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FOSTERING IMAGINATIVE EXPRESSION IN ELEMENTARY ART STUDENTS: A
DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF TEACHER STRATEGIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art
Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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The students in my elementary art classes did not seem to be creating for themselves. They seemed to have the understanding there was only one correct answer in art class, and the art teacher knew what that answer was. By way of research I have found ways to create an atmosphere in my art room that promotes imagination and self expression in children, thus fostering a free and creative reaction from my students. Through

understanding how and why one uses their imagination, an art teacher can enhance a student's ability to build and use his or her knowledge base. I believe an art teacher can help students build artistic confidence by using strategies such as introducing new art materials to children in a play atmosphere, planning lessons that are open-ended, giving choices for materials used, and guiding students using mental imagery.

Introduction

Problem

Student self expression and creativity must be nurtured in an art class. The question is, how must an art teacher present material to foster a free and creative response from her students? The students in my elementary art classes did not seem to be creating for themselves. I speculated that some students became confused by what would appear to be black and white, right and wrong answers for math, science and other academic subjects. I feel that when they have an assignment in art they believe there is one correct answer and I have researched ways to convey to them that there are multiple possibilities. I have found that it is important to understand the imagination in respect to why students should use it, how it works, and social factors that get in the way of students using it. Through researching ways in which art teachers and researchers promote imagination and self expression in children, I have come to some conclusions as well as solutions.

Theoretical Framework

I have provided supporting research, as well as anecdotes of my own practices, which cultivate self expression and imagination. Strategies such as introducing new art materials to children in a play atmosphere, planning lessons that are open-ended, giving

choices for materials to be used, and guiding students using mental imagery, are ways an art teacher can help students build a knowledge base, as well as build confidence in their own artistic abilities. I plan to show that when students feel freedom in the classroom, have a chance to exercise their own imagination, build a knowledge base for properties of art materials, and have confidence in their abilities, they will rely more on their own self expression and not worry about what they think the teacher wants.

Investigatory Plan

I plan to provide descriptions of strategies I have tried in my classroom and compare them to the research I have conducted. As I researched methods for inspiring students, I attempted to improve my own teaching methods and recorded my results and findings in this thesis.

The population of students in my elementary school located in Northern Virginia, is 480. Of those students, 125 receive special education resource assistance, 124 are enrolled in our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, and 89 are in our gifted and talented program. We are among the schools with the highest percentage of children from low-income families, making us eligible for Title 1 support from the Federal Government, as well as having a gifted and talented center in our building. Our school boundaries support 29 countries of origin, speaking 16 different languages in the home. I am responsible for teaching each and every one of these students.

The Imagination

Why do we need imagination? How does the imagination work? Should we be worried about the lack of time students have to imagine?

Our imagination provides a place for us to store events and memories as well as toy with ideas before acting on them. Our imaginations also help us day dream, ponder a new way of life, and formulate hopes and dreams for the future.

Joy Varnell (2005), veteran elementary school teacher, and Brynhildur Sigurdardottir (2002), a Doctor in Philosophy Education, wrote about the importance of the imagination, "...imagination transports children and adults alike to places they may never go" (Varnell, 2005, p. 52). Sigurdardottir (2002), explained that people can use their imagination to organize information they learn into a "web of meaning" to reference at any time. He wrote:

...imagination is a means for exploring connections between the person and the rest of the world. We use it to come up with explanations of the phenomena we see around us; balls falling to earth, birds flying in the sky, people dying from disease.
(p. 35)

The imagination provides a means of organizing thoughts and experiences, inventing ideas, daydreaming, and magically traveling to far off lands.

Alice Sterling Honig (2000) of Syracuse University, presented a paper at the annual meetings of the Board of Advisors for Scholastic, Inc. in May, 2000, called *Promoting Creativity in Young Children*. She expands on the idea that imagination is helpful in organizing and storing information. “Creativity is associated with breaking up of old ideas, making new connections, enlarging the limits of knowledge, the making of sudden, astonishing new connections...” (Honig, 2000, p. 3). Sigurdardottir (2002) added, “Imagination allows us to go beyond the routine daily life and imagine a new way of living, hope and dream for the future, or make the ordinary task more enjoyable” (Sigurdardottir, 2002, p. 34).

“How dull life would be if we had only real-life situations to contemplate!” (Varnell, 2005, p. 53) Our imagination allows us to be a character in a story or piece of art. It lets us place ourselves in any arena we wish, with as little effort as it takes to close our eyes.

Barbara Osburg (2003), English teacher and Chair of the English Department at a High School in St. Louis Missouri, further reminds us that the imagination can also inspire and bring hope. She stated:

All of our students are capable-to some degree- of imagining a world different from the one that greets them as they rise each day, a world different from the one they have been given, a world that might come to be through the force of their actions in this world. (Osburg, 2003, p. 58)

Knowledge, combined with imagination, can inspire children to build hopes and dreams for their future. Such inspiration can often be the basis for many children’s

artworks. “Imagination provides a space where we can experiment with possible actions before we act them out. We can even enter various possible worlds and put ourselves in the shoes of the most fortunate – and the least advantaged” (Sigurdardottir, 2002, p. 34).

A scientist or artist would be left with many wasted materials if it were not for his or her imagination. Much of the early development of an idea can be done in our imagination using the knowledge we already have. People can shuffle through many ideas using their imaginations before settling on something specific to investigate. “If children do not develop their imaginations, future advances in medicine, technology, and the arts might never happen. Without nurtured creativity, children’s minds may be unable to conceptualize a cure for a new disease or solutions to other problems we have yet to face” (Varnell, 2005, p. 53).

How the Imaginative Process Works

Harold Ordway Rugg (1963), late Professor of Education at the Teachers College, Columbia University, quoted the Oxford Dictionary definition of imagination as:

‘Forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses...the power which the mind has of forming concepts beyond those derived from external objects.’ This is called the productive or creative imagination. In contrast, the ‘reproductive imagination’ is ‘that faculty of the mind [including memory] by which are formed images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses, and of their relations to each other or to the subject.’ Thus memory images are vague holdovers from perceptual experience. (p. 36-7)

If a student were to stand at the doorway of the school, look out at the school yard, then close her eyes, that would be categorized as a memory image. If a student read a description of the Nile River, which he had never seen before, then tried to imagine what it would look like, that would be categorized as an imagination image.

Art teachers can draw from both types of imaginings. In the simplest form of art a teacher can ask a student to copy something they see. An art teacher can push the student's imagination a step further by asking the student to visualize a moment or scene from his memory and draw it. The teacher may continue to push and connect his imagination to a science topic by choosing a specific season to imagine. A teacher can also provoke deeper imagination by teaching about the characteristics of the moon and then asking students to imagine what their life would be like if they lived on the moon. Students could draw their house on the moon, their extraterrestrial neighbors, even the park to which they take their pet moon rock. They would have to imagine the inventions they would need in order to use the resources on the moon.

Often, Rugg (1963) found that in order to help the imaginative process run smoothly, one should push the problem away and let the subconscious mind work on it. He noted that there are different levels of consciousness that aid in the creative process, including what he called the "transliminal state" (p. 42):

The threshold state is that dynamic antechamber which connects the conscious and the unconscious. At one end, normal conscious behavior is marked by alert concentration on a task or an idea. At the other end, the deep unconscious is characterized by the oblivion of the third and fourth hour of sleep, the long dream

in its full kaleidoscope, or the deepest levels of the hypnotic trance. I prefer to locate the creative worker at the critical threshold of the conscious-unconscious border, the transliminal state. (Rugg, 1963, p. 42-43)

Rugg (1963) stated that if people send their idea to the “transliminal state” they can come back to it after days, weeks, or years and the idea would have developed further simply because of all the experiences they endure over time. This is more of a personal reflection that a student would experience over time, not something an art teacher at the elementary level can harness in a sixty minute time block. It is, nevertheless, an important element of the imaginative process.

One revisits their original idea after time, usually because of a “sudden and unexpected ‘flash of insight,’ coming with such certitude that a logical statement of it can be immediately prepared” (Rugg, 1963, p. 6). He wrote:

The consensus is clear that the flash of insight is not only a self-forming process, it is also a trans-forming process. The stuff of mind is transformed into meaningful response. Physiological message is transformed into psychological meanings; input is synthesized into output. Fantasy motor-images are transformed into metaphor-images. (Rugg, 1963, p. 298)

At the lowest level of imagining Rugg (1963) explains a person hypothesizes about what could happen “thinking logically” using their stored information. At the second level one “turns signals into movements or gestural signs,” and at the final level one creates a “symbolic transformation” (p. xii). Rugg (1963) also quoted Kenneth Craik who similarly described the three levels of imagining:

He found three stages in the thought process: first, the perception of events as translated into words or other symbols; second, the manipulation of these ideas as words or other symbols until another idea or symbol appears; third, retranslation of the ideas or symbols into the predicted design of the process or event in the real world. It is in this way that the brain-mind modeling power enables us 'to design bridges with a sufficient factor of safety instead of building them haphazard and waiting to see whether they collapse.' (Rugg, 1963, p. 245-46)

Francine Smolucha (1992), from the University of Chicago, summarized the theories of Lev Semyonoish Vygotsky. Vygotsky, a Russian pioneer in developmental psychology, spoke of imaginative development in children:

Research demonstrates at each step that the path of the development of children's imagination, as well as the development of the other higher mental functions, is through existing forms connected with the speech of the child, with the basic psychological forms of his communication with his surroundings, i.e., with the basic forms of the collective social activity of the child's consciousness. (as cited in Smolucha, 1992, p. 52)

Vygotsky explained that the creative function of the brain combines memories and experiences into new situations. It is through using this creative function that students realize inspiration for their art. Smolucha (1992), summarized Vygotsky's theory:

Vygotsky's theory of creative imagination has four main features: (1) Imagination develops out of children's play. (2) Imagination becomes a higher mental function and as such is a consciously directed thought process. (3) In adolescence, creative

imagination is characterized by the collaboration of imagination and thinking in concepts. (4) The collaboration between imagination and thinking in concepts matures in the artistic and scientific creativity of adulthood (as cited in Smolucha, p. 49-50). Finally, his [the child's] relation to the world does not have the complexity and diversity which distinguishes that of the adult, and which is important in the work of imagination. It is clear from this that the child's imagination is not richer, but poorer than the imagination of an adult; in the process of child development imagination also develops, reaching its maturity only in the adult (as cited in Smolucha, p. 54). The child is able to imagine much less than the adult, but he trusts the products of his imagination more and has less control over them; and therefore of course the child has more imagination in the worldly, vulgar sense of the word than the adult. However, the child not only has less material than the adult from which imagination is constructed, but also lacks the combinatory ability that joins together this material; the quality and variety of these are significantly inferior to the combinations of the adult. (as cited in Smolucha, p. 54-55)

While Rugg (1963) refers to the adult responses during the imagining process, I would like to make clear the possibility of relating his theories to the elementary school student. However, elementary students are only building their knowledge base of the world around them, art materials and art techniques. Many life experiences, as well as a strong concept of color theory, art elements, and design principles, are needed to accomplish Rugg's (1963), "symbolic transformation" in a work of art. Elementary school

age students are learning about life, building their experiences, and becoming interested in a variety of things. Vygotsky's research supports that a child's imagination is still in a forming stage and will most likely only be able to process Craik and Rugg's (1963), first stage, thinking logically; and second stage, manipulating the idea as symbols until another idea or symbol appears.

Therefore, it is extremely difficult to expect elementary students to reach the third step in Craik's thinking process, "retranslation of the ideas or symbols into the predicted design of the process or event in the real world" (Rugg, 1963, p. 246) simply because they are not developmentally ready.

In the remainder of my thesis I will focus on fostering imaginative expression using childhood appropriate stages of imagination such as Rugg's (1963) memory image & imagination image theory, as well as Rugg's (1963) first two stages of imagining; stage one, thinking logically/translating events into symbols; stage two, manipulating those symbols until another symbol appears. I will also accept Vygotsky's theory that a child's imagination develops through play and it further matures in adulthood (as cited in Smolucha, 1992).

Knowledge Inspires Creativity

Rugg (1963), stated:

No man, be he artist or scientist, technologist or philosopher, will be successful either in thinking directly or in 'thinking aside' in his search for an unknown, unless his mind is equipped with all the needed materials with which to think: with

that multitude of facts, principles, theories, that might contain the one stimulus needed to precipitate the new idea. It is conscious preparation by deliberate manipulation of concepts into close juxtaposition that gives the greatest promise of permitting the spark of recognition to be ignited. (p. 12)

The imagination is fueled by knowledge. Children creating art must draw from their experiences in life as well as their knowledge of the materials at hand. For instance, artwork drawn with crayon then painted with watercolor can create an interesting effect. The student who knows what happens with those two materials will be able to decide whether they want that effect or not. An art teacher must provide a variety of experiences to aid students in gaining knowledge to make such judgments. The more fluent students are in the properties of materials, the smoother the creative process will run for them. Mary Hafeli (1997), an art educator at the Teachers College, Columbia University, discussed the importance of gaining a knowledge base through experimenting with various art materials, “As experiences are gained in these areas, artistic intentions grow to include the expression of ideas, images, feelings, and events from children’s lives and experiences, fusing understandings about materials to understandings about events and experiences in the world” (p. 19).

Carol Seefeldt Ph.D. (1995), holds a minor in art, and is a professor at the Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland-College Park. She agreed that knowledge is needed in order for a student to thrive during an art lesson. She stated, “As children create art, they must organize their thoughts and actions into patterns and symbols. They reason,

invent, create, and solve problems” (p. 40). Students work from their knowledge base to develop their ideas. She further stated:

What can a child draw if she has little to think about, few ideas, dreams, feelings, or experiences to express? ...Without a store of experiences to think or feel something about, children draw the stereotypical ‘house, tree, flower’ picture. Without continual, meaningful experiences, children’s store of ideas, feelings and imagination are readily depleted. (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 40)

Each school year I am amazed at what a second grader can see and draw. I teach a lesson on drawing using vases of flowers. In the pre-instructional drawing the students draw typical flower shapes, stems and a standard vase. Then I ask them questions about the flowers, how many flowers there are, how many petals on each flower, and so on. I question them about how many leaves they see and how many stems they see. The students also notice that some details of the flowers and flower parts are not in view because of overlapping. After this discussion the students head back to their seats and this time they draw what they actually see. Teachers and students walking by the flower drawings hung in the hall cannot believe that second graders drew them. The students simply needed to build their awareness of the flower forms and develop their drawing skills. Honig (2000) added:

“Knowledge and experience form a rich loam from which creative ideas can flower in the group. Without a strong knowledge base, even a gifted child may not be able to experiment creatively with science ideas and materials. Part of a teacher’s work in promoting creativity has to be to enlarge and enrich children’s

knowledge base of the world. A narrow knowledge base ill prepares a child to participate in all the creative adventures a teacher is prepared to offer in the classroom. (p. 22)

Why it is Important to Foster Imaginative Expression

Eva Balke (1997) is a Professor Emeritus at Oslo College in Norway. In her article she describes a problem facing many of our youth:

The culture of children is threatened by mass media and overproduction of plastic playthings that are ready-made and demand nothing of the child. It is also threatened because adults seem to have too little time to play with children even if they work fewer hours than ever before. (Balke, 1997, p. 359)

We, as art teachers, can help children develop their imaginations by providing activities that provoke thought and decision making.

I first noticed the effects that Balke (1997) discussed when I took a first grade class outside to look at the clouds. I thought a perfect way to introduce abstract art would be to take my students outside to find images in the clouds just as one would find images in abstract art. As a child, and even an adult, I have frequently played this game. To my surprise not one of the children in the group had tried this before. In fact, none had ever imagined objects in oily puddles, cracks in sidewalks, blobs of paint, or anything of the sort. I fear that children do not have the free time at home to gaze into the clouds. With many of the television shows and pre-made toys that entice them to stay inside, it seems children do not take the chance to simply sit and imagine the world around them.

Catherine Nikoitsos (2001), Assistant Professor of Visual Arts at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, claims that this lack of imaginative stimulus occurs at school as well. She writes:

A preschooler draws with freedom and self-determination, with all the abilities and skills that he or she has. It is not until the child has been in the educational system for a number of years that he or she loses this freedom. In later years, the child will not lack any artistic skills, but will lack his or her desire and enthusiasm to paint or draw directly, freely, and confidently (Nikoitsos, 2001, p. 5).

The art room seems to be one of the last places a child can flex his or her imagination and feel the freedom needed to develop a creative idea. Many classroom teachers do not have the time to fit the visual arts component into their curriculum because they have to ensure students can pass the state administered standardized tests. Varnell (2005), warns teachers not to let tests dictate what we do in our classrooms, because school can end up being a factory where students do not have time to imagine or create because they are constantly pumped with knowledge. Varnell (2005) also reinforces that there should be time for play and other activities that promote imagination and creativity. Those activities can be part of the best use of a student's time in school (p. 52).

Even Kindergarten teachers at my school are feeling the pinch to teach to the test. I order the art supplies for the entire school and this year when I attempted to give the Kindergarten teachers a supply of finger paint they refused. They stated that due to the high testing standards, they were not even sure if they would have time to set up the easel with regular paint, and they would definitely not have time for finger paint.

Jerrold Ross (2005), the dean of the School of Education at St. John's University in New York, supports Varnell's opinion that:

Our schools are taking on an increasingly 'imagineless' character in their curricula, causing the continuing problem of how to keep our children excited about learning and how, in part, to stem the tide of dropouts in our large urban centers. Lack of imagination is reflected in reliance on standardized tests as the measure of one's education-the same kind of dull 'teaching to the test' that has resulted in this sad state of affairs. (Ross, 2005, p. 4)

The art room should be the place where students express their ideas, contemplate the things they see in works of art or their own backyard, and not worry about passing a test. They can create freely, because art is a subject in school where students can express whatever it is they are thinking without having to worry about getting something wrong. The following chapter discusses strategies an art teacher can use with his or her students to foster imaginative expression.

Teacher Strategies for Fostering Imaginative Expression

Anderson (2004), suggested there are many reasons one creates art. The reasons include; to represent meanings, to communicate something, to enlist self pleasure, for self discovery, for visual exploration, to stimulate memory, to explore inner feelings, or for the pleasure of decorating (p. 31-35). Anderson stated:

At the root of it, we make art to make sense of things, to give meaning to our existence. When we express ourselves through making art, we create something tangible to look at, hold, reflect on, feel, and try to understand in our minds and bodies. (p. 31)

When an artist begins a piece the outcome may be preconceived, but as the work progresses many things develop. According to Anderson (2004), “Art making is an unrehearsed phenomenon, an open-ended seeking and trying process where the result cannot be known ahead of time” (p. 35). Additional decisions have to be made, unexpected things occur, and the artwork is pulled in different directions. Thus, the preconceived end result might change completely. “In making art, the imaginative body engages the physical body to carry out what is imagined” (Anderson, 2004, p. 38).

Additional authors who wrote about the creative process are Joe Khatena (1999), a professor and Head Emeritus of the Department of Educational Psychology at Mississippi State University, and Nelly Khatena (1999), an artist who received her

education in art at Mississippi State University. Khatena and Khatena (1999), add to the statement that art has an unpredictable outcome. They wrote:

Information by itself remains sterile until the artist breathes life into it. It comes to life through the intervention of the Individual...In the service of creative imagination are intellectual and emotive processes, which are activated by incoming information interacting with previous memory-stored information. The individual, in the creative act, calls upon the intellect and emotion to process information in ways that lead to productive outcomes. (p. 122)

The information stored in their minds and organized by their imagination comes from their knowledge base. Vygotsky also made a similar statement, “The brain is not only an organ maintaining and reproducing our own previous experience but it is also an organ that creatively combines elements of previous experience into new situations and new behaviors” (as cited in Smolucha, 1992, p. 51-52). Consequently, there are strategies an art teacher can use to cultivate the creative process.

An art teacher can help students develop a strong sense of self expression as well as nurture students imaginations. Strategies such as introducing new art materials to children in a play atmosphere, planning lessons that are open-ended, giving choices for materials to be used, and guiding students using mental imagery, provide the means for an art teacher to lead students in building a knowledge base, exercising their imagination, as well as encouraging confidence in their own artistic ability.

Over the past two years I have been incorporating some of these techniques in my own art classroom. Based on trial and error, as well as research in the field, I have been

practicing ways to help my students understand that there are multiple solutions in art. Art is not a teacher led assignment. It is an opportunity for a student to exercise his or her imagination and express an idea.

Providing a Classroom Atmosphere Conducive to Self Expression

Both Anderson (2004) and Trombetta (1992) brought up the correlation between art and play. Anderson (2004) provides a point by Dissanayake (1995):

Dissanayake (1995) claims that art making and play come from similar pleasure-seeking centers in our human psyche and that these pleasurable activities are nature's way of enticing us to engage in activities conducive to our very survival. The survival function of both art and play is that they help us discover how things are and how they work in pleasurable, non threatening circumstances. (p. 33)

Both authors suggest that play brings about experiences that enable people to be more informed in later decision making. Anderson (2004) wrote, "In art, the problem continues to change in response to the demands of the work in progress and the work changes as the problem changes" (p. 33). Art making uses courage, faith, and a belief in promise, all qualities that aid in coming up with one's own ideas (Anderson 2004 & Trombetta 1992).

When providing an art time that promotes development of a student's imagination and self expression, play becomes very significant. Play time with art materials is a great way to introduce a child to a new medium and creates an atmosphere where many

solutions are possible, and discovery is the main objective. Carol Seefeldt, Ph.D. (1995) professor of human development for the Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland-College Park, stated that it is important for children to have enough time to explore and experiment with materials. They can not express themselves until they understand the materials with which they are working (p. 42).

It is important for students to be exposed to this play atmosphere early in their development. Seefeldt (1995) affirmed:

Preschoolers who have been deprived of a period of messing around with art materials as too many in the United States who have been expected to produce an adult-pleasing product as toddlers, will require a great deal of time to mess around with art materials before they can use them to express ideas or feelings (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 42).

Many more studies support play as a way for students to explore. The arena for genuine play to exist must be a place of freedom says Anderson (2004), Balke (1997), Jalongo (1995), and Kohl (1999-2001). Through play they will gain experiences that will enable them to express themselves and make educated choices about materials. Play provides time for a student to safely try anything. Balke (1997) states, "Play is a little like being in love. It is full of promises and surprises. Play is like nature itself, easily destroyed or disturbed" (Balke, 1997, p. 355). Balke reminds us that a teacher must be careful not to disturb play with unreasonable time constraints or by making comments that could make a student feel judged. During play students almost always create from their own experiences, and draw from their knowledge base.

MaryAnn F. Kohl (1999-2001), an art teacher in Maui, suggests that when teachers respect student ideas, students feel more confident about their work. “Children who feel free to make mistakes and to explore and experiment will also feel free to invent, create, and find new ways to do things” (Kohl, 1999-2001, p. 3). Anderson points out that, “The survival function of both art and play is that they help us discover how things are and how they work in pleasurable, non-threatening circumstances” (Anderson, 2004, p. 33).

Balke (1997) explains that when students are given freedom to make decisions on their own they express themselves more clearly. Students also need a space where play and discovery can occur without pressure from the teacher or other sources. Balke (1997) adds:

Children clearly express their feelings and thoughts about life when they are given free rein to paint or play act. Drawing, painting and role-playing all rely upon the imagination. Children take the material for play from the world in which they live. They need security and lack of fear if they are to have the courage to play with ideas and impressions from the adult world, selecting those that are most relevant (p. 357).

Carolyn Edwards (1995), a professor of family studies at the University of Kentucky, explained that a great way to provide a classroom with a feeling of security is to give support, pose questions, and guide students through their process of discovery and investigation. A teacher must encourage risk-taking, but know when to back away from students and let them work (Edwards, 1995).

I knew that these methods I had researched and tried to implement in my classroom were starting to come to fruition when a new fifth grade student shared his feelings with me. He started to tell me how he did not like art until he took art in my school. "I never liked art before. My other school we had to copy stuff and we were told what to draw. Here we can draw whatever. It's like...freedom" he exclaimed. I am working to ensure that my classroom atmosphere fosters this sense of freedom.

Edwards (1995) affirmed that a teacher can provide a few key elements to promote active discovery and the feeling of freedom that I have been seeking in my classroom. Those elements include; time, space, materials, climate, and occasions. Teachers should provide time for students to finish their work and not interrupt them while they are engaged and motivated toward their art work. The actual room students work in should contain certain things as well. Edwards (1995) suggests:

A barren, drab environment is not conducive, but a space full of natural light, harmonious colors, comfortable and child-sized work areas, and examples of their own and other's work (not only their classmates, but as appropriate, also their teacher's and selected adult artists), and inviting materials. (p. 27)

Resources such as photographs, and found materials, as well as different drawing, painting, sculpting, and collage materials are imperative for imaginative discovery. "The classroom atmosphere [climate] should reflect the adults' encouragement and acceptance of mistakes, risk-taking, innovation, and uniqueness, along with a certain amount of mess, noise, and freedom. This is not a matter of chaos, or of tight control, but instead something in between" (Edwards, 1995, p. 27).

Edwards also suggests that teachers provide occasions where students can experience an encounter between themselves and their inner or outer world. “Children find it hard to be creative without any concrete inspiration. Instead, they prefer to draw on the direct evidence of their senses and / or memories” (Edwards, 1995, p. 27). Teachers can incite this by having discussions and questioning students about experiences they have had. “The adults act as resource persons, problem-posers, guides and partners to the children in the process of discovery and investigation. They take their cues from children through careful listening and observation, and know when to encourage risk-taking and when to refrain from inferring” (Edwards & Springate, 1995, p. 2).

If inspiration comes from a students’ observations, memories, and experiences then I believe it is possible to integrate a few elements from his or her other academic curricula within the art class. When students have a chance to look at their other academic studies in the light of an art problem they can often gain more excitement for the subject. I found that teachers appreciate assistance when reinforcing what they are teaching in their classrooms. In that case, I will challenge the students to look at things multiple ways. For instance, the fifth grade classes have a unit in science called “small things” and they study microscopic organisms. In art, we put a twist on that subject. Students begin by looking at pictures of microscopic organisms, and brainstorming the parts some organisms use to move around, and parts they use for survival. Then they use cut paper collage to create their own microscopic creature showing how it might live in its environment (i.e. how it might move, organs it might have, appendages, etc.). The students practice manipulating

symbols they know from studying microscopic images, into new symbolic imaginary organisms. We also use a variety of colors to make them look visually pleasing.

There is a fine line between not providing enough guidance and getting in the way of the students' creative process. Mary Renck Jalongo Ph.D. (1995), a professor of education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, states; "Educators also need to create that workshop atmosphere, to tread that line between *laissez-faire* and interference, to serve as that reflective mirror, and to realize that boredom and busywork are sure ways to stifle children's creativity" (p. 12). A teacher has to balance between giving freedom to the student as well as providing an enriching curriculum that will foster the development of artistic skills and creative thinking (Nikoltsos, 2001, p. 6).

That learning environment must also allow for mistakes, provide basic essential knowledge, and hold high expectations for student progress. "Through careful dialog a teacher can express vocabulary and certain expectations to a class without stifling their sense of creativity. However, care must be taken while conveying the expectations since to expect perfection is to invite paralysis" (Anderson, 2004, p. 37).

Recently my students were invited to participate in a fundraiser with a printing company who would make a free art magnet for every participating student. Families would then have the opportunity to purchase other items featuring their child's art. This provided extra stress for some students. To my surprise many came to tears with self inflicted pressure to make a "perfect" magnet. I had carefully pointed out that "we want to color the best we can so our magnets look terrific." Apparently this statement had invited "paralysis" as Anderson stated. I chose not to use that statement in the rest of the classes.

However, another challenge arose. I found that students wanted to draw whatever they wished instead of creating a self portrait. To help with this I showed plenty of artist's self-portraits and pointed out how they incorporated items that interested them in their lives. I do believe that most young students need some sort of theme, but it is how a teacher presents the theme that will allow for freedom. By stressing the fact that in all of the extra space around their body in the self-portrait could be turned into anything, the students felt better about the problem and the excitement level rose again. As always, teaching is a series of trials and errors. I have made the suggestion that next year the students chose their subject for the fundraiser.

Anderson wrote about the fear of failure and pressures students can put on themselves, and prescribes “play” to introduce art materials so students can succeed and fail without thinking they have ruined their product. Anderson (2004) points out that, “Artists make good creations by working in a medium, creating a large amount of work, failing much of the time (which provides good feedback about what works and what does not), and thus slowly gaining vision” (p. 37). Therefore, when given ample time and freedom a student can learn to work with mistakes along the way. “It is important to add that children should expect to ‘make mistakes.’ It is in finding solutions or modifying their experiences that will make the value of creativity most evident” (Kohl, 1999-2001, p. 2).

When a student has a failure, a teacher can help him understand that mistakes can be worked into his artwork and that artists make mistakes all of the time. Nothing is perfect in the art making process. It is how one handles the challenges that makes

one a successful artist. Children fear that their ideas and artworks are not good enough, and often quit or exclaim that they are not “good artists.” Anderson (2004) addressed a solution for this:

Art teachers who are sensitive to this fear of failure can remind their students that the primary difference between an artist and non-artist is not talent or ideas. It is that the non-artist allowed his or her self-doubt to reign and then quit. Your vision will always be ahead of your execution. You will always wonder if you can pull it off (Anderson, 2004, p. 37).

In such a situation I take out the “magic markers.” I often use black permanent markers instead of pencils with my students because I prefer to promote mistakes as a turning point in art work. I always tell students that if they make a mistake they should leave it and keep drawing. They can come back and fix the mistake when an idea comes to them. Often we turn mistakes into stripes on a shirt or items in the background. I tell them the magic markers are called magic because they will help your imagination come up with a solution to fix your mistakes. Now, the students even remind me when I make a mistake on the board, to leave it and make it into something else later!

A colleague shared this poem with me, “Fix it, Change it, Make it something new!” She uses a sing-song rhythm when she tells it to her students. It is helpful to ensure students understand that making mistakes is common in art; so common, in fact, that art teachers even have a song about it!

Open Ended Lesson Planning

Another obstacle for an art teacher is diverting from older methods and schools of thought in regards to teaching art. It is common for an art teacher to introduce a project with a number of steps which lead to an almost identical end product for all students. In this type of product driven lesson the decisions are made for the student. The student's end result is similar to other students in the class and decision making is lost. While this type of lesson can be a good way to introduce students to a difficult or new process, it should not be the only type of lesson taught, and it should be followed up with an open-ended lesson for students to practice the newly learned technique. More open-ended art lessons should balance out the product-driven lessons. This will allow students the chance to make their own decisions, succeed and make mistakes, and give them a chance to learn about the material so they may use it again.

Open-ended art lessons are another way to promote children's self expression and spark their imagination. These lessons pose a question or problem to be solved by the students and require that they search deep into their memory banks in order to come up with a visual image. With the help of a technique called mental imagery, a student takes the time to think before getting started, an art teacher can carefully guide students through an open-ended lesson.

If students seem pre-occupied with pleasing the teacher and being done with the lesson, one might consider that the lesson was too product oriented. If the teacher has provided the idea for the project, students tend to not express themselves because they do not have an attachment to the idea. The students do not feel the artwork was their

idea and they are unclear about how the teacher wants the end result. Thus, the reason for the student constantly asking, “Is this good enough?” As art teachers we need to help our students generate their own ideas.

Often my strategy for creating a non-product oriented project while teaching a specific subject is to brainstorm ideas about the subject with students to get their minds working toward a topic and then let them put their ideas on paper. In this case I focus on channeling the students stages of imagination that Rugg (1963) referred to as memory images and imagination images. I created a lesson for some second graders to work on while they waited to glaze their clay projects at a glazing station in the back of the room. Since they had just finished a map unit in social studies, and their cricket unit in science I combined the two subjects and asked them to draw a cricket map. The first group of second graders came and I asked them what they could tell me about a map. They told me all of the components such as, a compass rose, roads, places to go, map keys, etc. I asked them to create a map for a cricket at their seats. I figured that the creative part of thinking about places for a cricket would come easily to them. This class drew things like a human house, lots of grass, and a few other generic cricket things. I decided I needed to go more in depth with the cricket part of it in the next class so more kids thought outside the box and came up with more ideas. I needed to inspire them to think of imaginative images. They needed to picture themselves as a cricket and think of all of the things a cricket might do for survival or play. Conveniently, I had just read Is Creativity Teachable? By E. P. Torrance and J. P. Torrance (1973). I remembered the study Pansy Torrance had conducted with high school students and how brainstorming helped develop

their creativity. Of course we had brainstormed for previous lessons, but I kept in mind how instead of just listing things, Pansy Torrance had also questioned students to develop each idea further.

With the next group of second graders we talked about the components of a map and then brainstormed ideas for places a cricket might go. I asked them to picture themselves as a cricket and asked them where they would go. Some said the park and we talked about what would be at a cricket park. Someone mentioned the beach and I asked them if a cricket would know the difference between the beach we know and a large puddle on the ground. They giggled. As we talked about it more the kids came up with increasingly creative and imaginative responses. At that point, I sent them back to their seats to draw their great ideas. That lesson went much smoother. The students stayed in their seats longer because their minds were working at full speed. Instead of stating, “Today we will draw a cricket” and everyone hang the same cricket drawing on the wall, there was a variety of responses to the assignment.

The worst thing a teacher can do for a child, who is learning to express his or her self, is to provide the answer to a mistake or to an entire lesson. Jalongo (1995) stated:

As educators of the very young, we don't need to sing or dance for children, we sing or dance with them; we don't draw or paint or construct for children by giving them models to imitate, we create the conditions that allow children to do these things for themselves. (p. 10)

Jalongo (1995) and Seefeldt (1995) both agree that setting up a lesson so the students all produce the same thing is not respecting the student or supporting their creativity. Seefeldt (1995) stated:

However, asking children to complete patterned artwork or to copy adult models of art, as far too many children are asked to do in the United States, undermines the children's sense of psychological safety and demonstrates disrespect for children-their ideas, abilities, and creativity- more than anything else can. (p. 42)

Seefeldt (1995) continued; "A pattern of a dog for children to color in or cut out says to them- more clearly than words could- that 'this is what your drawing should look like; this is the right way to make a dog. You, and the way you might draw a dog, are wrong'" (p. 43). Jalongo (1995) agreed and stated "...art involves originality, breaking stereotypes, and inventing new forms. Therefore, formulas, recipes, or copies, no matter how 'cute,' are not art and do not qualify as creative activities" (p. 9).

Play also works because it forces an art teacher to allow the students to decide on the final product of their art project. A teacher should be less concerned with the product, and more concerned with the process students go through as they make their art. Balke (1997) adds that the problem with an adult created product for an art lesson is that children do not get the chance to play with the material and experience the decision making process on their own. " 'Adults' wishes may not be what is most important for the child at the moment, however, and the child's preferred activity may lead to more learning than would a structured learning situation" (Balke, 1997, p. 357). The spontaneity in play inspires fun activity that will help a child tackle complicated problems and work through them trying

various solutions. “What they [children] need to learn is so complicated that they will have to try again and again, each time in a different way. One way to do that is by being something that they are not, which can be achieved through play” (Balke, 1997, p. 358).

Nikoltsos (2001) explained that the teacher’s role is to provide the materials and the motivation for the child to explore a medium. She stated that the actual product, the drawing or painting, is not as important as the process the student went through to get there. Kieran Egan, Ph.D. (1994) Professor of education at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, supports Nikoltsos’ theory and adds, “If we begin to think of our lessons and units less in terms of objectives to be attained and more in terms of good stories to be told, we will move in the direction of this implication” (p. 30).

Evelyn Petersen (1998) a Parenting Columnist in Traverse City, Michigan, wrote the article *How art activities help teach children problem-solving and life skills*. She, believes that the teacher should let the end product be dictated by the student. Further, Petersen (1998) stated that:

When children are engaged in the process of building, sculpting, drawing, or gluing, they are thinking, planning, experimenting, and making decisions. It is the process of using the materials that is important, not the product or result, because it is the process that teaches children to think. Producing something by copying an adult’s creation will not help children imagine, plan, discover, create, think, or feel the joy of their own work. (p. 30)

In the fall I teach first graders the steps of drawing a pumpkin. In the lesson I incorporate depth by placing the pumpkins that I draw in various places and sizes on the paper to demonstrate. This fall the classroom teachers asked me to include leaf shapes in a lesson. In support of minimal requirements in a lesson plan, and hoping to inspire students to use their imaginations to come up with their own end result, I decided to change the lesson. Instead of modeling the whole project, I modeled drawing a pumpkin, maple leaf, oak leaf, poplar leaf, and fig leaf on the board in no apparent arrangement, while the students followed along step by step on their own paper. Then I asked the students to flip their paper over and close their eyes. Through questioning, I proceeded to engage their stored memory images. I asked them to think about what it looks like on a fall day. I asked them to think about if it were a holiday, or just a regular fall day in their imaginations. I asked them to imagine what fall trees look like, the sky, and what the details on the ground look like. Were there people in their picture? Animals? I asked them to think about where they could fit a pumpkin and a couple leaf shapes they just learned how to draw. Then I told them to open their eyes and draw what they envisioned. I explained that the only requirements for the picture are that they include a pumpkin and a few leaf shapes but it was their choice how many and where they put them. As long as they filled those requirements they could draw whatever they wish. The students were excited to share what they imagined and I was excited to see all the different versions of a fall day. I will have to teach depth in another lesson, but it was worth using such simple, open-ended requirements. The open-ended lesson enabled students to create freely, yet learn how to draw some fall items in support of their science curriculum.

Providing the answer, or telling the student what the end product will be only inhibits the students' confidence in their own art. Confidence in one's own decision making breeds self-esteem. Jill Englebright Fox, Ph.D., an Assistant Professor of early childhood education at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Stacey Berry M.Ed., a Kindergarten teacher in Richmond, Virginia, stated, "For very young children, making art is a sensory exploration activity" (Fox & Berry, 2002, p. 1). Through exploration of materials in an art classroom students gain more experience with the objects of the world around them, thus, feeling more comfortable (Fox & Berry, 2002). Once a student's self-confidence in art is shattered it is very difficult to repair.

Anne Trombetta (1992), an art teacher and parent, struggled with repairing her son's confidence in his own art ability. Trombetta had started her son off in an ideal preschool setting where the students were given art materials to experience. "The children explored the media with no particular product in mind" wrote Trombetta (p. 27).

The second preschool Trombetta's (1992) son attended focused on product driven lessons, providing all children with an identical product made from the same materials. "My son became obsessed with the idea of getting his drawings 'right.' 'You do it, Mom,' he would say, 'teachers draw better than kids' (p. 27). Her son reminded her of the fifth graders she had in her art classes that say things like, "I can't draw. I stink at art."

Trombetta (1992) stated, "This negative attitude creates a block that is virtually indestructible" (p. 27). She prescribes time and encouragement as an antidote for the

low confidence level that eventually can lead to fear of art. She also suggests exposing students to art work that shows unusual images of reality, and presenting many open ended lessons where, “Getting it ‘right’ doesn’t matter” (p. 27).

Kohl (1999-2001) is another supporter of open-ended art projects as a way to spark creativity in students and focus more on the process of creating art. She writes, “Products are usually an adult value, and once kids know they can explore and discover on their own, they stop worrying about how things must look” (p. 2).

According to Kohl (1999-2001), “Creativity is not to be confused with talent, skill or intelligence. Creativity is not about doing something better than others, it is about thinking, exploring, discovering, and imagining” (p. 1). Kohl believes that choosing their own art materials empowers the children. She believes that the process is more important than the product because the discovery and exploration that occurs during the process is how one develops creativity.

Christine Mulcahey Szyba M.A.T (1999), an art specialist at the Henry Barnard Laboratory School at Rhode Island College, ensures that her lessons are open-ended for the purpose of nurturing her students’ self-confidence in their own ideas. A student’s natural creativity often produces something that is non-representational (p. 18).

Katherine Douglas (2004), an art teacher in Massachusetts, and Christine Szyba (1999) make it a point to talk with students about their artwork. They believe that talking about artwork with a child is a way of introducing art vocabulary, reinforcing the standards that students must meet in a curriculum, and allowing a chance for the student to reflect on his own artwork. They write, “If it does not seem to be intrusive,

an adult can encourage a child to describe the elements she is using- lines, color, shapes, textures—rather than what the picture represents” (Szyba, 1999, p. 18-20).

Many preschools have adopted the open ended art curriculum strategy. Petersen (1998) wrote about how Head Start programs use open-ended art lessons and explained that those lessons help students with problem solving and build a knowledge base for art materials:

Head Start programs use open-ended materials, because although there are rules about using them safely, there is no right or wrong ways to create with them and no predetermined products and results. This means that all children will be successful in their efforts, and all creations will be valued and unique. Children will feel proud of their creations and should see them prominently displayed on classroom walls. (p. 29-30)

In Petersen’s (1998) article about open-ended materials she spoke about the benefits of such planning:

But perhaps the most important and least understood reason for using open-ended art materials is that they foster creative and divergent thinking skills. When children use these materials, they learn that there are countless ways to create with clays, collage, paints, and crayons. At the same time, they learn that there are also countless ways to solve problems and find answers. (p. 30)

Open-ended lessons promote a play type of atmosphere that is more developmentally appropriate for students who have had the chance to solely play with materials and build a knowledge base. Instead of a completely play oriented setting, which is beneficial for the

youngest students, open-ended lessons allow for an older elementary school student to decide how they will develop the question posed while learning about a material and following a lesson type format.

Petersen (1998) reinforces the benefits of an open-ended lesson by pointing out that classroom management is easier when using this type of lesson:

By letting children use the materials at their own pace and by providing several choices of materials, we are meeting the children's individual needs. When we do things in this developmentally appropriate way, there are few-if any-problems in guidance or classroom management. We have time to praise, enjoy, interact with, and ask questions of the children. (p. 32)

According to Douglas (2004), students become self-motivated and most behavior problems are eliminated when they are given a choice for their art making. When they choose their work they become more aware of the process they went through to produce it, and can talk more intelligently about it. "Various forms of sharing, reflection and celebration of amazing discoveries take place at the end of each 40-minute class" (Douglas, 2004, p. 50).

A Choice Classroom

"Deciding what they will make and what materials they will use may be the first opportunity children have to make independent choices and decisions" (Fox & Berry, 2002, p. 1).

In respect to Fox and Berry (2002), Szyba (1999) offers an additional option for a choice based classroom. Students in Szyba's (1999) classroom can choose the shape, size, orientation, and color of their paper, along with the art material they are going to use. "By choosing, children will select different combinations of materials and slowly learn more about those materials' properties as well as the effect one material has on another" (p. 18). According to Szyba (1999), the extra time needed to make those decisions is time well spent. Soon students will discover what materials will work for certain ideas, however, along the way:

Teachers must need to help students understand that the materials that they select and the ways that they are used must be at one with what they are trying to express and that they need to test materials and forms against the pervasive quality of the driving emotion and meaning of the piece. (Anderson, 2004, p. 35)

Kohl (1999-2001), Fox & Berry (2002), Douglas (2004), Szyba (1999), and Trombetta (1992), all agree that giving a student choice of materials during the art-making process enables the student to claim ownership over the idea and builds self-esteem. "Deciding what they will make and what materials they will use may be the first opportunity children have to make independent choices and decisions" (Fox & Berry, 2002, p. 1). Simply choosing their materials enhances student excitement about their idea, furthering the importance of their experience.

My youngest students become excited about a project when they get to start by making decisions on their own. It sets the mood for freedom and makes it easier for me to convey to them that they can make their own decisions about their art work.

When she plans a lesson, Szyba (1999), ensures student input. She does this to make certain student work will be different from others. She states, “Children, if allowed, are extremely creative and revel in the opportunity to choose materials. If children have choices to make, they are learning how to make decisions. If they make a decision they are not comfortable with, they are gaining knowledge nonetheless” (p. 18). It is this decision making process that helps an artist claim ownership over their artwork and discover the properties of the medium. Artists know they are finished when all of the choices or decisions they could make would cause the artwork to take a turn for the worse (Anderson, 2004, p. 33).

During an abstract painting assignment with fifth graders some of my students learned that there is a time when an artist needs to stop before their painting gets out of control. The assignment was to paint to the sound of the music, pick out each instrument they heard, and create a shape and color for it, then decide how many times they needed to repeat the shape according to the music. Some students became carried away with the paint and their art work became one mixed up color. They had fun doing it, but were not very happy with the brownish end result. Thankfully, they had time to try again. We talked about how important it is to create without abandon, but that they have to figure out when to stop painting before the picture’s colors become jumbled and less visually pleasing to themselves.

Mental Imagery

It can be scary for an art teacher to relinquish control and depend on the students to run their own assignments and make most decisions on their own. Some guiding can be done in the beginning of the lesson to help students decide on what subject they will create. This guided task can be as simple as having the children close their eyes and imagine a scenario, or brainstorming ideas on the blackboard. Both methods support students working from their memory images as well as imagined images. Mental imagery is a tool a student can use to build and imagine an idea before they begin his or her artwork. It can be helpful to make it a group effort to help students get a feel for the direction of the lesson and help them to narrow down their ideas. Khatena and Khatena (1999) describe the imagery process, “Imagining is a mental processing of information in nonverbal or figural form that occurs freely or can be made to occur by planned experiences” (p. 109). They further state, “Imagery is both private and universal, unique to the individual yet common to all humanity. It belongs to the individual, but shaped by the physical and sociocultural world, is rooted to culture, civilization, and the cosmic order” (p. 60) Khatena and Khatena (1999) stated:

Mental imagery represents the internal and external worlds of an individual and is an important component of thinking and expression in the visual arts. Information from the physical and sociocultural universe reaches the individual through various senses, such as sight, hearing, and touch, to become mental images in the brain. Its role in art is significant because imagery overcomes the barriers of intermediary

symbolic systems, like the language of words, to represent to the individual visions that eventually find themselves expressed in one art form or another. (p. 33)

Mental imagery is a great way to incorporate what the students are learning in their classroom with their artwork. Picturing an animal habitat in their mind, and choosing an animal from that habitat, then thinking about the parts and colors of that animal, is how I begin my paper animal sculpture lesson. Just that one session of mental imagery alone touches on many topics that reinforce their animal unit taught by their classroom teacher. Then the fun can begin, while we build the imagined animal out of cut, folded, and glued construction paper.

Children can imagine their art through use of their knowledge base and creative mind. This is supported by authors Khatena & Khatena (1999). They write, “Art depends on the external environment internalized as images, in the first instance, for its materials. These mental images are processed by the creative imagination to produce fresh image combinations eventually expressed in a figural art form that includes drawing, painting, and sculpting” (p. 61). This process is similar to Rugg’s (1963) first stage of imagining where a student translates events into symbols.

Students who have had the time for mental imagery get to work quicker, are more involved in their own art, and come up with new solutions to the art problem presented. They are more prepared for an open-ended lesson and behavior problems rarely exist. This gives the teacher time to circulate through the room, talk to students about their ideas, and make sure requirements are understood and being carried out.

Conclusion

There are many things that can get in the way of a child using his imagination. An elementary art teacher has a specific responsibility; to cultivate her students' self expression and confidence as well as build a knowledge base about materials and their surroundings. Developmentally, a child can be expected to create a memorable experience in a new light, or develop their idea further by using parts of memorable experiences combined with their knowledge base of information and art materials to create a new scene. Rugg explains this in his first two stages of imagining; stage one, thinking logically/translating events into symbols; stage two, manipulating those symbols until another symbol appears (pp. 245-246). Students will be able to use their imaginations further as they mature past elementary school age.

Teachers should consider students' ability to imagine as well as their need for new information when planning lessons. At the Kindergarten age level, art should be based on playing with materials. This allows the student to begin a knowledge base about materials available to them. In the following years an art teacher should provide this play time when introducing a new material, or whenever it seems that students need to discover more about a familiar material. This will enable them to see what materials are available as well as the properties of each material, in order to make a more informed decision about what to use to carry out their ideas. Some teacher guided lessons that include teacher modeling may be necessary for students to explore more challenging techniques that they may not have discovered on their own. However, following those product driven activities, children

should be allowed time to experiment with their learned technique. Open-ended lessons provide time and inspiration for this experimentation. As students reach second and third grade, art lessons should be more open-ended, allowing the student to ponder ideas and develop them into works of art.

Students who have been provided with adequate play time while creating art, will build a large knowledge base from which they can generate more informed decisions about which materials to choose for an assignment. In elementary school these choices can be more simplified. However, once a student has reached high school the student should be presented with a problem and allowed to create in any medium to develop his solution. When presenting an art problem to students, giving them time to draw from memories using mental imagery is important. It provides a chance for students to play with ideas in their minds before they begin their art work.

Through mental imagery, open-ended lesson planning, play with new materials, and choice based materials, students will be able to develop their imaginations and express themselves in their art making. An art teacher must nurture the imaginations of each child in a positive manner to encourage self expression in the art classroom. Once this balance between instruction and experimentation is achieved a child's true colors will shine through his or her imagination.

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VITA

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