Making Authentic Connections between Art and Life:

An Evolution of Student Engagement in the Process of Learning Art

in an Elementary Classroom

A thesis presented to

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Theresa L. House

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This thesis titled

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in an Elementary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

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Making Authentic Connections between Art and Life: An Evolution of Student Engagement in the Process of Learning Art in an Elementary Classroom (140 pp.)

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This qualitative action research has been conducted to realize the effectiveness of authentic instruction and thematic inquiry in relating art to the lives of students. The participants in this study included thirty sixth grade students from a rural elementary school in southeastern Ohio. These students engaged in the design and implementation of two lessons aimed at making meaningful connections between their lives in the classroom and outside of school. Through the investigation of themes of personal and social significance, students explored various concepts, media and techniques in order to develop their understanding of identity and the environment. The study illuminates changes in levels of engagement during the process through the examination of student surveys and written reflections in conjunction with the final artworks. Included in this study are positive effects of art in student’s lives and recommendations for educators wishing to employ authentic teaching strategies in an art classroom.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Connie Wolfe

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Background of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Pedagogy:</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Instruction:</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Skills:</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the Study</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and Location of the Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Data Collection</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Data Analysis</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity and Trustworthiness</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature ........................................................... 27

The Dimensions of Art in the Lives of Students ........................................... 27

Personal Development ........................................................................... 28

Academic Development ...................................................................... 31

Social Development ............................................................................. 33

Authentic Instruction in Art Education .................................................. 38

Benefits of Authentic Instruction ......................................................... 38

Employing Authentic Instruction in an Art Classroom ............................ 42

Thematic Instruction ........................................................................... 48

The Teacher’s Role in the Process ......................................................... 53

Authentic Assessment ......................................................................... 55

Oppositions to Authentic Instruction .................................................... 57

Art Education and Social Change ......................................................... 60

Art in the Schools: Trends toward Standardization ............................... 61

Democratic Principles in Art Education ................................................. 64

Teaching Visual Culture .................................................................... 67

Summary ............................................................................................. 69

Chapter 3: The Study ............................................................................ 71

Design of the Study ............................................................................. 72

Participants and Location of the Study ............................................... 73

Prior to the Study ............................................................................... 73

Process and Results of the Study ........................................................ 74
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Example of completed Radial Design project</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Example of Identity Box 1</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Example of Identity Box 2</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Example of Self-Portrait</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Example of Identity Collage</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Example of Identity Narrative</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Class A: Deforestation Installation 1</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Class A: Deforestation Installation 2</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Class B: Endangered Species Installation 1</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Class B: Endangered Species Installation 2</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Levels of Engagement in Question 1</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Levels of Engagement in Question 4</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Levels of Engagement in Question 5</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Levels of Engagement in Question 6</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

Educators and artists can both be considered cultural workers. Through their dedication to fostering empowerment in their students with the tools to become critical thinkers and active participants in their lives, many educators and artists work to challenge the status quo and develop a personal commitment to creating a better world (Weisman & Hanes, 2002). By examining socio-cultural issues through artifacts and visual culture, studying art can become an instrument for improving the way we live. “Within the context of curricular reform art educators can challenge students to build a meaningful interpretive framework by identifying, inventing, and reflecting upon visual objects that relate to issues and problems of contemporary life” (Ciganko, 2000, p.35). Assisting them in using their creative thinking skills to engage with several forms of art can expose students to multiple perspectives and encourage them to imagine alternative realities through dialogue and reflection. “At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured” (Greene, 1995, p.123).

As an elementary art educator, I think art has the potential to positively impact the minds and lives of my students. I am the only art educator in two elementary schools with a small budget, enthusiastic students and a strong support system of community and staff. Roughly six hundred children come through my art room doors each week for an average of forty minutes. Students have art class all year beginning in kindergarten and
continuing through the sixth grade. This long term relationship we share enables me to influence their appreciation for the fine arts and instill a sense of self-confidence in their own abilities. My hope is that they will continue to make art a part of their lives once they move on. Since my school district allows me to design my own curriculum around the state standards, this freedom permits me to create lessons that will engage students according to individual interests, needs and developmental stages.

Creating my own curriculum also provides space for me to refine my pedagogy by implementing my ideas in practice. Art is a universal language that opens dialogue and fosters interconnectedness. Besides investigating techniques, materials and histories of artists, art can build the framework for tolerance, equality, justice and freedom and make life rich and infused with multiple ways of seeing, interpreting and communicating. When students are allowed to experiment freely, negotiate outcomes and make informed decisions they can learn the skills necessary to live as conscious participants in a democracy. I work to create this climate in my classroom while using art as a means for exploring the world around us.

Art and artifacts can serve many purposes. In addition to functional and decorative uses, they tell human stories of identity and beliefs. They act as both windows into and mirrors of life and culture. The arts provide an arena to awaken appreciation and understanding of human ideas, emotions and purposes (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). When meaning is sought through the context of art and artifacts, cultural barriers can be broken and tolerance fostered. Examining these concepts can provide the students with the opportunity to look deeper into their own actions and beliefs. Through the evaluation
of personal, social and cultural connections that shape humanity by means of visual culture, students can develop skills of reasoning, empathy, invention and imagination (Attenborough, 2002).

This, then, is the great democratic potential of the public places we call schools. Used well, schools can nurture these ‘essentials’, which are the very qualities needed for the hard work of living together freely but cooperatively and with justice, equality, and dignity. Schools can do this because of the collective problems and the diversity contained within them. Problems and diversity are the essential assets for cultivating democratic citizens (Parker, 2005, p.348).

Guided by the personal connections and inquiry of the students, authentic pedagogy is centered on exploring real world issues and problems that are significant outside the classroom. It emphasizes active construction of knowledge using peer support and extensive conversations about topics related to the students’ lives. Deeper learning can occur because the content has value beyond the school setting (Milbrandt, 1998). Investigations focus on themes related to personal, cultural, environmental and human issues. “Constructing and exploring meanings thematically through art and visual culture can become a channel for students’ personal transformation and social reconstruction” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.11). Connecting students to the human experience in the classroom enables them to explore and define their understanding of the world within an atmosphere of acceptance and guided direction toward personal and communal growth (Weisman, 2002). “Students make art to express not only things about themselves, but about their surroundings, their social context, the things that act upon
them. Students make art not merely for its formal, technical, or even private value, but to communicate about social issues in social ways” (Freedman, 2000, p.323).

I feel it is important to develop the skills needed to facilitate such learning experiences in my own classroom but bridging my philosophy with normal daily routines can be difficult. Limited contact with the students can make the impact I hope to have less influential. With only forty minutes in a class once a week, projects tend to be fast paced so a variety of materials and concepts can be introduced in each school year. At the elementary level, I feel it is important to inspire students with as many forms of creative expression as possible. Therefore, creating in-depth extended investigatory lessons can seem drawn out and lose steam. There are also misconceptions held by the students that can become a challenge to overcome. Many students do not see art as a part of their everyday life. They see it as something separate from the world outside the classroom. I think that if I could learn to make more connections to interests and issues in their lives, students would consider art a tool for discovering more about their world and subsequently, the lives of others.

**Purpose of the Study**

My thesis will focus on a primary research question:

*How does student engagement in learning art change when lessons are connected to their life experiences?*

My main intention for engaging in an action research project is to improve my ability to connect art to the lives of my students outside of school and to assist them in
developing their identity and belief system through the examination of art and visual culture. Through researching authentic instruction and critical inquiry into socio-cultural issues, I hope to gain insights and resources that I may use to bring these ideas into my own classroom. I aim to offer students not only a well rounded knowledge base of art discipline and history, but to also create reflective learners who will continue to evaluate their personal connections to this world. Looking critically at the habits of our society, examining how artists respond through their work and creating personal contributions to the human story can be a pathway to change if students can make links with these issues and their own lives. Offering students space in which they may share their voice and mind can guide them in forming their identity and “their relation to such principles as freedom, equality, justice and concern for others” (Greene, 1995, p. 68). By investigating this subject, I hope to further define my pedagogy and how I can effectively implement it into my curriculum in order to increase the quality my students’ engagement with the fine arts.

Significance of the Study

Through the research involved in this study, I foresee many benefits to the field of art education and my teaching practice. Investigating the methods and theories surrounding the facilitation of authentic learning experiences in the art curriculum will inform my abilities to engage more students in deeper learning about art and visual culture. Working to design a course of study the students care about can elicit active construction of knowledge, build communication, emotional and cognitive skills and
connect students to the human experience (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). My findings will also be useful to other art educators interested in this topic. “More empirical work is needed both as a foundation for social perspectives and to establish what occurs in classrooms when social perspectives are enacted” (Freedman, 2000, p.323). While there are many examples of lessons that fit the state mandated standards available to educators, they are not developed to assist students in looking critically at their world and issues in their lives. I will synthesize the research that has been done on the importance of art in the lives of children, authentic instruction, and the advancement of art education toward becoming a tool for social change. Through the integration and application of these notions, I will bridge the connections between art and life and show how they can become a foundation for the experiences students can have in art education. Further, through a collective effort to engage students in gaining a deeper, critical understanding of our world, we can enhance each child’s experience of growth and success.

Definition of Terms

Authentic Pedagogy:

In the contexts of this research, pedagogy refers to the holistic nature of education encompassing the intent, conditions and effects of instruction, learning, and curriculum design. Authenticity is to the ability to relate what is being learned in school with what the child lives outside of the classroom. To develop understanding and capacity to provide authentic experiences through art, instructional strategies are examined. According to Anderson & Milbrandt (2005), authentic instruction emphasizes “strategies
that foster high-level cognition, deep learning, connections to the world beyond the classroom, and substantial discussion by and support from peers” (p.x). The teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom is useful for success in school and in real world settings. Newmann and Wehlage (1993) clarify “authentic” as “achievement that is significant and meaningful” different from “that which is trivial and useless” (p.8). Students engage in active construction of knowledge through disciplined inquiry of real world themes and focus on developing connections between art education and life apart from school in order to deepen understanding of issues. Art and visual culture are used to “engage viewers in communicating, reflecting, and responding to the meaning of their lives” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.ix). The five criteria they use to judge the authenticity of instruction include: “the use of higher level thinking, a depth of knowledge, content which has value and meaning beyond the instructional context, substantial conversation about the topic, and peer support for achievement” (Milbrandt, 1998, p.48).

Closely connected with the concept of authentic instruction are the notions of thematic and integrated instruction. Integrated instruction incorporates many disciplines while investigating an issue or theme to facilitate learning. When examining a theme that is related to the students’ interests and concerns, many paths of exploration can be taken to achieve a more holistic understanding of that topic. Boundaries along subject lines do not authentically represent how knowledge is developed in the real world. Therefore inquiry and instruction must be allowed to expand naturally to incorporate many
disciplines, times and cultures. In art education, the exploration of themes of personal
and social significance should not be limited to studies within the field of art.

**Thematic Instruction:**

In relation to authentic instruction and art education, thematic instruction is
“centered on significant human themes rather than on the traditional elements and
principles of design or units of instruction based on media, such as clay or pencil
drawing” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.237). Knowledge is constructed naturally in
relation to a larger theme connected to the lives of the students. Themes are taken from
students’ personal experiences and authentically connected to art and culture of the larger
world (Weisman & Hanes, 2002). Exploration of formal elements and the development
of technical skills evolve as new knowledge is acquired in order to understand a theme.
By offering students meaningful contexts, deeper understanding occurs as opposed to
fragmented pieces of knowledge. “Themes are used to attain meaning. Ideas and
emotions are elicited and taken to their natural conclusion. The guide is students’ own
logical and emotional connections” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.237).

**Critical Thinking Skills:**

One aim of authentic education is to foster critical thinkers and reflective learners
who will take active roles as members of society. Critical thinking refers to the ability to
pose and solve problems, make informed decisions, accurately interpret meanings and
inferences, analyze, evaluate, make judgments and think creatively (Turner, 2006). A
person who is able to think critically can arrive at warranted conclusions through a process of interpreting and sorting relevant information, make connections among significant pieces of knowledge, intelligently predict outcomes and develop articulated opinions (Guay, 2002). This involves “manipulating information and ideas by synthesizing, generalizing, explaining, hypothesizing, or arriving at conclusions that produce new meanings and understandings” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p.86).

**Methodology**

**Design of the Study**

For my thesis research I employed the methods of action research in a qualitative study. Qualitative research can be described as a "systematic process of describing, analyzing and interpreting insights discovered in everyday life" (La Pierre & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 34). Emphasis is placed on the researcher’s descriptive, narrative approach to reporting outcomes of data collected from a natural setting linking an emergent design with ongoing analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).

Action research is a form of reflective teaching aimed at self-discovery and learning about the aspects of one’s own teaching he or she may not be fully aware of or clearly understand. It allows teachers to engage in examining their own practice by expanding on a theory or inquiry in their classrooms. The educator is able to reflect on their own experiences and apply the findings immediately to their teaching in order to enhance their effectiveness and pedagogy. Through a spiral cycle of planning, acting, fact-finding and analysis, educators can delve deeper into a question or interest they face
in their teaching. It builds a bridge between theory and practice that requires an open mind, deep reflection, and engagement in the process of learning and problem solving (May, 1993).

Action research allowed me to work within my own classroom to examine the implementation and results of authentic instruction in the lives of the students I teach. After researching authentic instruction strategies, I chose the class that would participate in the study and applied the theories and techniques investigated through a series of lessons. Further, I reflected on the events through various forms of data collection to analyze the results and realize the benefits possible in my own teaching and the students’ learning.

In my research, I collected many forms of data to achieve triangulation. Triangulation refers to the use of a variety of research and data collection methods in order to support the conclusions of the study (Koroscik & Kowalchuk, 1997). I relied on the findings of a conducted survey, participatory and non-participatory observation, field notes, class discussions and students’ written responses to gather evidence and analyze results. These methods worked best to describe the impact authentic instruction can have on students’ engagement in the process of learning art. Through a narrative approach to describe the results, I gave a holistic view of the classroom setting, student interactions and reactions to art and one another, and students’ personal reflections. I also relayed enough information to my readers so that they can make generalizations about how my research may apply to their personal situations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).
Participants and Location of the Study

The aims of my research were to improve my effectiveness in relating art to the lives of my students and help them make authentic connections between art and broader real world issues. Because of my personal interest and inquiry into this topic, I conducted this research in my own classroom. The participants included thirty sixth grade students who were divided into two homerooms. There were thirteen girls and seventeen boys. These students attended a small rural elementary school in the southeastern region of Ohio. Because of the close proximity to a university, the demographic makeup of the students was diverse. Included in this sixth grade were three students from Vietnam and one student each from the countries of Indonesia, China, Germany and India. Although three of these students were in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program when they first arrived at our school, only one still attended for assistance. This student spoke English fluently, but required additional assistance for some reading and writing. I chose to work with sixth grade students because they have more art experiences in the weekly schedule. These students attended art class twice each week for forty minute classes. Students had class on Tuesday afternoons and Thursday mornings.

Timeline

I began the research at the beginning of November after the classroom routines and procedures had been established. Once the study was approved by Research and Compliance at Ohio University, consent to participate in the research was sought. A letter was sent home to parents of the sixth grade students requiring a signature by both
the parent and the child. Because the lessons would be taught as part of the regular curriculum, all students were required to participate in and complete the projects during the study. In accordance with the elementary school’s policy, permission was required by the parents to include their child in the collection of data for the study. Questions about the project were answered in a class discussion on November 1, 2007 and students were reminded that their participation in the research was voluntary. The voluntary portion would include taking a survey, writing a reflection following each lesson and participating in class discussions about the projects. All thirty students returned their consent forms by November 15, 2007 and participated in all aspects of the research.

The next step in the study was to administer an anonymous survey to each student (see Appendix A). This survey was used to gather evidence of students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding art and the process of making and learning about art. This occurred on November 15, 2007, during which time students were working on a lesson taught as part of the regular art curriculum. The students completed this assignment centered on the technical skills of radial design and color theory between October 30 and November 27, 2007. On November 29, 2007, during their normal art time, the students completed a written reflection aimed at illuminating their personal connections to the content and value of the lesson (see Appendix B).

During the next several weeks, I worked collectively with the students to design and implement two lessons based on themes of personal and social importance. The first lesson, which took place between December 4, 2007 and January 24, 2008, developed into an exploration of personal identity reflected through various forms of
media chosen by each student. During this particular project the students were not in school between the dates of December 22, 2007 and January 4, 2008 due to winter break. Students completed a written reflection at the end of this investigation on January 29, 2008 (see Appendix B). The second project actualized by the sixth grade students focused on communicating their understanding of and interest in an ecological issue. This educational experience designed by each class began on January 31, 2008 and ended on April 22, 2008. As in the past, a written reflection was completed by each student on April 24, 2008 (see Appendix B). The study concluded at the end of these lessons and a final survey was administered on April 28, 2008 (see Appendix A).

**Methods of Data Collection**

Many forms of data collection were used to create triangulation and to gather sufficient evidence to establish credibility. In addition to my own observations, the students’ opinions, reflections and artworks were the prominent sources of data. All thirty students of the sixth grade consented to participation in the collection of this data.

The study began with a survey administered to gauge students’ attitudes and beliefs about the value of art (see Appendix A). This same survey was given at the end of the research to compare the answers and analyze the results. The surveys were kept anonymous in order to account for the researcher bias present from my relationship with the students. The students were able to respond to the surveys in their homeroom classes and return them to their individual teachers providing sufficient time to complete them in private. I then collected them from the homeroom teachers.
A similar form of data collection followed each lesson during the span of the study. At the end of all three projects, each student completed a written response reflecting on the value of what they learned during that particular process of art making (see Appendix B). The questions asked were aimed at gathering student opinions and interpretations of the process and product. The same questions were used each time in order to compare the changes in attitudes and beliefs and levels of engagement throughout the research.

The first reflection was distributed after a lesson on radial design. This lesson focused on the elements and principles of design which are technical concepts taught in the regular art curriculum. There was no attempt to include connections to personal or social issues in this project.

Next the students engaged in discussions about topics related to themes they then explored in two subsequent lessons. Through dialogue and inquiry the students were asked to look closely at their individual connections and questions about larger human themes. The themes chosen for investigation were personal identity and the environment. In the context of this research, personal identity concerns the qualities that make up an individual’s heritage, beliefs, abilities, talents, dreams, fears, family, friends, preferences and so on. The term environment is used to describe the natural world and humans’ relationship with it. Each unit of inquiry examined how artists respond to these themes through their art and resulted in an opportunity for the students to investigate their personal relationship to each theme.
The students played an integral part in making decisions about the formation of the projects based on their interests and preferred methods of exploration. I facilitated the learning by introducing artists of various times and cultures along with relevant aspects of visual culture and artifacts that relate to the projects and themes. Using art as the vehicle and beginning at a personal level then branching out into cultural and global concerns, students investigated their connections to art and their experiences outside of the classroom. The inquiry resulted in tangible projects where students explored various media and techniques.

In addition to written surveys and reflections, I gathered data in other forms throughout the study. During the creation of each project, I examined the thought processes, decisions and ideas behind the work made by the students. The end product was also analyzed to determine levels of engagement, creative thinking and deep learning. In addition, I kept a reflection log during this time and recorded my observations of the interactions and opinions of the students.

**Methods of Data Analysis**

The results of this study were analyzed and will be implemented in my pedagogy and curriculum design as an art educator. Using the students’ artwork, answers to surveys and written reflections, discussions, and interactions with the project and one another as evidence, I looked for themes that appeared throughout my observations that expressed various levels of engagement and interest in the explorations of personal identity and the environment. I specifically sought examples of the students’ actions and responses that reflected “high-level cognition, deep learning, [and] connections to
the world beyond the classroom” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.x). I created and employed a Critical Thinking Rubric (see Appendix C) to gauge these levels in the students’ written reflections. From the survey given at the beginning and end of the study and those written at the culmination of each lesson, I judged whether or not the students’ value of art had shifted as a result of the authentic approach to teaching. The findings from the study were then translated into graphs to further assist the discovery of patterns and findings. The informal patterns occurring in the actions and thoughts of the students’ investigations and reflections were used to draw conclusions about the action research (Stokrocki, 1997).

Validity and Trustworthiness

There have been many steps taken to establish validity and trustworthiness in this study. Through narrative description of the research and its findings, enough rich detail is provided to allow the reader to determine if the information is relevant and transferable to their situation and context (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). In order for generalizations to be formed by the reader, emphasis is placed on accurate depictions and observations to create a realistic and rational assessment of the research. To achieve this I have included examples of student reflections, artwork and writing samples to present valid evidence to support the construction of a theory. The data was collected in a variety of forms to achieve triangulation. By searching for themes and credible interpretations supported by several forms of data the conclusions are reliable and trustworthy (Koroscik & Kowalchuk, 1997). The multiple methods of collecting
data in this study include observations, field notes, student surveys and written reflections, class discussions and student artwork.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study stem from the specific details of the classroom being studied in addition to the pedagogical style of the principal investigator. This study was limited to a public elementary school in the United States. What is determined as a model for creating lessons geared toward the interests and lives of the students outside of school in this setting may not be fully transferable to all situations. Furthermore, due to the nature of qualitative action research, the educational and theoretical practices that shape my pedagogy may influence the interactions and reflections of my students. Although my intention is to remove this subjectivity, I understand the nature of my approach may cause different results than others attempting similar research. Through the triangulation of data and efforts to enhance the validity of this study, the findings can be used as a reference to other art educators interested in creating opportunities to engage students in authentic art education.

Summary

In summary, this qualitative action research has been conducted to realize the effectiveness of authentic instruction and thematic inquiry in relating art to the lives of students. The participants in this study included thirty sixth grade students from a rural elementary school in southeastern Ohio. These students engaged in the design and implementation of two lessons aimed at making meaningful connections between
their lives in the classroom and outside of school. Through the investigation of themes of personal and social significance, students explored various concepts, media and techniques in order to develop their understanding of personal identity and the environment. Various forms of data were collected and analyzed to draw conclusions about students’ engagement in the art making process and their beliefs about the value of art in their lives. These include observations, field notes, student artwork and written student responses in the forms of surveys and reflections.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to create a more meaningful experience for students in the art room as well general education classrooms. While this research takes place in an art education context, the ability for all educators to amplify significant student engagement through interdisciplinary experiences can be actualized by applying the findings of this study. In the process of making, learning and discussing art, students can investigate issues that shape their identity and examine their questions and concerns about the world. Through this exploration, students also learn empathy for other’s struggles, appreciation for differences, awareness of diverse viewpoints and collaborative problem solving skills. Developing their artistic freedom empowers them with self-confidence, discipline and the ability to interpret and name their world. If students are provided with the opportunity to engage in lessons that are connected to their interests and inquiries, interactions with the various forms of art can become a tool for developing deeper understanding and individual growth.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

While reviewing literature surrounding the idea of authentic instruction, certain themes emerged that support the importance of connecting art to the lives of students. The first issue emphasizes how art can positively influence and improve an individual and in turn, the larger world. Next, in order to create an art curriculum that effectively engages students through inquiry into personal and social themes and the construction of meaning, the methods of authentic instruction are investigated. Finally, these topics progress toward the value of employing art education as a tool for social change. These notions were researched to assist in answering the primary research question of this study, *How does student engagement in learning art change when lessons are connected to their life experiences?* In addition, examining these concepts further is intended to illuminate paths for improving art education and the quality of engagement students have within the art classroom.

The Dimensions of Art in the Lives of Students

Art plays many roles in the development of students’ capacities for academic, personal and social growth. Delving into the multi-faceted functions of art and its effects on student growth will reinforce the significance of offering a meaningful art education to children. Promoting influential encounters with many forms of art can enhance students’ experiences in and out of the classroom setting.
Personal Development

The arts offer students numerous opportunities to expand their abilities and form their identities. Art helps students make sense of their world and engage in activities that encompass many aspects of their inquisitive motivation to develop meaning. The arts are intrinsically important, helping us process what we think, feel and see. They are fundamental to understanding ourselves, others and history (Turner, 2006). “We make art to make sense of things, to give meaning to our existence. Artists connect ideas and emotions through the physical act of making aesthetic forms to represent their meanings” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.139). Art addresses the emotional and social aspects of a child’s development. Engaging their senses along with their intellect in the process of art making, students can further define events in their lives.

According to John Dewey (1934) art helps us know and order the experiences that shape our growth. “In an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the lived creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it” (p.257). Growth stems from the individual’s ability to find meaning in these occurrences, learn from them, adapt and then act with the intention of achieving worthwhile ends. “The fine arts seek out and elicit this quality of all the things we experience and express it more energetically and clearly than do the things from which they extract it” (p.215).

The process of stabilizing an idea or feeling in a visual form encourages students to reflect upon the often unseen or unnoticed aspects of a situation. “One of the large lessons the arts teach is how to secure the feelingful experience that slowed perception
makes possible; the arts help students learn how to savor qualities by taking the time to really look so that they can see” (Eisner, 2002a, p.24). Through this close examination of the thoughts and feelings tied to occurrences in life, students may learn to become conscious and active participants in their surroundings. The arts can help students discover the contours of their emotional and intellectual identities and live a fuller existence (Eisner, 2002a).

As students learn to view the world from an aesthetic perspective, they can learn about their own capacities to appreciate something aesthetically. “Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms” (Dewey, 1934, p.108). As students become aware of and appreciate the beauty and meaning in common experiences, they will begin to find more joy in daily life. Intrinsic value in these visual observations will build a foundation for discovering meaning and enriching future encounters with works of art (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Work within the arts increases imagination, creativity, innovation and wonder. It cracks through habits and opens doors to new alternatives of perception. “To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginier has called normal…to carve out new orders in experience” (Greene, 1995, p.19). Without imagination, the consideration of other ways of thinking, living and understanding would not be possible. It is from this awareness that change emerges. We don’t look to works
of art to only show us what already exists; we also look for their ability to enable us to see more. Assisting students in using their creative thinking skills through meaningful encounters with several forms of art will empower them to imagine the unpredictable and work within the unexpected. Through this process of education, students discover their role in designing their own experiences and therefore learn to shape their identity. “The arts have distinctive contributions to make to that end through their emphasis on the expression of individuality and through the exercise and development of the imaginative capacities” (Eisner, 2002a, p.24).

To truly gain insight through their self-expression, students must be conscious of their own realities and thinking. Art encourages students to take personal responsibility for their actions in the process and design of a work by allowing the creation of meaning to come from the individual (Hickman, 2005). This in turn advances the development of identity. “A major aim of arts education is to promote the child’s ability to develop his or her mind through the experience that the creation or perception of expressive form makes possible” (Eisner, 2002a, p.24). Art should be about helping students try to make sense of themselves and their environment during appropriate times in their development (Hickman, 2005).

Through art education, students are introduced to the rich heritage of world visual culture, not only to expand their knowledge and to extend their imaginations, but to construct their identities. If we accept the idea that art education is actually part of identity construction, that it focuses, after all, on cultural and personal forms of interpretation and representation that influence the way in which
students see themselves and the world, the responsibility of art educators becomes great indeed (Freedman, 2003, p.118).

Learning to effectively communicate aspects of an individual’s identity through the many forms of art can also aid in the development of self-confidence. Art can help students learn how to transform their ideas and emotions within the limits of a material, “learning to exploit the unanticipated opportunities that unfold, making judgments about relationships that are rooted in one’s own somatic experience, entertaining alternative solutions to a problem and judging their respective merits” (Eisner, 2001b, p.7). All of these processes are developed during the creation of a piece of art. Decisions about the qualitative relationships within the work come from experience, and reflection on these experiences build confidence in one’s abilities. The more one understands and believes in their own abilities, the more assured they become, enabling them to better express themselves. It provides another way to understand identity, one that evolves from knowing what feels right and true (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

**Academic Development**

Another facet of personal development that arts can support is within the realm of the academic advancement of a child. Engagement with the arts can impact a student’s personal motivation, increase critical thinking skills and strengthen cognitive capacities. A kinetic and stimulating art program can activate the brain in more ways than sedentary learning approaches (Jensen, 2001).

Looking at and interacting with various art concepts, activities and objects has the ability to strengthen numerous thinking skills. One such skill is that of sensory
anchoring. Art strengthens the ability to maintain focus for extended periods of time because seeing something aesthetically requires careful examination (Hickman, 2005). It requires viewers to make multiple connections between a variety of symbols, meanings and relationships. Students learn to see the whole as well as the parts (Eisner, 2002a). The use of critical thinking skills such as posing and solving problems, analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting is fostered through most encounters with the arts.

Improvements in spatial and conditional reasoning can also occur. Spatial reasoning is the ability to recognize, organize and sequence visual elements and patterns. Conditional reasoning refers to the ability to theorize about outcomes and consequences (Turner, 2006). Furthermore, language skills are fostered when students transform the qualities of their experience into speech and writing. “Work in the arts, when it provides students with the challenge of talking about what they have seen, gives them opportunities, permission, and encouragement to use language in a way free from the strictures of literal description” (Eisner, 2002a, p.89). The construction and interpretation of metaphor become primary objectives in discussing and making art.

Along with art’s ability to increase students’ awareness and improve thinking, it teaches the importance of flexibility. Work in the arts challenges and strengthens the improvisational side of intelligence. Students must be able to shift their objectives as unpredictable developments occur in the course of their work. This spontaneity and creativity is more true to life than calculated methods with expected outcomes (Eisner, 2002b).
Attempting to translate what has been perceived and learned in life into a work of art requires the skill of editing. Refining one’s work to ensure its success in conveying the intended meaning is a form of artistry. “By artistry I mean a form of practice informed by the imagination that employs technique to select and organize expressive qualities to achieve ends that are aesthetically satisfying” (Eisner, 2002a, p.49).

Students develop this skill as they learn to reflect upon their work and effectively use the tools and medium that will best communicate their idea or experience (Dewey, 1937). However the work emerges from the creator, “…it, just because it is a full and intense experience, keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness. It does so by reducing the raw materials of that experience to matter ordered through form” (Dewey, 1937, p.138). Working within the symbolic language and interpretive design of art enhances students’ ability to imagine, express, discover and communicate.

Finally, artistic endeavors construct qualitative intelligence. Art emphasizes the formation of opinions and judgments as opposed to accepting rules and truths. It teaches tolerance for ambiguity. It demonstrates there can be more than one answer to a question and more than one solution to a problem. Meaning and worth comes from the individual. Because students are encouraged to use their senses and emotions in the process of learning and intrinsic satisfaction drives the creative process, personal motivation is fostered (Turner, 2006).

Social Development

Art’s power as a means of exploring personal ideas, identity and development leads to a greater understanding of self while simultaneously fostering empathy and skills
needed for cooperation in a community. Art offers opportunities for dialogue between cultures and individuals, it creates interconnectedness through the communication of shared experiences and through engaging the imagination, new possibilities and resolutions to existing communal problems are conceived and explored.

Art’s role in the social threads of society has served many functions in promoting and maintaining ways of life and cultural beliefs. Besides using art for decorative purposes, it tells the human story. It helps people understand who they are, where they came from and what they believe. Traditionally art was used for the purpose of reflecting and reinforcing the values, attitudes and ideologies of a culture (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). It was a visual method of passing this sense of reality from one generation to the next. Through the use of mutually understood symbol systems, individuals and groups of people built their identity, individuality and status (Mcfee, 1998).

Art history helps students understand the development of art in relation to the people, time and place in history that it mirrors and assists. It reveals how traditions and histories are created and broken. Through the examination of the forms and functions of artworks and artifacts in their original and social contexts, it can elicit connections to contemporary societal issues (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Understanding art in the human context can link it with aspects of the students’ lives. Given that the arts represent such a large portion of communication in society, it is important that students are able to understand, interpret and contribute to these symbol systems. Looking critically at the motivations behind the creation and study of art can lead students to a holistic understanding of the social role of art through history.
In addition to understanding art’s ability to communicate attitudes and beliefs on a cultural level, students also benefit from the individual opportunity to engage in the exchange of experiences and identity. Art connects students with their peers through cooperative learning. It can be used as a tool to raise consciousness and as an invitation for others to share their stories. It provides a space where personal anxieties are acknowledged and develop collective significance (Naidus, 2005). Through the illumination of these shared feelings and experiences, it fosters interconnectedness and inspires students to contribute and develop their voice. It can “serve as a bridge of respect and understanding between people and contribute to a global sense of self, community, and of place” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.18).

Art is a universal language. It can convey meaning through visual elements that speech and text can often lose in translation (Dewey, 1934). “Expression strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from one another. Since art is the most universal form of language, since it is constituted… by the common qualities of the public world, it is the…freest form of communication” (Dewey, 1934, p.282). The language of art relies on a social relationship between the creator and the viewer. The artwork becomes the connecting link between the artist’s intended meaning and the viewer’s interpretation. It is important because it continues to be experienced in new ways by different people at different times, therefore it remains valued. Even artists can find new meaning in their work because of changes in their intellect and development (Dewey, 1934).

Through the communication of emotions, stories, cultures, identity and experiences, art can cultivate imagination and empathy. It lies at the forefront in the
celebration of diversity and individuality. “Works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience” (Dewey, 1934, p.109). It encourages an immediate emotional response to new perspectives and offers intellectual space to engage in dialogue with others about personal and communal views of the world (Albers, 1999). Art can become a means for students to celebrate and remember the most important and fullest moments in their lives (Dewey, 1934). Exploring their individual capacities to express their understanding can assist students in sharing their experiences with others. “The social contribution of the educational process is to make it possible for individuals to create symbiotic relationships with others through the development of their distinctive and complementary abilities and in so doing to enrich one another’s lives” (Eisner, 2002a, p.7).

Through this enrichment and collaboration, students will influence one another to challenge and overcome misconceptions, appreciate multiple perspectives and develop possibilities of change. This is perhaps the most valuable social facet of art’s influence in improving the world. Art can be a social instrument for enhancing people’s lives. Much of human behavior is learned and influenced through interactions and collaborations with others (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Art cultivates dialogue among individuals which can lead to the development of tolerance, respect, empathy and compassion. “Encounters with the arts and activities in the domains of art can nurture the growth of persons who will reach out to one another as they seek clearings in their experience and try to be more ardently in the world” (Greene, 1995, p.132). The creation and sharing of art can become
an act of transcendence and freedom where individuals can break through the barriers that divide human beings (hooks, 1995).

The development of imagination is the gateway toward positive change and equality. Besides its influence in the creation of empathy, it encourages curiosity, experimentation and creative solutions to problems. Without imagination, the consideration of alternative ways of thinking, living, understanding and communicating would not be possible. It is from this awareness that change emerges. “The person educated to experiment, accept mistakes, try new ways of looking at and inventing things will also be someone who questions the status quo and contributes to the dynamism of society” (Hickman, 2005, p.104). Working together and using art as a vehicle for examining injustices and social issues will empower students to question the way in which things exist and create new possibilities. “Meaningful dialogue, substantial conversation, and other substantive cooperation are means of overcoming isolation, repression, and hierarchal attitudes” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.27). This dialogic exchange with what is true and what is imagined will challenge students to define their place in their social and physical world and foster active participation in the path toward justice.

In summary, the arts contribute significantly to the development of the individual as well as communities and cultures. The growth of students personally, academically and socially through art can impact the quality of life they will experience in the classroom and as part of society. “Work in the arts…is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning,
establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture” (Eisner, 2002a, p.3). The perceived value of these encounters is the driving force behind the influence they will have in the development and growth of the child. Connecting art to the lives of the students will ensure they will find it relevant to their advancement and progression as individuals.

**Authentic Instruction in Art Education**

Furthering student engagement in the process of learning using authentic instruction strategies goes beyond the content area of art, but for the purpose of this study its relationship within art education will remain the focus. The goal of this instruction strategy is to “prepare students for success at school and in life, through teaching and learning centered on art” by making real-world connections and fostering active construction of knowledge by examining issues pertaining to the students’ lives in depth (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.7). It strives for understanding life through art. Throughout the next section, the benefits of employing authentic instruction and approaches to using the technique effectively will be discussed.

**Benefits of Authentic Instruction**

A study recently conducted by the Department of Education found that in the United States’ largest public schools districts, thirty-one percent of students were dropping out of high school or failing to graduate (Thomas & Date, 2006). This astonishing statistic demonstrates how ineffective schools are at connecting to the lives and minds of students in a meaningful and engaging way (Eisner, 2002b). The criteria to
graduate or earn high scores on achievement tests are often considered “trivial, contrived, and meaningless by both students and adults” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p.7). This absence of relevant meaning creates low motivation and investment in schoolwork and hinders the possibility for the transfer of knowledge to the world outside the classroom.

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school- its isolation from life (Dewey, 1900, p.75).

When learning is centered on issues and themes that can be connected to what the student cares about and what is experienced in life, the construction of knowledge is more effective and significant (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Emotion can not be separated from the learning process because how students feel about the content they study influences how well they will learn it (Eisner, 2002b).

Giving students a voice in their own learning will develop their commitment to growing as individuals and as a community. In the art room, if students are given the opportunity to select activities and areas of investigation, they will be empowered to take control of their own education (Hickman, 2005). “If the young were enabled to identify alternative possibilities and to choose themselves in accord with what they thought preferable, they might have reasons for learning to learn on their own initiative” (Greene, 1995, p.177). Art, as a social process, incorporates group activities and cooperative
learning experiences that are crucial to developing socialization skills and cultivating motivation to learn (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). When students are involved in such planning exercises they become aware of democratic concepts important to the functions of daily life in society. They learn to integrate personal desires with communal interests in a participatory and collaborative decision making process (Beane, 1997). Learning to compromise and contribute to the whole while exploring content driven by personal significance will further promote success outside of the classroom.

There are other benefits inherent in the approach of connecting learning to the interests and concerns of the students. One intended outcome of authentic instruction in art includes creating “students who think critically about art and artifacts in the visual world and feel deeply about the artwork they create and see” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.x). In order for students to understand the aesthetic qualities and value of a work of art, they must first delve into identifying with the source of inspiration, social or personal, for which it was created (Dewey, 1934). This connection to the human experience involves students in the development of meaning which leads to deeper understanding and engagement. When artists go through an act of expression, not only are the materials transformed but order is brought to the ideas and thoughts. The act is not merely a spontaneous impulse. The artist must employ critical and cognitive skills to work the vague conceptual idea over thoroughly to achieve meaning others can share. Working within the realm of an aesthetic experience allows the person creating the art to be fully engaged in living the experience during the process of production (Dewey, 1934). Assisting students in discovering personal connections and associations with the
work of other artists and facilitating opportunities where they can explore their own abilities will enhance their capacity to relate art to their own lives. This conscious participation in the creation and appreciation of art is encouraged through authentic instruction.

Students also benefit from this instructional strategy through the development of lasting qualities that will enhance their relationships with themselves, others and their environment. Including comprehensive learning units that extend beyond the classroom will generate students who care for each other and their world, who will learn to solve problems with empathy and understanding and who will value human rights (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). “Such learning engages the hearts and minds of elementary children in ways that help them make sense of life experiences and that help them develop understanding and empathetic, or as needed, oppositional, critical relationships with their environments” (Guay, 2002, p.304). The tasks that are designed for students in school will determine the ways of thinking and the types of skills they will acquire and utilize later in life. The experiences a child is exposed to and the manner in which the child learns to manage them will greatly influence the habits that will develop (Eisner, 2002a).

The context that really matters educationally is the life context outside school, for the educational aim of schooling is not merely to help students do well in school, but to help them lead personally satisfying and socially constructive lives outside it (Eisner, 2002a, p.187).
Employing Authentic Instruction in an Art Classroom

There are a variety of instructional strategies and experiences that can be utilized in an art curriculum to support the goals of authentic instruction. Authenticity can be described as “the extent to which a lesson, assessment task, or sample of student performance represents construction of knowledge through the use of disciplined inquiry that has some value or meaning beyond success in school” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p.4). By eliciting connections to the world beyond school, students become personally engaged and take an active role in building knowledge in order to deepen understanding and promote the transfer of these skills to situations outside the classroom (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

When educators aspire to create authentic learning experiences, there are certain criteria that may be used to evaluate the quality of the instruction. While creating, understanding and interpreting art, it is essential to involve the intellect and emotion of the students. “The purpose of art education is not to educate people about only the technical and formal qualities of artifacts but to extend the meaning of those qualities and artifacts to show their importance in human existence” (Freedman, 2000, p.324). If educators can encourage students to make sense of what they hear and see, they are more likely to see art as a way of understanding the world around them. Art can become a way of knowing and living.

One component emphasized in the use of authentic instruction is the way in which knowledge is constructed. Rather than simply listening to the teacher and reproducing what has been said, students are offered meaningful topics to investigate individually as
well as cooperatively. Through their research, writing, discussions, and decisions, students form their understanding in relation to their personal connections, concerns and inquiries (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Rich dialogue is fostered, “student interpretation is valued, and challenged, and expert opinion is represented, as part of a negotiated system of information rather than a deliverable object” (Freedman, 2000, p.321). Students collaboratively explore themes of individual and social significance and support one another in the process of achievement (Newman & Wehlage, 1993).

According to Dewey (1902) there are many downfalls to the external presentation of information accessible through textbooks and direct instruction. First, there are frequently no personal connections to what the child has seen or experienced. The knowledge offered becomes “purely formal and symbolic” (p.202). Because of this separation from life, the child has no motivation or need driving them to invest in the learning. Another negative factor is the lack of opportunity for stimulating inquiry and critical thinking skills to develop. The thinking has been done according to what an outsider has deemed comprehensible and the students need only passively take in the material. In this situation “the child’s reasoning powers, the faculty of abstraction and generalization, are not adequately developed” and they resort to memorization (p.204).

The art room is naturally conducive to active processes of thinking and learning. Traditionally, school classrooms are often set up for listening. This is apparent from the organizational structure of the furniture, for example. The desks, created to keep an upright posture, are positioned in rows facing the chalkboard with little room for movement. The uniformity and mechanical appearance are favorable for passive
absorption of knowledge (Dewey, 1900). Compare this with an art room or workshop in which there is freedom of movement, open communication, social exchanges of ideas, hands on experimentation and cooperative learning. Students in this environment push one another to achieve higher standards and learn from each other’s experiences (Dewey, 1900).

In this environment, incorporating authentic meaning within the activity would be advantageous to helping students come to better understand their world as they live it. “If students are to grow and develop both psychologically and socially through making art at school, they need to be helped and encouraged to construct their own meanings rather than passively accept meanings from authorities such as teachers and texts” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.144). Students are asked to consider alternative methods of inquiry, resolutions, points of view, and perspectives while examining a concept or issue (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995). Encouraging students to seek alternatives and understand there are many solutions to a problem will enable them to confidently seek meaning in accordance with their own interests. In this way school has the opportunity to “affiliate itself with life, to become the child’s habitat, where he learns through directed living, instead of being only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future” (Dewey, 1900, p.18).
Sincerity of interest in the subject will allow students to personally invest in what they are learning and they will be more likely to apply the knowledge to situations outside of the classroom.
Disciplined inquiry is a method used to promote the active construction of knowledge needed to effectively employ authentic instruction. This method asks students to exercise methods of inquiry and communication used by specialists in the field of study to identify with the central ideas, theories and perspectives associated with a discipline. It bridges the work done in the classroom with what is characteristic of the theories and work achieved in the professional arena. The main features of this process include the use of prior knowledge to build in-depth understanding and conclusions which can be expressed through various forms of communication (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995). “Art lessons are more meaningful when they connect to a student’s world. A meaningful lesson derives from prior experience and evolves from there to the creation of new knowledge, experience and deeper understanding of life” (Marshall, 2002, p.280) Critical thinking skills such as interpretation, evaluation, analysis, synthesis and organization of information are emphasized as students examine their experiences in relation to lessons and artifacts (Guay, 2002). Students are involved in manipulating information to “arrive at conclusions that produce new meanings and understandings for them” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p.86). Ability to effectively communicate through written and visual means can be enhanced by tapping into the stored experiences of the student and using them to expand comprehension of present situations and new knowledge.

Another important aspect of disciplined inquiry and authentic instruction is the development of in depth understanding. Rather than creating imitative art works or obtaining only a superficial awareness of an artist or artifact, students are encouraged to
delve into the historical and contextual characteristics of the art they research with enough thoroughness to investigate connections and relationships and arrive at complex understandings. In order for this to occur, substantial conversation about the topics must be incorporated into the learning process (Newman & Wehlage, 1993). Through the study of art history, students come to understand the circumstances in which the art was developed, utilized and valued. “The more informed our encounter, the more we are likely to notice and the more the work is likely to mean” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.139). By fully integrating the intentions and motivations of the artist and the culture surrounding the time of the work’s creation, students can conceptualize the work as material from life. By presenting large amounts of detail, the students can place themselves in the process and may realize their ability to contribute to it (Dewey, 1900). “Helping students understand that artists have something to say- and that they themselves have as well- is a fundamental aspect of learning in the arts” (Eisner, 2002a, p.51). Connecting what a child feels and wishes to articulate with the experiences of other artists can facilitate satisfaction and sincere investment in the act of self-expression.

Furthering students’ development of meaning through the study of art can be accomplished through the exploration of topics and themes that have value beyond school. Authentic experiences emphasize the relationships between art education and the child’s personal and social environments (Dewey, 1900). The students’ interests and inquiries serve as the entry point for the exploration of ideas and concepts they have encountered or are likely to encounter in life outside of school (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995). Educative growth occurs best when the “child’s natural impulses and
instincts” are utilized “so that the child is carried on to a higher plane of perception and judgment, and equipped with more efficient habits; so that he has an enlarged and deepened consciousness and increased control of powers of action” (Dewey, 1900, p.128). Using the innate curiosity and interest of the students, themes can be developed that are personally engaging and socially significant.

It is important that contexts learned in the classroom are explored in such a way that the information is deemed meaningful and relevant to students’ learning outside the school as well. The content of the curriculum must be viewed as worth the students’ time and effort. “The insular and often artificial circumstances of many classroom activities decrease the likelihood that what is learned will be applied; and when what is learned cannot be applied, the meaningfulness of what is learned is diminished” (Eisner, 2002a, p.95). The artists that are presented, the context in which the information is explored and the methods allowed for expression and communication should be geared toward what inspires and interests the students and what will encourage them to find value beyond the classroom.

Here is the organic relation of theory and practice; the child not simply doing things, but getting also the idea of what he does; getting from the start some intellectual conception that enters into his practice and enriches it; while every idea finds, directly or indirectly, some application in experience and has some effect upon life (Dewey, 1900, p.85).
Encouraging students to communicate what they have learned to a larger audience can also increase the authenticity and empower students with an understanding of the value of their work (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995).

It is also understood that not every learning objective can be considered entirely authentic. Some instructional outcomes cannot be readily applied to knowledge needed outside the classroom. These include close-ended objectives such as the acquisition of art making skills, the learning of technical concepts and the exploration of new media. But when these activities are used to compliment the building of knowledge to enhance the students’ abilities to express their ideas, they become a pathway towards authentic ends (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). “In order to express themselves, students must have physical art skills as well as clear concepts and emotions they want to express. Skills should be developed in conjunction with and for the purpose of exploring themes related to real life” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.11). Investigating issues and concerns within the context of themes is the final characteristic of authentic instruction.

**Thematic Instruction**

Organizing instructional strategies within themes is an effective method used to incorporate all of the essential elements of authentic education. Guided by personal connections, students explore human ideas, emotions and intentions to solve real world problems that have value beyond the classroom through art. By investigating meaningful themes that are relevant to the students’ personal experiences and concerns and linked to contemporary art and culture, the information is seen as compelling and comprehensible (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). “The curriculum and knowledge it engages are more
accessible and meaningful for young people and thus more likely to help them expand their understanding of themselves and their world” (Beane, 1997, p.2). By promoting constructive, reflective experiences, thematic instruction integrates significant problems and issues in order to build upon and expand present understanding and enhance the likelihood that constructed knowledge will be applied to new situations (Beane, 1997). Exploring these themes through art furthers students’ relationship with art as a form of individual expression, historical importance and as a social instrument (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). “Intrinsic satisfaction in the process of some activity is the only reasonable predictor that the activity will be pursued by the individual voluntarily, that is, when the individual is able to make a choice about an activity” (Eisner, 2002a, p.203). It is this enduring application of art as a means for learning to solve problems, express ideas and emotions, understand others and connect to the human experience that is emphasized in authentic instruction.

In thematic instruction, themes are chosen for their ability to connect the personal concerns of the students to larger world concerns. “Thematic inquiry can lead to personal transformation and social reconstruction; thus the themes should be chosen from real life. They should be focused on who we are, where we think we belong, and our sense of community” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.170). The ideas people have about themselves and the world around them come from their experiences. Reflecting on these experiences and delving into topics related to what one still wants to know become resources for themes to be examined. Knowledge is developed because of its relation to the theme being studied as opposed to learning fragmented pieces of information for a
test. “Researchers have found that students learn better and more deeply when they take up powerful ideas, with units and lessons organized around key supporting concepts, then when they learn merely facts or techniques” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.9).

Students gain a holistic understanding through in depth investigation which is allowed to expand organically to include several disciplines, cultures and artifacts. Projects and activities show real application of knowledge because they are similar to those performed in everyday life outside educational institutions (Beane, 1997). Placed within a meaningful context, the curriculum is seen as worth the students’ time, effort and attention.

One way to ensure the students’ voices are involved in the process is through collaborative planning. Students are encouraged to exercise their democratic rights and develop the citizenship skills needed to participate in a democracy. They learn to work within heterogeneous groups, participate in decision making processes and solve problems collaboratively (Beane, 1997). “Using themes that link personal and social issues promotes the integration of self and social interest, a marker of social responsibility in a democratic society. Such themes also offer a personally and socially significant context for the integration of knowledge” (Beane, 1997, p.50). Eliciting student’s ideas in the creation of the curriculum incorporates their experiences and increases personal investment in learning. This can “enable children to become the mappers of their educational journey, so that when they leave school they are in a position to pursue goals and interests that are important to them” (Eisner, 2002b, p.89).
It also challenges the notion that knowledge measured as important is decided by someone other than the individual learner. Power is not associated with the teacher or those outside the school and enforced upon the students, but rather shared throughout the development of the curriculum (Beane, 1997).

Incorporating this approach in the art classroom can be achieved through working closely with the students to develop a curriculum that is collectively significant and reflects authentic learning. The process begins with choosing problem centered themes for the learning experiences. These themes, which come from life concerns, can be chosen by the teacher but incorporating the students in the decision is preferable. James Beane (1997) suggests asking students to answer two questions that will illuminate the direction of the curriculum. “What questions or concerns do you have about yourself? And what questions or concerns do you have about the world?” (p.50). It is important to avoid asking students what they are merely interested in, as opposed to what they are concerned with. This will keep the focus on issue centered authentic themes which will provide learning experiences that foster deeper, more meaningful connections to real life. Once students have responded individually, groups are formed and answers are shared in order to uncover similar ideas. Next the groups work to find themes that will connect questions and concerns from both the self and world categories. Coming together as a class, students share their discoveries and ideas and vote to determine which theme will be investigated first (Beane, 1997).

Once a theme has been chosen, students work to generate the identifying questions and activities that will address the focus within the theme’s context. Working
collaboratively, guided by their own enthusiasm, students decide what knowledge must be explored and what actions should be taken to arrive at a full understanding of the chosen theme. Ideally the process would culminate with some form of public display of the work to further enhance the quality of authenticity and motivation. In this way the projects would show real application of knowledge (Beane, 1997). “Because knowledge is actually put to use, young people are pressed toward higher standards as they confront more challenging skills and forms of content” (Beane, 1997, p.xi). In this process the teacher facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge needed to achieve the objectives chosen by the students to understand the theme. Once the unit concludes, the students revisit the original list and choose the next theme of focus and the progression continues in the same manner (Beane, 1997).

When learning is centered on the investigation of a question or theme, the paths used to examine this focus often reach across discipline and subject lines. Knowledge from multiple fields of study is repositioned into the context of the theme, question or activity. This is referred to as integrated instruction (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). “The protocol for examining meanings, then, is making connections between ideas and the forms in which ideas present themselves, rather than keeping these ideas separate within separate academic disciplines (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.236). In this way knowledge is not fragmented or abstracted as it is when left within the boundaries of subject areas (Beane, 1997). Understanding and activities expand naturally as ideas are investigated. The visual arts characteristically encompass multiple subject areas as artists draw inspiration from all experiences in life when making art (Freedman, 2000).
Sharing content typically considered part of the domain of other school subjects can only help students to understand the importance and power of the visual arts and their place in the world. Art education should help students know the visual arts in their complexity, their relationships as well as their independences, their conflicting ideas as well as their accepted objects, and their connections to social thought as well as their connections to other professional practices (Freedman, 2000, p.19).

_The Teacher’s Role in the Process_

Authentic instruction in art can benefit from an educational leader who is open to collaboration, supportive, flexible, creative and experienced. Applying these characteristics in the process can guide students to make their own meanings and evaluate their encounters with art and the world around them independently.

A central element of the teacher’s role is to engage the students’ interests and concerns in the creative process while simultaneously offering challenging and growing experiences. Beginning with the child’s curiosity and interest, the teacher can build upon these ideas to foster skills and content of the art domain. Working within this context, educators can introduce strategies and techniques employed by artists, art historians, aestheticians, and critics (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Recognizing the activities and interests of the child and then giving them direction is imperative in the educational process. “Through direction, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression” (Dewey, 1900, p.36). If students were left to spontaneously indulge their
interests indefinitely, there would be limited individual growth because of the lack of the child’s experiences. “But let the child first express his impulse, and then through criticism, question, and suggestion bring him to consciousness of what he has done, and what he needs to do, and the result is quite different” (Dewey, 1900, p.40). Originality and creativity come from experience, from learning to apply prior knowledge and inspirations (Dewey, 1947). This valuable insight, when offered in a supportive and informed way, can lead students to make more discoveries about art, themselves and the world.

It is important for the teacher to know and understand the students in order for the suggestions to be geared toward each child’s individual growth (Dewey, 1900). Art educators can encourage the creative process by engaging in significant discussion about the students’ ideas, offering advice and recommendations to stimulate their imaginations, and give honest, valid evaluations of the products (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). The educator must allow the students to lead and be cautious not to dictate how work should be done. Good suggestions are directly related to the students’ inquiries and do not interfere with personal freedom and ingenuity. At the beginning, these suggestions are likely to be vague and unaware of a final product, but will become more specific as the idea takes shape. The real learning will come from the steps that follow as the idea is transformed through creation, problem-solving, reflecting and sharing with others (Dewey, 1947).

Finally, the climate created by the educator is fundamental to student success. Promoting an environment of support, fairness and respect is essential. Students should
be engaged in the process of exploring and refining ideas through the creation of art for its own sake. If they are driven by concerns of succeeding or failing, feeling ridicule from peers, or extrinsic value, they will be less likely to find enjoyment or worth in the study and creation of art in the future (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). When collaboratively developing authentic activities, the teacher must make the students feel their opinions and ideas are valuable and foster confidence in their ability to achieve the challenging objectives. “High quality performance demands consistent support for all students to master challenging work. The instructional climate should communicate high expectations for all and should cultivate, through both the teacher and peers, enough trust and respect to reward serious effort” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p.29). Through the use of these strategies, teachers can enhance students’ experiences with art in the classroom and advance the development of its value in their lives.

**Authentic Assessment**

Assessing student performance can be an integral asset to the development of authentic learning activities. Evaluation is an ongoing, multi-layered, non-standardized process that can be used to improve the educator’s ability to facilitate the learning and involve the students in measuring and elevating their performance (Beattie, 1997). The ultimate goal in authentic assessment is to foster pride and responsibility in one’s own learning by engaging students in the creation of activities and setting the criteria used for assessment while reflecting experiences they are likely to encounter in the world outside of school (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).
Tasks used to assess student performance should make it possible for students to display their creative processes, inventive solutions and expressive powers. Authentic activities should reflect what students may experience beyond the classroom and be valued in the discipline from which they were derived. These assessments can be based on individual performance in addition to achievement within a group. Students should be able to pursue multiple forms of representation, choosing the ones that best display the knowledge that has been learned and is of most interest to the individual (Eisner, 2002b).

When educators are evaluating students’ performance in an art classroom there are certain qualities of behavior and cognitive ability that can be examined. Learning in art can show in a variety of ways. Educators can look at levels of engagement, interest and intrinsic satisfaction to determine students’ personalized involvement. Students gain experience, apply knowledge and show interest when they are pursuing an activity on their own time outside of school or with concentrated effort in class. Students may also display refined aesthetic perception when viewing or creating a work of art. Their understanding of relationships, symbolism, and visual appeal will lead to informed decisions and discussions. Their technical and descriptive language skills will also improve as they acquire skills and become familiar with content and techniques (Eisner, 2002a).

One form of evaluation that can effectively illuminate these qualities is through student led critiques. In this form of art criticism students discuss one another’s artwork in the context of the class. By involving the students in this activity, the educator may observe ideas and cognition directly from each child. The inherent reciprocity
encourages sensitivity to other students’ ideas and individuality. Students learn how to explain their positions, participate skillfully and help other artists improve their work. This communication requires the students to investigate, assess and carefully choose effective, informed words that will express their suggestion while respecting the artist being addressed (Eisner, 2002a). “The opportunity to stop and assess, to comment and to justify, to apprise and to plan for further work can be a powerful source of learning in the art room” (Eisner, 2002a, p.194).

As they learn to apply their understanding to their own work, students will display growth in various ways. Educators will notice improvements in students’ ability to work within the constraints of a material. Students will develop their imaginative and creative capacities through experimentation with ideas, resources and multiple modes of thinking. Through the creation of art, they learn to effectively communicate their ideas and look deeper into the intended meaning of other artists’ works. The inspection of the quality of the students’ art products, as well as processes used to arrive at them, will reveal what has been learned, levels of engagement and development of the students’ abilities and cognition (Eisner, 2002a).

**Oppositions to Authentic Instruction**

Like with any new method of curriculum design or approach to instruction, there are inhibitions to the challenges of adopting new strategies. Oppositions to employing authentic instruction in an art classroom stem from the breaking of tradition, utilizing collaborative planning, and the shift of power from the teacher to the students.
Familiar routines are difficult to change, especially when the intended outcome is still achieved. “We teach what we teach largely out of habit, and in the process neglect areas of study that could prove to be exceedingly useful to students” (Eisner, 2002b, p.103). As educators work to develop lesson plans and activities to fit state standards and meet mandated objectives, the value of the instruction lies in accomplishing goals irrelevant to the students they serve. It is possible for an educator and the students to come to accept and even like the “routines or mechanical procedures” if they are continually used for successful results (Dewey, 1902, p.204). Teachers fall into habits and rely on proven strategies. Students become accustomed to the repetitive nature of the presentation of lessons and the activities that follow and find it easier than thinking for themselves (Dewey, 1902).

Allowing students to plan the curriculum collaboratively with the teacher is another reservation. Evolving designs of lessons means more work for the teacher in planning, researching and searching for relevant resources (Beane, 1997). “More is required if the teacher is to work more or less individually with students to enable them to think through and to plan what they are going to address in their art program” (Eisner, 2002a, p.153). The uncertain nature of the direction the work will take creates worry about covering required concepts and meeting standards (Beane, 1997). If students lead the process and the design of the curriculum follows the impulses of the child, educators are unsure of how all the information will be disseminated. They also question if the natural processes and concerns of life are compatible with the acquisition of vast amounts of knowledge (Dewey, 1900).
This can also create new tension in the relationship between the teacher and the students. Teachers may become aware of unexpected issues, questions and concerns raised from the personal experiences of the children (Beane, 1997). This may create emotional tension as some educators are not confident assisting students with exploring such topics. Additionally, students may not be comfortable with taking a leadership role in planning. “Many students find it difficult to cope with the opportunity to define their own goals; it takes practice to do so well and a willingness to accept such an opportunity as an appropriate part of one’s own education” (Eisner, 2002a, p.152-3). Because of their apprehensions, students’ true feelings and thoughts may not be displayed in the classroom setting. They may believe their ideas will not be valued by the teacher. Furthermore, there will always be students who are not sure how to contribute and therefore they never truly participate (Beane, 1997). These tensions can be difficult to overcome in the process of collaborative planning which would make some educators hesitant to adopt authentic instruction.

Finally, the shift of power may prove too uncomfortable for some teachers. By not allowing the students to be involved in the planning, they retain a sense of control over the situations and experiences in the classroom (Dewey, 1900). One way to assert authority is to keep the students guessing what will come next. The constant ambiguity of the continuous planning process and the uncertainty of the long term outcomes can be challenging to a conservative educator. Teachers who want to know what to expect each day may be troubled by such an open ended approach. In addition, they feel if students
are not threatened by an upcoming test or defined project, they will not take the instruction seriously (Beane, 1997).

Although there are apprehensions involved with any change to traditional methods, there is even greater need for willingness to attempt new ideas for the benefits to education and the lives of the students. “To refuse to try, to stick blindly to tradition, because the search for the truth involves experimentation in the region of the unknown, is to refuse the only step which can introduce rational conviction into education” (Dewey, 1900, p.104). Creating lessons and activities that allow what has been learned in the classroom to be applied to the world outside is critical for the success of students. “The aim of the educational process inside schools is not to finish something, but to start something. What one starts is an interest that is sufficiently powerful to motivate students to pursue that interest outside school” (Eisner, 2002a, p.90-1). Empowering them with the skills necessary to be ambitious seekers of knowledge and new experiences, reflective, empathetic members of humanity and active participants in a democracy can be fostered through an authentic approach to education.

**Art Education and Social Change**

Art through authentic instruction can become a vehicle for students to discover and navigate issues and concerns of the larger world. As students learn to take active roles in their education and work collaboratively with their peers, they will develop the skills needed to engage in the complexities of social life. Including these concepts in the art curriculum will “…enable students to understand the social and cultural worlds they
inhabit. Tomorrow’s children need the arts to enable them to understand their social world so they might have a future in it!” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996, p.73).

Encouraging students to explore rich contexts and significant issues through art can foster awareness of global concerns and social realities and empower them to cultivate creative solutions toward equality and justice. Art education can become a powerful, effective tool in actualizing this outcome. Structuring a classroom around democratic principles and including visual culture as part of the inquiry will promote reflective and engaged members of society. In contrast, the current trend towards standardization and the omission of arts programs from schools can work against these values.

*Art in the Schools: Trends toward Standardization*

In the current state of the educational system, the social development of a standards-driven perspective in which test scores and accountability reign is affecting the value of what is being taught and the methods used to teach. The push for higher achievement in math, science and language arts has forced many school districts to make these core subjects their primary focus.

[Our present educational system] is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art (Dewey, 1900, p.26).
The climate of schooling has become “one of highly rule-governed tasks and standardized expectations” which leaves little room for exploring the distinctive educational contributions of the arts (Eisner, 2002a, p.44).

Because the results of an art program are not immediate, they are not easily measured and therefore are often the first to be cut from the curriculum (Jensen, 2001). This elimination can have a lasting effect on students’ personal, academic and social development and the satisfaction they will experience in life. Students learn what is valued most by schools by the amount of time and emphasis given to different subjects. When compared to the core subjects, the amount of time allocated for the arts is small. It is often considered a break from the challenging aspects of intellectual thinking. “This reinforces the belief that the arts do not require rigorous and demanding thought and that they are really unimportant aspects of the school program” (Eisner, 2002b, p.92). If students are unable to learn how to explore such avenues of thinking and interpreting, they will become very literal thinkers and their ability to fully interact with the arts will be underdeveloped (Eisner, 2002b).

Without a strong arts program, students will lack the interpretive skills needed to think creatively, communicate effectively and solve problems. Through art education, students are encouraged to decipher visual and symbolic metaphors. They learn there is not always one standard or correct answer and engage in developing their own personal interpretations (Eisner, 2002b). Without this freedom, “interpretation may not be conceptualized by students as safe because from an educational standpoint, it must be supportable” (Freedman, 2003, p.86). Presenting students with opportunities to focus
their individual lens on the world will build high level interpretive proficiency. This reflects the ability to discover underlying assumptions and meanings, personalize situations by forming multiple associations, and perform critical self reflection (Freedman, 2003).

Finally, because students obtain, store and retrieve information in a variety of ways, they should be given opportunities to express what they know and understand through diverse methods (Eisner, 2002b). Meaning and interpretation is not limited to words or numbers. It is not always predictable or standardized. Some of the most useful and productive forms of thinking are “nonverbal and illogical. These modes operate in visual, auditory, metaphoric, synthetic ways and use forms of conception and expression that far exceed the limits of logical prescribed criteria or discursive or mathematical forms of thinking” (Eisner, 2002b, p.98). To limit the approaches of expression and exploration to standard methods excludes many children from successful growth. Art education can show students what is unique and distinctive about their work and themselves. It encourages students to value all ways in which meaning is discovered, examined or expressed equally.

While standardization emphasizes uniformity, art education can help students become aware of and develop their own individuality (Eisner, 2002a).

The stronger the push towards the standardization of curricula, the pre-specification of outcomes for performance, and the use of isolated test items to measure achievement, the greater the need for the arts, if for no other reason than
to help students understand that there is another way to live, another way to think, another way to be in the world (Eisner, 2001b, p.7).

Art education has the potential to engage students in discovering possibilities of learning and expressing that are just as useful in life outside of school. Allowing students to explore issues and concerns that are significant in their lives through the arts program can instill an effective tool for future achievement that is not currently emphasized in the educational system. Facilitating authentic learning experiences in art can counterbalance the push toward uniform standardization.

**Democratic Principles in Art Education**

One strategy in art education that enhances the effectiveness of authentic instruction is the implementation of democratic principles in the ontology of teaching. Used as the foundation to structure the class, students have shared responsibility and interest in the achievement of the classroom and the individuals. Many aspects of what art education promotes coincide with the nature of a democracy. Mutual ideals such as “intellectual freedom, creative imagination, and social responsibility” are important to the arts and a democratic curriculum (Freedman, 2003, p.106). Fostering opportunities to implement such learning will prepare students with the skills necessary for public life and success.

Engaging students in collective decision making and collaborative discovery is a pedagogical method emphasized in both authentic instruction and democratic teaching. Establishing a community of learners in which group work flourishes can assist children in learning from one another through discussion, deliberation and consensus (Eisner,
2002b). The teacher is seen as the facilitator, as opposed to an authority, and works collectively with the students to develop a curriculum and body of knowledge valued by each child (Dewey, 1916). Giving students a voice in the decisions of the classroom allows them to take ownership of their learning and teaches social cooperation needed for community life (Dewey, 1900). “The young can be empowered to view themselves as conscious reflective namers and speakers if their particular standpoints are acknowledged, if interpretive dialogues are encouraged, if interrogation is kept alive” (Greene, 1995, p.57). The art room can be a place where students develop and share their voice and begin forming their individual and social identity. In classrooms where students are taught to be compliant and strategies of “hierarchical organization, one-way communication, routine”, and the use of extrinsic rewards are implemented, students are not personally invested in their learning goals and do not make connections to the significance of the learning (Eisner, 2002b, p.91). “In this way schools encourage in students a dependency on authority and in general provide a distorted view of American history that in turn undermines the kind of social consciousness needed to bring about change” (Eisner, 2002b, p.74).

The arts can teach about other cultures, histories, and ways of thinking and living. They can assist students in examining realities of the past and applying them to current situations in society. Educators can empower students to expand their “understanding of the influence of social life on the generation of knowledge and construction of self. An understanding of the influence of context in one’s self-creation can be a step toward
understanding and accepting difference in others” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996, p.44)

In the process of collaboration, characteristics of tolerance, trust, respect and equality are developed. Biases, misconceptions and presumptions are revealed and students learn to resolve the conflicts that arise from them (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Maxine Greene (1995) argues “we teachers must make an intensified effort to break through the frames of custom and touch the consciousness of those we teach” (p.56). Art can illuminate dilemmas of moral and social value and offer students a safe and supportive environment to explore possible meaningful solutions. Highlighting social themes through encounters with the arts can open dialogues that might otherwise remain closed (Freedman, 2003). “When aimed at democratic ends and supported by the proper democratic conditions, the interaction in schools can help children enter the social consciousness of puberty and develop the habits of thinking and caring necessary for public life” (Parker, 2005, p.348).

Creating a democratic climate within the classroom while employing authentic instruction can create reflective students equipped with the skills needed to voice their opinions and concerns, challenge existing inequities, take risks and courageously map their own destinies. “The primary task of art education lies not in preparing consumers of culture but in developing and enabling creators of culture” (Marshall, 2002, p.280). Implementing democratic principles of allowing students to form their own rules for social living, involving individual and collective concerns in the creation of activities, and enhancing problem-solving skills through collaborative group work can enhance the
possibilities for social change (Eisner, 2002b). Furthermore, applying this ideology in conjunction with authentic instruction will impact how students will view the role of the arts in future experiences of their lives.

**Teaching Visual Culture**

Another important feature of art education that can be used to positively affect change and increase the connections students make between art and their lives outside of school is through the inclusion of visual culture in the curriculum. “The visual arts make up most of visual culture, which is all that is humanly formed and sensed through vision or visualization and shapes the way we live our lives” (Freedman, 2003, p.1). Visual culture includes not only the fine arts, but also images from television, advertising, photography, mass media, computer technology, film and video games. All of these elements affect the identity of the culture students know and experience. In a world where visual images saturate methods of communication, art education can make a difference in the way students understand and interact within that culture (Freedman, 2000). If educators are to effectively teach in a contemporary democracy, the inclusion of visual culture is vital. “The new conditions of visual culture illustrate that personal freedoms no longer only involve matters of free speech. They concern freedom of information in a range of visual art forms integral to the creation of individual and group knowledge” (Freedman, 2003, p.3). It is essential that students are taught to understand the power of imagery and the responsibilities and freedom that accompany it (Freedman, 2003).
Exploring what students see outside of school everyday should be just as important as learning about art work and artifacts in museums. Bringing familiar images into the discussions and activities of the classroom can be a catalyst for bridging what students like and see with the discipline of the arts. Embracing the images of popular culture can erase the lines between high and low art and allow students to develop their own contributions of communicating meaning through art. Incorporating the study of visual culture in the art curriculum can inform students’ abilities to consciously navigate through the images they experience.

Learning how to critically interpret the wealth of images students see everyday will allow students to meaningfully engage with the world around them. When they learn to read messages imbedded in visual culture from an educated perspective they can effectively analyze its influence on them (Eisner, 2002b). They can evade the persuasion techniques of the mass media and learn to examine the underlying messages being presented. “When students develop a deeper understanding of their visual experiences, they can look critically at surface appearances and begin to reflect on the importance of the visual arts in shaping culture, society, and even individual identity” (Freedman, 2003, p.xi). Further, by fostering the analytical skills needed to interpret these images, students’ awareness of the uses of visual culture to perpetuate societal values and cultural attitudes can break down traditional inequities and misconceptions.
Summary

Art’s contributions to a child’s development are seen in many aspects of their lives. Interactions with the arts have the potential to enhance a child’s personal, academic and social growth. The arts provide an arena for new experiences to merge with prior understanding to improve opportunities for advancement in these capacities. Intelligence is a continuous active process of adaptation and application of experience. Involving the emotional and social aspects of learning along with the intellectual through art will assist students in forming their identities as well as understanding, contributing to and interacting with the larger world.

Employing authentic instruction strategies in art education can further the positive development of the child. Through collaboration, students initiate and take ownership of the learning process. By connecting their interests and concerns to the exploration of art, students will come to see art as a tool for fostering discovery and communication. Through the investigation of significant themes, students will connect what they learn about art in school with how it can be authentically implemented in future experiences of real life.

The most important outcomes of school art programs are not achieved while students are still in school. Rather, they are achieved when, having left school, individuals continue to enrich their lives and their society through meaningful and satisfying encounters with art (Wilson, 1997, p.18).

Art education has the power to bring about social change and advance the quality of life. “To help students view learning as [a] practice that provides them with a sense of
identity, value and worth, educators must encourage the use of art in its authentic contexts as a vehicle of change” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.xxiii). Studying and creating art can illuminate previously unseen truths of history, culture and one’s self and can elicit critical reflection of identity and society. Encouraging students to challenge social inequities and strive for justice through art can empower them to take active roles in their community and work to create a better world.
CHAPTER 3: THE STUDY

The action research project that is the focus of this paper was conducted to determine how students’ levels of engagement in learning art changed when lessons were connected to their life experiences. Art educators face many challenges in designing and implementing curriculums that allow students to explore a wide variety of technical skills and materials while meeting mandated fine arts standards. With limited exposure to students, lack of funding and often the difficulties of traveling between schools, art educators are challenged with balancing the logistics of their position with their ambitions to provide students with an impacting art experience.

These notions reflect many of the difficulties I am still learning to overcome as an art educator. As an artist, I see art as a vehicle for exploring my own identity, discovering other times and cultures, and developing my creativity and abilities to communicate my passions, views and feelings. I want to provide my students with the opportunity to embrace and employ the arts as a tool for enhancing their life experiences as well. Encouraging authenticity by connecting lessons to questions and concerns the students have about themselves and the world is one path toward this goal.

Creating tasks in which what has been learned can be used and through which connections can be made between what has been learned in the classroom and the world outside it is one of the critical needs in teaching the arts (Eisner, 2002a, p.56).
When students experience art as more than mere formal and technical elements and meaning is fostered through relevance to their lives, they will continue to use art as a means for exploring and understanding themselves and the world.

**Design of the Study**

To facilitate the application of the results of the action research to my own pedagogy and teaching practice, this study was carried out in my classroom. Art’s ability to inspire and connect people has always driven my interactions with students, but I am continuously searching for effective strategies to bridge my ontology with the students’ experiences. In the past, my lessons have addressed a variety of approaches to making and seeing art. I introduce students to many traditional and some unconventional materials with which to work. They learn about past artists from an assortment of movements in art history and different times and cultures. Students also focus on improving their technical skills, vocabulary and ability to communicate through art. Each lesson is a new opportunity to learn how art can be a valuable tool for self-expression and how there are threads of the human experience that connect us all. Although most students come to my classroom each week with high motivation and willingness to try new things, I still feel the impact could be greater. Therefore, my research is focused on fostering deeper engagement in learning and creating art through authentic instruction in my own classroom.
Participants and Location of the Study

The students in this study are comprised of two sixth grade classes at the same school. The elementary school is located in a small rural region of southeastern Ohio. Most students are middle class Americans but because of the school’s close proximity to a university, a small portion of the students are visiting from other countries. A total of thirty students participated in this study. Class A consisted of eight boys and six girls. Two of these students were originally from Vietnam and one from India. Class B had nine boys and seven girls. In this class, there was one student each from the countries of Indonesia, China, Germany and Vietnam. The students are accustomed to a diverse population as they had experienced a breadth of encounters with foreign students throughout their grade school years. Students in Class A had art on Tuesday afternoons from 2:20p.m-3:00p.m. and Thursdays mornings from 10:00a.m.-10:40a.m. Class B attended art on Tuesday afternoons from 1:30p.m.-2:10p.m. and Thursday mornings from 10:40a.m.-11:20a.m. I chose to include these students in the study because of the manageable class sizes and because they have art more often in their weekly schedule than other grade levels.

Prior to the Study

Once the methodology of my research was decided, I began taking steps toward actualizing it. The first requirement was to seek permission from my principal. Next, due to the use of human subjects in my research, I applied for and received the consent of the Research and Compliance Board at Ohio University. This was achieved by the end of October, 2007 and allowed me to proceed with the study.
Once the classroom procedures were in place and the students had adjusted to the new school year, I informed them of my intentions and their role in the research. During the normal art classes, I explained my goal of earning my Master’s Degree and the process I would need to undergo to write a thesis. I related the action research portion to an experiment using the scientific method since they were familiar with this concept. I explained that through research I have formed a hypothesis and now I would test my ideas and collect data to form a theory. I explained that all students would be participating in the lessons that would follow but in order to collect data from them, I needed to obtain permission from them and their parents. Some students had questions about anonymity and I assured them their identities would remain protected. Overall the students seemed supportive and many shared connections with their parents going through similar processes. This discussion occurred on Thursday, November 1, 2007.

By Thursday, November 15, 2007, all of the consent forms had been collected, enabling all thirty students to participate in the collection of data.

**Process and Results of the Study**

*Pre-Study Survey*

Upon the return of all consent forms, I initiated the first form of data collection. On Thursday, November 15, 2007, I gave the pre-study surveys to the homeroom teachers, asking them to administer them at a convenient time and remind students to be honest and thorough (see Appendix A). The survey was used to gather evidence of students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding the process of making and learning about art. I
chose to have the students complete them during their regular class time as opposed to during art class to ensure they were not rushed to finish because of time restraints and to allow anonymity to account for researcher bias present from my relationship with the students. The students were asked not to include their names and to answer openly. Students who were absent on this day completed the survey when they returned and all pre-study surveys were collected on Friday, November 16, 2007. The separate classes were determined by paper color and results analyzed by class as well as collectively.

When analyzing the students’ surveys, two methods were employed to evaluate the responses. Each answer was examined separately and the categories which emerged from each were often different due to the variety of questions asked. First, I searched for themes within the responses. Dividing the answers into categories and utilizing a tally marking system, I organized the diverse ideas of each student into quantifiable measurements. Each time a student responded within one of the categories, a tally was added. Therefore, students’ answers could be counted in multiple sections. Second, I considered the level of critical thinking reflected in their answers. Critical thinking involves the ability to pose and solve problems, make informed decisions, interpret meanings and inferences, evaluate and make judgments, and form opinions through analyzing relevant information and connections (Turner, 2006). I used these qualities to assist in determining the levels of engagement students demonstrated through their written reflections. After creating a Critical Thinking Rubric to evaluate the responses, I determined the level of each answer as a whole (see Appendix C). Not all questions in the survey required the use of the rubric to enhance the analyzing of the data. The factors
which determined its use depended on how the particular question related to the research question, *How does student engagement in learning art change when lessons are connected to their life experiences?*

The first two questions of the survey were aimed at understanding students’ definitions of art. Question one asked for students to reflect on what they think of when they hear the word art. Majority of students named forms of visual art, mentioning painting and drawing most often. The next largest category included forms of self-expression. Students saw art as a way to show their feelings, emotions, imagination and creativity. Very few, only a total of four, named music or literature. Some answers took form in descriptive words ranging from positive reflections to terms used in art class. A variety of words were written such as “fun”, “abstract”, “concrete”, “beautiful”, “color”, “shape”, “unique” and “out of this world”. A few answers did not fit within a determined category, so fell under the heading “other”. Some of these responses were “my horse’s name”, “forests and natural beauty”, “people wearing fancy hats”, “scenery” and “love”.

Question two asked students to give some examples of art. Again, students referred to forms of visual art the most. Painting, drawing and sculpture were written most frequently. Music was the next highest, followed by literature. A variety of other traditional and non-traditional forms of art were named. These were drama, dancing, teaching, learning, skateboarding, scrap booking, sports and natural wonders such as “waves”. Four students mentioned famous works of art including “Mona Lisa”, “Starry Night”, “the Statue of Liberty”, “Leaning Tower of Pisa” and the “Arc de Triumph”. Finally, those answers that did not fit elsewhere were again referred to as “other”.
Answers in this category named “the human body”, “history”, “and the environment”, “life”, “my sister’s drawings” and “just doing what you want”.

The third question asked students to reflect on the reasons they thought art was important. In analyzing these responses, I again searched for quantifiable categories but also examined the level of critical thinking reflected in the answers. Self-expression was most often cited as to why art is important. The next largest response referred to how the world would be different without art. Most students answering in this category stated the world would be “dull” and “boring” without art and the physical changes of not having movies, videogames, picture books and museums would be evident. A small amount of students offered ideas of how art can alter people’s moods, improve skills, and increase the appreciation of variety and differences.

When utilizing the rubric to assist in understanding students’ levels of critical thinking, I examined the answer as a whole. I looked for variety of categories and depth of reasoning. Thirteen students, or forty percent, were placed in Level One, which is the lowest level of Critical Thinking according to the rubric I designed. Students responding in this level often gave simplistic answers with little or no connection to broader contexts. These answers referred to art skills or concepts only related to the world of art. Fourteen students, forty-seven percent, were included in Level Two. These students often mentioned art as a tool for self-expression, which expanded its connection to the broader world. One student in this level said art is important “because it is what can control moods and stop anger by stimulating our brain”. Another stated, “I think art is important because without it, there would be less ways to show self-beliefs”. An additional student
said “It’s also important because it’s a way to express your feelings through art and not through words or violence”. Three students, or ten percent, were placed in Level Three due to the insightfulness and sophistication of their responses. One student wrote that art is important “because it helps people release their emotions and it can show what their soul looks like. It helps put your imagination together.”

Questions four and five asked the students to list the reasons they make art and why they believe other people make art. When reflecting on their own motivations, twenty-two students said it was because they enjoyed it. Along with entertainment value, the next most stated reason was self-expression. Seven of students said they do it for schoolwork or to “get a good grade”. A handful said they make art to help them feel better and some use it as a way to improve their skills or “to look at things I’ve never noticed and to discover more about myself”. A variety of answers were classified as “other”, including “it helps me think”, “it’s a good way to get an idea of how famous artists feel” and “it builds integrity”. When asked why they think other people make art, the students’ answers varied slightly from their own. The students saw it mainly as a means for self-expression and less because it is enjoyable. More responses referred to the reason as making money or as a job. Six students said the reasons were similar to their own.

Question six asked students how art helps them understand themselves. Eighteen students wrote about how art is a way to better understand their identity. It allows them to learn more about their thoughts and feelings by expressing them in a visual way, using colors, shapes and free expression to get them out on paper. Six wrote about how art can
even reveal unknown aspects of their identity or skills. One stated “art helps me better understand myself because it filters all of my feelings into something else, feelings that I can’t share with anyone else, feelings that I, myself, don’t understand.” Two students stated that art does not help them understand themselves and two said they don’t know.

Finally, question seven was broken into two parts. The first asked how art could help a person see the world and the second asked what the world would be like without art. The majority of answers reflected the idea that art shows us different views and perspectives and helps us understand others. The next positive aspect of art mentioned was its ability to make the world brighter and more beautiful and exciting, therefore creating happiness. When responding to the notion of a world without art, all but one student expressed a negative view of what the world would be like. Most said it would lack color, fun and happiness and would be dull and boring. Some went as far as saying the world would be a “disaster” or “wouldn’t exist”, “the world would fall apart” or “we’d all be mindless zombie cavemen!” Only one student stated they would be fine if there was no art.

This question was also analyzed according to levels of critical thinking. Fifteen, or fifty percent of students, were placed in Level One when employing the categories of the designed rubric. These answers were simplistic and often not backed up with logical reasoning. Twelve students, forty percent, were included in Level Two. The levels of critical thought were more evident and points of view were supported with relevant reasoning and connected to broader contexts. One student in this category wrote “Art can help a person see the world by opening other people’s eyes to issues around us.” Another
stated “Art helps us see the world in different perspectives of others.” Only three students’ answers, ten percent, fit into Level Three. One example from this level stated “It can help us see how messed up and cruel the world is yet how beautiful it is. If we had no art then we would have no imagination and if we had no imagination, mankind wouldn’t be able to invent things.”

*Radial Design Project*

When the students completed the pre-study survey, they were in the midst of working on a lesson that is taught as part of the regular art curriculum. The Radial Design project began on October 30 and ended on November 27, 2007. This project involved learning and applying formal principles and elements of design, line, shape and color in a radial pattern. After folding a circular paper in eighths, students drew an original design in one of the sections. After tracing the design with an ebony pencil, students then transferred this image over to a connecting section by rubbing the back of the paper while it was folded. They continued this process until the entire circle was filled with a symmetrical radial design. Upon completion of this step, they traced the design in permanent pen and erased their pencil marks. A brief lesson on color theory and techniques for using colored pencils was given and the students independently chose how to apply this knowledge to their projects. Once finished, students framed their work on a colored paper.

The procedures used to introduce the lesson and the progress made in the subsequent art classes were in line with the routines established throughout the year. On the first day of the project I led a discussion intended to illuminate what the students
already knew about symmetry, radial patterns, and the elements and principles of design that would be the highlighted during the completion of the work. During this time the students remained at their seats while I drew their attention to relevant posters and famous artworks hung around the room or drew illustrations on the board to further engage their understanding of the concept.

Following the initial discussion, the students were called around one table to watch a demonstration. During this time, I took the students through each step involved in the process of drawing and transferring the image, including some of the thought processes and reflections they should consider as they carried out their design. Finally I showed them what a finished product may look like. The two examples I used were designs I had created in the past. Once the excitement was voiced and questions were answered, students gathered supplies and began working. This initial introduction took approximately fifteen minutes and the students used the remaining time to begin their drawings. The following art time was also used to continue drawing and then tracing their image.

On the third art class dedicated to this project, I went over some basic color theory concepts. Students were asked to recall some vocabulary while also learning additional color relationships. These concepts included primary, secondary and intermediate colors, warm and cool colors, monochromatic, complementary and analogous. Gathered around a table, students watched as I gave them some tips on how to apply and blend colored pencils to achieve aesthetically pleasing results. They were not asked to follow any specific procedure when choosing color, the information was presented as a guide to
assist their decisions. After this seven minute demonstration, students continued working where they had left off.

The Radial Design project was completed in eight forty minute art classes. Students worked at their own paces but were encouraged to make progress through the use of small timeline goals which I presented according to where majority of the class was at in the process. During the work times, students were allowed to engage in conversations with their classmates and I frequently moved around the room offering encouragement and advice or joined in their discussions to build personal relationships while they worked. Students who finished early were allowed time to work on independent projects of their choice while students who did not finish by the end of the eighth art time used free time in their own schedules to complete the work.

The final compositions created by the students were successful according the intended outcomes of the lesson. The neatness and precision implemented in the drawing of the designs were apparent, seen through the symmetrical balance achieved in the images. The understanding of aesthetic value and use of color relationships was evident from the final products. Students effectively described their choices of color using vocabulary terms and demonstrated thoughtful application of color theory. The students’ use of colored pencils in a neat and attentive manner also enhanced their designs (see Figure 1). Many positive reactions from other students in the school as well as teachers passing by the display of finished products in the hallway were shared with myself and the sixth grade as well.
Following the completion of the project, students wrote individual responses to reflection questions aimed at illuminating their connections to the content and perceived value of the lesson (see Appendix B). This occurred on Thursday, November 29, 2007 during the normal art periods. Evaluation and analysis of the responses were completed in the same manner as the pre-study survey. Common themes were identified and the answers quantified according to categories. Some answers were assessed in relation to the levels of the Critical Thinking Rubric. When writing their individual reflections, students sat with their Radial Design projects at their seats. The room remained quiet and

*Figure 1. Example of completed Radial Design project.*
students were asked to answer honestly and according to what they personally felt and learned from this particular project only.

The first question asked the students what they learned from doing this project. A majority of the answers were related to technical skills, materials and vocabulary emphasized during the lesson. One student responded, “I learned a lot about the color wheel like intermediate colors, complementary colors, warm colors, cool colors and value.” Many answers were similar to this example. Five students mentioned learning about aesthetics, saying they learned “how colors look good together”, “radial designs look really cool with different colors and patterns”, and “symmetry can make things look nice”. Four students applied their learning to their own skills, mostly reflecting critically on their efforts or artistic talents. Two students mentioned they learned “nothing”.

This first question was also scored utilizing the Critical Thinking Rubric. Included in this evaluation were the categories of Level One, Two and Three, in addition to a separate category for students who answered “nothing”. In this case, two students stated they learned nothing from this lesson. Twenty-two of the students, seventy three percent, answered in Level One. These answers were simplistic, predictable and focused mainly on the technical skills and concepts presented in the lesson. Seventeen percent of the students’ responses were scored in Level Two. These answers reflected deeper thinking, often connected to the students’ personal skills or preferences in addition to the concepts of Radial Design. Finally, only one student’s answer was in Level Three. This answer reflected an insightful look into personal discovery and human nature and how
the project related to this view. This student stated “That every personality of yourself isn’t going to be the same and perfect. I learned that this is what it represents.”

Question two prompted students to reflect on what they liked most about their final project. Most of the students declared they liked their choices or applications of color the most. The next most popular response was the design or drawing of the radial pattern. A few said they liked to see the finished product as a whole. Two stated they liked the social aspect of working during the process. Most answers reflected a sense of content or pride with the final work.

The third question asked students to identify what they would do differently if they were to do the project again. The largest part said they would change something about their design or pattern. The second largest number stated they would choose different colors in order to achieve a different look than their first one. Six students stated they would change nothing because they were happy with the results. The remaining responses varied from choosing different materials to being neater to choosing a theme to incorporate in the design.

Question four asked students what they learned about themselves from doing this project. The responses to this inquiry were analyzed using the Critical Thinking Rubric. A high number of students, thirty-seven percent, stated they learned nothing about themselves. Fifty-three percent responded with answers that were scored in the Level One category. These answers were simplistic, unsupported through reason and not connected to broader contexts outside of the project. Students often mentioned they learned about their likes and dislikes or their abilities. Only ten percent of students’
answers fit within Level Two. These students supported their remarks with reasoning and made some deeper connections. The answers related to learning personal perseverance and discovering qualities of their imaginations and feelings. No students answered in Level Three.

The fifth question asked students what they learned about the world. Again, the Critical Thinking Rubric was implemented in the analysis. Fifty-seven percent stated they learned nothing about the world. Thirty-seven percent answered within Level One. The responses were often illogical and no real connection was explained or supported. For example, “the world is a circle that has no end” and “it is colorful.” Six percent were included in Level Two. These two students responded with attempts to connect their design to their understanding of the broader world. One of these students stated “I learned that, just like the design, the world is simple and complicated.” No students were scored in Level Three.

The final question invited students to reflect on how the project relates to their life. Again, the largest number of students, sixty-four percent, stated that it doesn’t. Twenty-three percent were categorized in Level One. These attempts at connecting the project to their lives were not broader than the concepts in the lesson or the personal abilities they demonstrated. Thirteen percent of the responses were in Level Two. These students were connecting the descriptions of their final product to their own life, stating they were both “colorful,” “abstract,” “hectic” and “crazy” or stating they know other people in their lives who share these descriptions. No students’ answers were placed in Level Three.
Overall, the students’ responses mainly reflected concepts within the lesson of Radial Design. Connections to the technical qualities and formal elements and principles of design were evident and strongest. While some students attempted to make deeper and broader associations, most did not view this project as more than a lesson based on skills and design.

**Identifying Themes**

During the art classes immediately following the culmination of the Radial Design project, the students and I embarked on an educative journey of new ideas and methods for creating lessons. Implementing the strategies outlined by James Beane (1997), a brainstorming session was conducted to illuminate the questions and concerns the students had regarding themselves and the world.

On Tuesday, December 4, 2007, students were asked to reflect upon and respond to two questions. “What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?” “What questions or concerns do you have about the world?” (Beane, 1997, p.50). I explained that from these inquiries, we would choose what would be the focus of our next project. In each class, the students were first asked to write their responses individually. The class remained quiet while students concentrated on their answers. After ten minutes, students were placed in randomly selected groups to share what they had written. While in groups, students looked for similarities or themes that emerged. Students began reading what they had written to one another and asking if anyone else had something that sounded comparable while one student recorded the group’s shared concerns. With
only ten minutes remaining, we came back together as a class to list the commonalities on
the board and voiced ideas of possible art projects that would tie to the themes.

The students’ responses were very insightful and demonstrated a great awareness
of issues common to individuals and society. When asked about personal concerns,
students reflected questions about their identity including what their future will hold,
what shapes their personality and character, what their purpose in life might be and
wanting to know more about their heritage. When prompted to express their questions
about the world, students employed a critical lens to show their interest for social and
global issues. Some of these incorporated themes of inequality, injustices, damage to the
environment, world peace, hunger, poverty, war, technology, growing populations,
vioence and freedom. After sharing these ideas, students were asked to vote on what
they would like to examine for the first project. The majority of the students agreed they
should begin with identity.

Identity Project

In the context of this research, personal identity refers to the characteristics,
personality traits, heritage, beliefs, values, dreams, fears, preferences, talents, hobbies and
so on that are connected to an individual and shapes who they are. Students were asked
to collectively add to a list posted on the board in order to uncover a common definition.
On Thursday, December 6, 2007, the unit based on the theme of identity began in both
sixth grade classes with a presentation and discussion of various artists who used art to
explore and represent identity. On this day, classes were held in the school’s computer
lab which is equipped with a ceiling mounted projector and large screen. In preparation
for this unit, I gathered information and images of four artists and organized them into a slide show which was presented to each class.

The four artists were chosen because their work encompassed a variety of materials and methods of personal investigation into the theme of identity. The first artist was Vincent Van Gogh. Students examined multiple self-portraits created during his life. Through his use of line, color, movement and texture, Van Gogh portrayed not only his physical appearance, but also his emotions and feelings in his paintings. Frida Kahlo used paint to render personal narratives which included images of her along with significant cultural and individual symbols. Each painting, rich with detail and descriptive elements, tells a story about the experiences and hardships she lived. Lucas Samaras used found objects from visual and material culture to create numerous sculptures in the form of boxes to represent his identity. Using a box as a metaphor, Samaras allowed some parts to be visible while other remained hidden. From personal memorabilia, to archeological finds, to the contents of a time capsule, Samaras pieced items together to form a picture of his life. Howardena Pindell was the final artist presented. She uses layers of collaged materials and paint to symbolize her life. Pindell constructs these autobiographical painted collages from a variety of photos, postcards, and other materials that reference her personal experiences, culture and ancestry.

Through dialogue and prompts, students were led through the images and invited to share their interpretations and personal connections. In each artist introduction, I described the artists’ backgrounds and styles with enough detail to encourage the students to connect with the emotions and motives of the artist. “Because humans are similar in
some respects over time and across cultures, once an artwork is understood in its original context, students may compare and contrast its meaning with aspects of their own lives” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.120). The students’ ideas and interpretations were resonant with complexity, empathy and thoughtfulness. They shared meaningful evaluations and significant connections to the human experience. The dialogue was so inspiring, enriching and productive that both classes were extended by twenty minutes. For the full hour, students openly discussed their opinions and insights and remained fully engaged.

As the class time came to an end, I briefly explained my thoughts regarding their creation of an artwork centered on investigating identity. I recommended that students choose an aspect of their identity they wish to explore such as hopes, fears, family, or personality. Next, they should select a medium that would best illustrate their examination of the theme and begin sketching ideas and possibilities for the project.

During the next art class which was on Tuesday, December 11, 2007, students began working on their individual representations of their identities. We quickly reviewed the artists explored in the previous class and I encouraged students to use their styles and techniques as a starting point for their own work, but not limit themselves to reproducing what they had seen. I invited them to remain open to discovering new things about themselves through the process and take this opportunity to improve their abilities to express themselves through their art. Each student began almost immediately. A few could not decide which direction to take, in which case I advised them to try one and if they were not inspired by the results, they were free to change. This first work session
was very active with students asking for a large variety of materials and advice. I moved around the room locating extra boxes, paper, fabrics, collage materials, magazines, beads, paints, ribbons, yarn, craft sticks, modeling clay and a multitude of other items. I also taught a brief lesson in figure drawing to a group in each class that wanted to begin self-portraits. The art time went by very quickly and the students expressed disappointment when they were asked to begin cleaning up.

The students had three remaining work sessions before winter break began. During these times a large variety of projects were taking shape as the individuality of each student emerged from the freedom of this lesson. By not restricting the students to one method of expression and inquiry, their personalities became more evident and their motivation grew. “If teachers are to understand what students know about something, then students should be given options in the ways in which they can express what they know” (Eisner, 2002b, p.148). The students’ ideas continued to evolve as they viewed each other’s work and their engagement moved beyond the classroom when they began bringing items and work from home to include in the project. During this time, I facilitated the students’ progress through conversations regarding their ideas, assisting with technical skills needed to achieve their desired results, and prompted alternative and expanded solutions to challenges that arose.

Once we returned from a two week winter break, I felt it would be beneficial to have each student share their work in progress to receive and offer feedback with peers. This occurred on Tuesday, January 8, 2008. I had originally thought the process would only take ten minutes, but the students were so receptive to the advice and insights
offered, we continued sharing for the entire forty minutes. Four of the large work tables were pushed together so the entire class was sitting around the same area with their projects in front of them. When it was their turn to speak, students first told the class what they were creating and which artist inspired them the most. Next, they explained their process and ideas and even asked for assistance with solving problems they were facing. Each class remained thoughtful and supportive with their suggestions. While most students had a clear view of what they were going to do in order to finish their work, they remained open and appreciative of their peers’ comments. This meeting with each class provided a refreshing and motivating return to the projects. It also allowed me to model how artists’ communicate with one another in critiques and benefit from sharing ideas, comment on new possibilities for direction, and refocus students who expressed uncertainty.

As a result of the previous class meeting, students were excited to get back to work the following art time. Many of them incorporated some of the notions that were shared and I could see more of each student’s identity emerging through their art. My role continued to exist as a facilitator, assisting the students with any needs they had, including retrieving supplies, teaching how to quill flowers, how to make a picture frame, how to draw a face and giving suggestions for further advancement of their ideas. The students worked independently and remained focused during each work session. They continued until Thursday, January 24, 2008. This final day was chosen by gauging each class’s progress and together determining a date students would feel comfortable ending.
On this day they created a title card with the information about their projects. The students worked for a total of nine art times and all students finished on the last day.

The results of this lesson were profound and inspiring. The range of ideas expressed and maturity of thinking demonstrated showed the depth of feeling and creativity the students are capable of. Some of the metaphors used to parallel their lives opened up a window into the minds and hearts of the students I teach. On Tuesday, January 29, 2008, each student sat with their project while they answered the same reflection questions they had during the Radial Design project (see Appendix B). Examining these written responses, I saw even deeper into their connections with the project.

Many students created boxes to explore their identity which included found objects and personal memorabilia pieced together in an aesthetic way. The final pieces were full of symbolism and representational materials. One student added postcards to symbolize her love of travel. She painted the bottom of the box like a soccer field to show her athleticism. She used a glue bottle to express her love of art and placed objects in no particular order because she sees herself as messy (see Figure 2). Another student created his own box from folded tag board and included a collage representing his personality, blue pipe cleaners to represent the element of wind, aluminum foil to display his reflection and shaped modeling clay in the form of fire. When the viewer pulls one side of the box open, the other side attached to the string closes. He wrote “The fire is my element; the yin yang is there because I am the yin. I had the doors so that only one can open, because everyone can only see one part of me at a time” (see Figure 3).
Figure 2. “The Box That Goes Round the World” Example of Identity Box 1

Figure 3. “Fire” Example of Identity Box 2
The next most popular choice was in the form of self-portraits. Many students not only included images of their appearances, but also created symbols to express more aspects of their identities. One student created multiple images of himself, each one with a different sport’s uniform and equipment. Another included a drawing of her horse and the ribbons they have won. This student even translated her title card in German, her native language. Another student incorporated many of his hobbies into his portrait such as art, hockey, skateboarding, snowboarding, checkers, and math (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. “King Me” Example of Self-Portrait
A few students used collage to share their connection with the identity theme. One student created a family tree using different images of animals to symbolize each member’s personality. Another combined various media and found objects in an abstract manner as a metaphor. She writes, “The pencil shavings represent the happy, energetic part of me. The flowers represent the calm part of me. The puzzle piece says that I need to do things bit by bit to get the whole picture” (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. “Digging Deep” Example of Identity Collage

Two students chose to create a symbolic narrative to illustrate events in their lives. Both images were split in half with each side representing a different time and
place. Strung in the middle of these two worlds was a piece of clothing worn by the student, a metaphor for themselves. The female student had recently moved from New Mexico and through her work she juxtaposed the landscape, schooling and overall sense of safety she’s experienced in both places, yet expressed a longing for the life she left, represented by a traditional Native American dress that hangs directly in the center. The male student employed a similar approach. He included elements of home in Ohio and his experiences from his native country of Vietnam. He represented the differences in time zones by including a sun and a moon. There were different trees, those he remembers from Vietnam and those that exist in the United States. He drew the two homes where he has lived and also included symbols from his country’s mythology and beliefs (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. “The Fantasy of Reality in Two Worlds” Example of Identity Narrative
Examining the responses to the questions, I saw greater evidence of critical thinking and personal connections to the project. When asked what they learned from this lesson, a majority of students said they learned something about themselves, including their likes and dislikes, their talents and their abilities. The next elements most referred to were the technical aspects of the process and the creation of the work. In analyzing this question according to the rubric, ten percent said they learned nothing; fifty percent were scored at Level One, twenty-seven percent at Level Two, and thirteen percent at Level Three.

When prompted to reflect on their successes and elements they would change, the answers were rich in description, confident and decisive. When choosing their favorite part of their work, most students shared an aspect of their design or process. Different from the Radial Design reflection was the naming of free choice in the project and the personal investment of sharing and learning about their identity. One response said “My favorite part was being able to do almost anything as long as it related to the theme because it opened up a lot of variety to choose from.” When selecting something they would do differently, most students wrote they would alter their design, including adding more detail, alternative color choices, or changing the arrangement of the objects. Following that was a change in materials.

Making connections outside of the project was most evident in question four which asked students what they learned about themselves. More students demonstrated higher level critical thinking and expressed a positive reflection of their own talents and
abilities. These students said they learned how to express their identity and personality using sculpture, found objects and through symbolism. Some came to realizations about how important their friends and family are. Others referred to the amount of effort they put into the project and the satisfaction they received as a result. Twenty-seven percent said they learned nothing about themselves; forty-three percent were scored at Level One, thirty percent at Level Two, and none at Level Three.

The students did not make many correlations to the larger world from this particular project. Seventy percent of students said they learned nothing about the world. But those that did make a written connection analyzed in conjunction with the results of their final product were scored higher according to the rubric. Ten percent scored were Level One and twenty percent at Level Two. An example of a Level Two respondent wrote “I learned how all the people in the world are the same in some way.”

Overall students believed this project related to their life, making deeper connections to ideas outside the context of the project. Some were very surprising with deep insights to their own identity or to the human experience in general. Many were able to connect beyond their likes and dislikes. “It shows how I live my life and how I act and what I do.” “Mixed media equals mixed ambitions, mixed thoughts, mixed music and mixed feelings.” Twenty percent said the project did not relate to their life. Thirteen percent responded at Level One, fifty percent at Level Two, and seventeen percent at Level Three. When the projects were hung and displayed in the school, students created and voted on the name of the show and chose “Hall of Truth”.
Environment Project

Once the students had finished hanging their own work in the display area of our school, we shifted our focus to the next lesson we would delve into as a class. We revisited the list of questions and concerns created at the beginning of the study to guide our choice. A majority of the students voted to investigate an environmental issue. In the following art class on Thursday, January 31, 2008, I presented a variety of artists whose work examines ecological issues or work within the realm of environmental art. This slide show and discussion was held in the computer lab as it was in the previous lesson on identity. Beyond research that I performed, Anderson and Milbrandt’s (2005) book, Art for Life: Authentic Instruction in Art Education, was used as a resource for an example instructional model.

The same presentation was seen by both classes and each class expressed an overwhelming interest and excitement to share personal environmental concerns during the discussions. They disclosed examples of artworks they had seen in the community, public service announcements from television, and current articles from magazines and newspapers related to littering, global warming, recycling, and promoting stewardship for the planet. We began with questions aimed at challenging the students’ conceptions of what can be considered art. They were asked who decides what can be called art, if they considered functional objects to be art, is it art if no object is actually made, and do they consider an installation a work of art. Since these questions were posed at the beginning, I let students respond with their initial thoughts and asked them to keep these thoughts in mind as we progressed through the discussion.
Artists referenced in this presentation either touched upon the idea of artists as activists or used nature in conjunction with art to raise awareness and intensify the viewer’s relationship with the natural world. The first two artists viewed were Ciel Bergman and Nancy Merrill who worked collaboratively to create an installation called “Sea Full of Clouds, What Can I Do?” The artists collected non-biodegradable trash found along the Santa Barbara shoreline for five weeks and arranged the materials in a powerful display along with murals and photos of the effects to the animals and the environment. Inviting the audience to participate was an integral piece of the work and as a result, the city initiated a recycling program (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Also included in the presentation were environmental artists. We explored Nancy Holt’s “Sun Tunnels”, Walter De Maria’s “Lightening Field”, Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty” and “Asphalt Rundown” and numerous works by Andy Goldsworthy.

The students engaged in offering their evolving interpretations of a definition for art and how these artists challenged it. This was the first time the students had reviewed the concept of an installation or seen the examples of how artists collaborate with the natural world to create art. The students were inspired by the results of artists as activists and art’s power to move people to action. Some remained hesitant to declare the placement of objects in the natural world, such as Nancy Holt’s work, as art. But most were intrigued by the aesthetic possibilities of working with nature. At the conclusion of the class, I explained that the next project would be a collective effort. The power of working together would enable us to encourage others to notice what we care about and motivate them to think, feel and then act.
The following art class, Tuesday, February 5, 2008, the students in each class began the selection process regarding the issue they wanted to explore through art. First they were randomly broken into three groups and were asked to name at least five ecological issues that were important to them. Each group listed many more than the minimum. After approximately ten minutes, we came back together as a class and listed all of the issues on the board. As the list grew, students continued adding more ideas that were not stated in the group work, until there were over two dozen listed in each class. I was impressed with the diversity of concerns and maturity of understanding and awareness in the responses. Some of the topics listed included global warming, air and water pollution, erosion, strip-mining, pesticide use, endangered species, rainforest destruction, fossil fuel depletion, electricity waste, landfills, recycling, and war’s effect on the environment. Both classes developed similar lists.

Once the issues were listed, we began an elimination process through a series of votes. Students first voted for their two favorite choices. Once the list was narrowed down, they voted for only one topic. The top two choices were then used for the final vote. The students were asked to consider these possible ideas until the next class when we would finalize the focus of the project. Once they returned they made the final decision. Class A chose to explore deforestation and Class B selected endangered species. Once the decisions were final, the class moved to the computer lab where students began researching relevant facts and information to familiarize one another with the topic.
During the next art class, the students continued researching in the computer lab. On this day, I facilitated the classes in deciding on possible research topics within the main theme and then students volunteered to investigate the various categories. As each class found useful websites or new ideas to explore, they shared them with one another. They also announced astounding facts about the issue which resulted in more motivation to inspire change.

On Tuesday, February 19, 2008, we used the art class to share the research and begin the process of choosing how to present the issue to the community through art. Four work tables were pushed together so we all could face each other. Students first shared their topics and some of the important facts they discovered then shared some possible ideas for a project. The dialogue was exciting, back and forth, students would expand on one another’s thoughts and include new concepts and possibilities. The energy and creativity in each class could hardly be contained. The ideas were complex, diverse and invigorating. Students in each class had paper in front of them and while ideas were emerging, they spontaneously began drawing their vision of what it may look like. During the process, I did not contribute my own ideas; I merely facilitated the expressive collaboration and asked technical questions aimed at focusing on the reality of time and materials. Impressively, with the variety of suggestions and impulsive nature of the brainstorming session, both classes ended with a concrete direction they wanted to take.

Since both classes chose to create an installation, the next art class was used to continue brainstorming in the spaces we received permission from the school to utilize
for the projects. We discussed how the ideas from the previous class would work to reinvent the space to produce what had been envisioned. In the locations, students grew excited to get started so they made decisions on what they would begin in the next art time. Students offered to begin working at home to research endangered animals and to take pictures of deforestation in their community.

For the next thirteen art times, students worked to achieve their visions. Each class had a different approach, so my role guiding them through the process exercised my knowledge of technical skills and creative problem solving along with the students’. Enabling the classes to continue each session relied on my organizational abilities to ensure the materials were available and each class remained focused. I put as many of the decisions in the hands of the students as possible. As each goal was achieved, I turned to the students to direct the class to the next step. If restlessness began to set in from the tasks that were being performed, I would ask the students what they thought needed to be done next. Surprisingly, placing the decisions in their hands motivated them because they were empowered with doing something they were interested in. In each group, there were a variety of tasks needing completion, so each student was able to lend their talents and abilities in a way that was most appealing to them. This allowed for confidence and pride to grow and shape individual efforts. Students often complimented one another’s work and offered assistance when they recognized it was needed. The collaboration was balanced with personal leadership in a harmony most students responded to positively. Some were unsure how to initiate their own decisions, but through the process, those individuals found comfort in the new approach to learning.
The enthusiasm continued to cultivate as the students began installing their creations in the designated spaces.

The results of the installations were powerful and profound. Each class would have continued creating because with each completed piece, new inspiration arose for additional elements to the design. But as the checklist of our initial tasks grew smaller, the students and I discussed a realistic deadline to achieve. Coincidentally, both classes decided they could be done on Tuesday, April 22, 2008, which was also Earth Day. On this day the students were glowing with pride. They were able to see all of their hard work, dedication, and cooperation come together.

Class A focused on the issue of deforestation. They had a strong vision of what they had hoped to achieve from the beginning and they were even more satisfied when they saw the final product. This class worked in a small tutoring room located behind the cafeteria. The room measured approximately twenty-six feet by sixteen feet. The students wanted to recreate the effects of deforestation by taking the viewer on a journey from a heavily forested environment to that of a city.

As you first enter the space through a doorway covered in cloth resembling tree bark, you are greeted with a peaceful and pleasant scene. Painted and collaged trees stretch up to the twelve foot high ceiling. Some three dimensional trees provide a strong presence in the space. Leaves cut from various colored and textured paper adorn the light blue walls. Paintings of birds, owls, squirrels, tigers and elephants welcome you into the natural environment. A couch has been remade into a cave where stuffed animals such as lions, frogs, monkeys and bears rest. Live plants fill the forest floor. There is a painted
dirt path to follow as you enter the room. Every inch of the ceiling is covered in collaged fabrics and paper of blue and green hues, creating a soft filtered light and a feeling of walking under a forest canopy. There are even sounds incorporated in the invented environment. You can hear birds, jungle mammals, and wind blowing through the leaves (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7. Class A: Deforestation Installation 1](image)

But as you continue down the forested path, it abruptly turns to a paved road. A fallen tree lies in front of a skyscraper. You are surrounded by tall menacing dark buildings and images of distant city skylines. The plants are dying and the wildlife is nonexistent. A once beautiful waterfall is covered in oil and polluted with trash. The sky is covered in black, allowing little light to penetrate and gray clouds fill the air. Traffic
signs, airplanes and trucks cover the walls. The sounds you now hear are those of jackhammers, chainsaws, sirens and honking horns. These elements come together to create an uneasy and dark feeling (see Figure 8). Scattered all over the floor are large green leaves, fallen from the trees that once stood. Written on the leaves are facts researched by the students about the impact of deforestation on the environment along with their personal pleas for change.

Class B used their creativity and imagination to heighten awareness of the growing crisis of endangered species. The students in this class chose to use a tree as a metaphor, representing the animals that are falling from the healthy canopy of life. Because of the nature of this idea, a three story stairwell located near the cafeteria was
designated for this installation. The stairway is large and open. The limited amount of solid walls allows plenty of light to filter in through the windows. A multitude of live plants greet students on the landings and in the window sills. The students in this class also had a strong vision for their creation. Although there was not the same variety of components as in Class A, the abundance of similar visual elements created a great impact and a strong, clear message.

As you begin your ascent up the first set of wide stairs, you feel as if you are entering a magical, serene forest. Looking up, you see the canopy of leaves stretching over you, filling your immediate view. Thick brown paper mache branches, approximately six feet in length, reach from the railing on the left side over your head to the opposite wall. Each branch is covered with paper leaves of various green and brown hues made of diverse shapes and sizes. These leaves are strung around each branch with green yarn that sparkles in the sunlight. A total of thirty five branches fill the space above the first two sets of stairs, allowing the forested feeling to persist as you continue your climb up to the second floor (see Figure 9).
In addition to what you notice above, you come face to face with colorful photographs of a variety of animals. Hanging low from the branches at eye level are large brown leaves, their only connection to the green canopy above is a thin black piece of yarn (see Figure 10). On each of these leaves is a different image of an endangered species whose survival is threatened by the effects of humans. The leaves are meant to be touched. On the back of each leaf is information researched by the students about their chosen species. The facts include the name of the endangered species, the natural habitat where it can be found, how many are left, what is causing their population to decrease, and what humans can do to protect them. The leaves spin with the breeze and must be handled in order to continue up the stairs. This interaction invites the viewer to
take matters into their own hands. A total of fifty endangered species were represented including a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles, and marine life.

Figure 10. Endangered Species Installation 2

To enhance the authenticity, the local newspaper was invited to write a story on the students’ efforts and a public viewing was held for the community to share in the experience. The students’ excitement when speaking to the reporter about all they had learned from the project was exhilarating. They presented facts they had researched to support why they thought it was important to raise awareness of their issues. They shared
their feelings about the process, saying they loved creating the art but were saddened by the realities of the information. They even discussed recent incidents that occurred outside of school that made them realize how important their work is. For example, a student who researched the trumpeter swan recounted after she discovered they are killed for their down feathers. She was appalled when she went home and saw her mother had purchased a down couch that same day. When the community was invited to see the final exhibitions, students acted as tour guides available to answer questions and point out elements they were most proud of. The pride and satisfaction they expressed when they took adults and other students through the installations was a testament to the empowerment they achieved through this project.

On Thursday, April 24, 2008, the students reflected on their experience through the written responses as in the past (see Appendix B). Each class sat quietly in their installation as they answered the questions. As expected, the responses to the first question about what the students learned from the project referred to an aspect of the environmental issue their class explored. A few mentioned a technical skill acquired from the process, including gaining an understanding of installation art. A high level of critical thinking was demonstrated in the answers. Many of the students backed up what they had learned with facts and most expressed concern for raising awareness, connecting their work to a broader world context. One student wrote “I learned that anyone can get a message out there, even kids.” There were no students that felt they learned nothing during this project. Twenty-three percent answered in level One according to the scoring rubric, sixty percent were at Level Two and seventeen percent were Level Three.
When asked about their favorite part of the lesson, most students named an aspect of the process or product. Many of the students declared it was “fun”. Some liked how they could apply the knowledge and skills they have as individuals to a larger project. Many said they enjoyed seeing everything completed at the end. When they were prompted to name something they would do differently, many students wrote how their aspirations were bigger than time allowed. They wanted to add more features to the installations or expand on current ideas. Each class expressed inspiration to reach further in their design.

Answers to the next question reflected what the students felt they learned about themselves. Forty percent of students said they learned nothing. Twenty-six percent were scored at Level One. These answers were simple and only related to the project or process. Seventeen percent of student responses were at Level Two. These students mentioned learning something about their own skills or realizing the rewards of their efforts. Seventeen percent were at Level Three. Many in this level expressed how learning about an environmental issue made them realize how humans are effecting the cause and how they can personally spread a message through art to create change. One student wrote that they learned “how much impact we can have by spreading art and spreading awareness.”

When students were asked what they learned about the world, the answers reflected personal investment in affecting change. Many students referred to facts they learned throughout the project. These students were scored in Level Two. Students whose responses engaged an element of personal responsibility and action were placed in
Level Three. Examples from this level demonstrate the empowerment and inspiration felt by the students. One student wrote “I learned that if we all do our part then we can save the world. I thought it would be a lot harder to do.” Another said “we need to make sure that we know the consequences of our actions.” Seven percent, or two students, said they learned nothing about the world; ten percent scored in Level One, fifty percent in Level Two, and thirty-three percent in Level Three.

In the final question, students were asked how the project related to their lives. Thirty-seven percent wrote that it did not. Thirteen percent were scored in Level One. Twenty percent were labeled Level Two. Thirty percent were at Level Three. The students responding in this level said this project had changed their perspective of humans’ effect on the environment. They wrote about how they wanted to spread awareness and change their habits to take better care of the planet and its inhabitants.

Overall, the students’ reflections of this project reached beyond the contexts of the project itself. Students recounted a variety of facts about their chosen environmental issue that were discovered through the process. More than any other project in this study, students expressed an awareness of art’s ability to deliver a message and their personal ability to contribute. When sharing the work with the community, one student said that working through art was different because had they written a report to demonstrate their learning, not as many people would be impacted. But by creating a work of art, more people stop to look and then go deeper to explore the message behind the creation.
Post-Study Survey

The final step in the study was to administer the post-study survey (see Appendix A). This was completed anonymously by the students on Monday, April 28, 2008, following the same procedures as was done in the pre-study survey. Results were also analyzed in the same manner.

When asked what they think of when they hear the word art, answers were similar to those given in the pre-study survey. Most students saw art as a form of self expression. The second most popular responses given were forms of visual art. New and interesting concepts stated referred to art as an “expressing way to learn and help other people.” One student’s definition is an example of the broader concept of art as learning that other students shared. This student wrote “When I hear the word art I think of any passion someone might have, if it is visual, audio, or physical, something that someone might explore.”

Students gave many of the same examples of art as in the pre-study survey. Visual art forms were mentioned most frequently, followed by music and literature. New to this category were multiple references to installation art and specifically the environmental installations created by the classes.

Students responding to why they think art is important showed growth in the sophistication and complexity of their answers. Self-expression, sharing feelings, and expressing ideas and identity were the main reasons it was deemed important. Students answering in this manner were scored at Level Two using the Creative Thinking Rubric (see Appendix C). More students achieved a Level Three because their answers were
very thoughtful and insightful. Not only did these students see art as a way to express themselves, they also said it helps you become “attentive to the world surrounding you.” They said it is “like a diary of pictures, it alludes to your feelings. You can be creative and free.” And they understood that “It shows someone’s point of view about something. It can make someone think a different way. Also, it can be more powerful than words.” In this question, seventeen percent answered in Level One, sixty-three percent in Level Two and twenty percent in Level Three.

Similar answers also appeared in the next questions. Students said they make art because they enjoy it and it helps them express themselves. These were the main reasons they thought others made art as well. New ideas which emerged during the post-study survey were the notions that art helps the students reflect on what they do in their lives and it helps them create meaning. Additionally, they added that others make art to spread new ideas, to teach others, to make others critically think and to solve problems.

Responses to how art can assist individuals in understanding themselves were also analogous with the pre-study survey, yet richer with emotion and personal empowerment. Learning more about one’s identity and revealing unknown aspects of oneself were mentioned most frequently. One student wrote that you achieve this “by seeing the life you’ve created within your own art, your accomplishments, your dreams, your attempts, your memories.” Similarly, another wrote “Art is much like a record of your past, and by looking at it later you can see how you’ve changed.” Finally one student wrote “Art shows me what I can do to change the world and what I can change in life.”
The final question once again reflected similar notions as in the previous survey. Art helps them see the world through someone else’s eyes and experiences. Assisting others in appreciating and understanding different perspectives was the most common answer. A new concept presented in the post-study survey included the notion that art could be used to raise awareness to important concerns and issues, including environmental problems, and inspire change to occur. One student wrote “Art helps people see the world because they might change their opinion for the better on important issues.” Another wrote “Art helps a person see the world in what state it is in and what state it could be in.” When scoring the levels of critical thinking presented in this question, thirty-three percent answered in Level One, forty-seven percent in Level Two and twenty percent in Level Three.

Summary

The series of events that took place during this action research project were performed to assist in answering the primary research question, *How does student engagement in learning art change when lessons are connected to their life experiences?* Beginning with a lesson that is taught as part of the normal art curriculum and then allowing the students to design their own lessons according to meaningful questions and concerns they have about life experiences, the study intended to illuminate changes in levels of engagement during the process. Through a survey administered at the beginning and the end of the study along with written reflections created at the conclusion of each lesson, variations in students’ opinions and critical thinking levels were analyzed to assist
in determining the changes. The written evidence was presented in conjunction with my observations and the final artworks of the students to create a full representation of the experiences and events that transpired. In the following chapter, I will use this evidence gathered from the study to draw conclusions and relate the findings to my theory.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

As an art educator, my objective is to provide my students with meaningful experiences through multiple forms of art and illuminate the various modes of creative, critical thought that surround its creation and understanding. Engaging the students’ emotions along with their inquiry into questions and concerns of contemporary life can enable them to become empathetic, reflective and active participants in a democratic society. Encouraging students to investigate their connections to the human experience and employ art as a vehicle for exploring this relationship can foster creative solutions and expressive communication with the world around them.

If students can be helped to see appreciatively with heart and mind as well as eyes, they can acquire a rich store of imagery and understanding and develop attitudes that lead them to invent, create and respond to art. They will also make connections with real world issues and devise means to deal with these issues creatively. This is the social aspect of creativity (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.75).

To enhance my ability to facilitate these learning experiences within my classroom, my action research project focused on the application of authentic instruction within the existing structure of my position as an elementary art educator. My intentions to elicit connections between art and the students’ lives in an authentic context led to the development of my primary research question. *How does student engagement in learning art change when lessons are connected to their life experiences?* Implementing
this approach and examining the reactions and reflections of the students has created a valuable framework for future employment of this method.

**Evaluation of Findings**

During the six months devoted to undertaking this new approach to teaching and learning, the discoveries realized have supported the hypothesis of my research. To analyze the reactions and levels of engagement of the students, a written reflection was given at the end of each project completed in the duration of the study. An anonymous survey was also administered at the beginning and end of the research period to note any significant changes in the attitudes and beliefs regarding the importance of art held by the students. In addition, my personal observations have been used in conjunction with student artwork to assist in evaluating the results.

The ability to think critically is vital to the creation and understanding of art. Critical thinkers are active learners who employ problem solving skills to make informed decisions, interpret meaning and inferences, analyze, evaluate, and make knowledgeable judgments (Turner, 2006). They are able to think creatively to generate new solutions and possible outcomes to situations. Making connections, synthesizing, hypothesizing and arriving at warranted conclusions are also skills related to critical thinking (Newman, Secada & Wehlage, 1995). Because this proficiency requires students to play an active role in learning and producing, measuring the levels of critical thinking became the quantifiable element of determining student engagement in the learning process.
Creating a Critical Thinking Rubric (see Appendix C) to evaluate the students’ responses enabled me to gauge their varying degrees of involvement in each of the projects in the study. Once the answers were scored using the rubric, the final totals of each level were compiled in a bar graph intended to illustrate the changes in critical thinking and simultaneously, the levels of student engagement in learning art, over the span of the three lessons. The graphs were created to reflect the results of only those questions that were measured with the rubric.

The first question asked in the written reflections following each lesson invited students to describe what they learned as a result of doing each particular project. The answers continually reflected higher levels of critical thinking (see Figure 11). During the Radial Design project, most students mentioned mere technical skills and vocabulary presented in the lesson. In the Identity lesson, the students’ connections to broader contexts outside of the classroom activity began to increase. While technical aspects concerning the creation of the final product were mentioned, the higher level of personal engagement was apparent because more answers reflected individual observations regarding elements of identity realized during the lesson. Finally, the levels were highest following the Environmental project. Students were able to back up their thoughts with reasonable explanations and they identified a greater number of connections to ideas beyond the information and skills presented during the process. In addition, the students’ answers reflected a certain level of empowerment gained that is missing from the Radial Design lesson. Instilling a sense that art can become a form of learning invites all students to be involved in the process and enables each of them to contribute in a way
they feel is best. “Essential to the concept of art as research is the notion that all artmaking is a learning experience…framing artmaking as learning focuses attention away from the qualities of the product to the nature of the process” (Marshall, 2002, p.281). This is evident from the shift of responses. The final product was the focal point of the learning in the Radial Design project yet the process and the experience became the central theme in the following projects.

![Figure 11. Levels of Engagement in Question 1](image)

The results found in each subsequent answer analyzed this way demonstrate similar results. When asked what they learned about themselves in each lesson, although some students did not make any connections to how the project related to individual discoveries, the students that did attempt to parallel the content to themselves exhibited greater levels of engagement through the series of projects. Student responses expressed the greatest amount of critical thinking and engagement during the Identity project (see Figure 12). It seemed as though the students had each connected with at least one of the artists presented and were excited by the opportunity to choose the media and form best
suited to their desires and personality. “Giving a young artist appropriate materials and posing appropriate questions at the right time may be one of the most effective procedures for building skills and confidence.” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.151)

Therefore, learning how to express themselves more effectively through various forms of art was most frequently stated. The students also expressed satisfaction with their abilities and made connections to qualities explored outside of art. Personal perseverance, friends and family, symbolism and unique aspects of their identities were some examples of the broader associations. Some reflections of the Environment project also demonstrated high levels of critical thinking and engagement. Students scoring in Level Three appeared due to the empowering nature of their response. These students realized their connections to the human experience and humans’ effects on the planet. They expressed awareness of art’s impact on spreading a message and their investment in contributing to a larger cause.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 12. Levels of Engagement in Question 4*
When prompted to reflect on what each student learned about the world, the highest levels of engagement were observed during the Environment project (see Figure 13). While attempts to connect learning to the broader world were made during the Radial Design and Identity projects, the answers given in the reflections were simple and unsupported. In contrast, the answers from the Environment project were quite sophisticated and profound. In addition to relaying the facts they learned about the issue their class explored, the students articulated personal investment in affecting change. The nature of these responses exhibited engagement that moved beyond the creation of art or the study of environmental issues. Students expressed notions of individual responsibility for the future of the planet and acquired the ability to spread awareness in their own ways. Therefore, the Environment project was most successful in empowering students to make broad connections and develop their confidence. “When students have a set of clear criteria and are free to meet those criteria in ways that require ingenuity, they will take deeper interest in coping with the problem. The opportunity to use ingenuity breeds interest.” (Eisner, 2002b, p.118)

![Figure 13. Levels of Engagement in Question 5](image-url)
As the lessons progressed, the students’ ability to see how the projects related to their lives increased (see Figure 14). While many students did not feel the Radial Design project correlated with life, more connections were made once the students played an integral role in designing the lessons. The students saw the most relevance in the Identity project and the critical thinking demonstrated was the highest in the Environmental project. Majority of the decisions in the later lessons were made by the individual students and guided by their own interests and concerns.

![Figure 14. Levels of Engagement in Question 6](image)

The levels of engagement were also apparent when analyzing the efforts, motivations, and quality of the final products created during each lesson. The Radial Design images, while appealing in a visual sense, were similar in design and aesthetic value. They did not display the unique character of the individual artist. The students enjoyed the project because the final result was attractive and pleasing. Quite the opposite, the results of the Identity lesson were rich with personality. The students were
much more motivated to pursue their creations and learn from the variety of methods employed by their peers. Class sessions were increasingly active and infused with dialogue surrounding individual obstacles and successes. The final products reflected high levels of invested time, thought and passion in pursuit of sharing and expressing identity. The variety of styles and media mirrored the traits and character of each student. During the Environment project, the collaborative efforts of each class kept the enthusiasm high and the inspiration alive. Because the concerns of the students were the impetus for the design of each installation, the students were invested in the success of the work. Each student was able to choose in accordance with what they were interested in researching and creating, therefore a variety of skills and talents were highlighted during the process. The satisfaction and empowerment expressed as the pieces came together as a whole were genuine and electrifying. Students began seeing themselves as powerful communicators and deemed the messages they have as worthy of expression. The final installations were a testament to their effort and dedication. As students and adults from the school and community viewed the works, their accolades focused on the moving power of the message and the effectiveness of the art.

Regarding the evaluation of the surveys administered at the beginning and end of the study, the students’ attitudes and beliefs about the value of art reflected higher levels of awareness, appreciation and understanding. Students continued to view art as a form of self-expression, but additionally saw it as a way to help others and as a form of communication. They recognized its ability to develop multiple ways of seeing and interacting with the word and other people. The later surveys conveyed art’s capacity to
elicit change in people’s actions and ways of thinking. Finally, following the series of lessons, students also considered art a powerful way to raise awareness to important issues and inspire action.

Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen (Dewey, 1934, p.222).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings of the study support the research discussed in the literature review. During the process, the academic, personal and social development of the students was evident. Promoting deeper engagement through authentic approaches to teaching enabled students to make connections between the content being learned in class and its application to life outside of school. In addition, art’s ability to affect social change was demonstrated and acknowledged by the students.

The processes and projects designed by the students presented many opportunities for development to occur. Personally, the students increased their individual abilities to make and interpret meaning, strengthened their creative thinking skills, and learned how to effectively stabilize their ideas and communicate in a visual form. They exhibited personal responsibility for their actions and ideas because the creation of meaning and value came from them. Their confidence and pride grew as a result of this personal
investment in learning. Academically, there was an increase in critical thinking skills, personal motivation, sensory anchoring, flexibility, improvisation and construction of qualitative intelligence. The length of time invested in each project and the lack of authoritative guidance in addition to the variety of avenues open to explore allowed students to develop these skills in an open and developmentally appropriate manner. Finally, the social aspects of development occurred during both projects as well. Cooperative learning, creations of resolutions to communal problems, connections to contemporary societal issues, exchanges of experiences and identity, and learning to express intended meaning to the viewer were elements of development that were strong and continual through the process. The students influenced one another to work harder and reach higher and developed tolerance, respect, empathy, compassion with the sharing of ideas and responsibilities.

The degree of authenticity in the study resulted in positive reflections from the students. Because they were able to develop their own projects, motivation to learn and work was cultivated. These personal connections increased the potential for students to think critically about the art they saw and created. They felt more deeply about the art they produced which in turn elicited care for the work, feelings and concerns of others. The levels of engagement increased and students developed intrinsic satisfaction while making connections to broader world contexts.

Democratic concepts and ambitions toward social change were also key elements fostered in the implementation of this study. Students learned to integrate personal wants with communal interests. They exercised their involvement in collaborative decision
making, shared responsibility and interest in achievement, and awareness of global concerns and social realities. The students learned to work together and listen to one another’s ideas and create solutions to collective concerns. They also displayed personal leadership and confidence from the equality promoted throughout the process. They realized their voice and ideas were as valuable as the others in the class including the teacher’s.

**Recommendations**

Many recommendations for future lessons and approaches to art education have resulted from the process and reflection of this action research project. Teachers who wish to create more authentic experiences through the creation and study of art will benefit from the outcomes of this study. Facilitating authenticity and bridging the connections between art and life will engage more students in deeper learning about art and visual culture and enhance their ability to use art as a vehicle for learning and living.

One important aspect of designing and implementing a curriculum in which the students’ ideas and concerns are cultivated and explored is the role of the teacher. It is essential for the educator to work and think as an artist, to treat the facilitation of the class as a form of artistry. Practice infused with imagination, invention and experimentation is essential to the success and impact of the education. “Artistry is important because teachers who function artistically in the classroom not only provide children with important sources of artistic experience, they also provide a climate that welcomes exploration and risk-taking and cultivates the disposition to play” (Eisner, 2002b, p.162).
Being informed with the knowledge of technical skills is equally important as the ability to engage the students’ imaginations. An art educator must understand the students’ art and be able to communicate ideas in a supportive and constructive manner. The teacher should know when to step back and allow creative spontaneity to occur and when to pose leading questions which stimulate the creativity without determining the outcome. Facilitating discovery by guiding the intentions of the students with the personal experience of the educator can lead students to make informed decisions and take ownership of the work. Knowing how to acquire, use, and arrange tools and supplies for effective work time is crucial. With multiple forms of expression and direction taking place in a limited time, the organizational skills and the foresight of planning must be in place.

When creating lessons, the teacher should know how to present problems or issues for investigation through art while leaving enough space for personal investment of the students. Presenting a balance of closed-ended objectives paired with open-ended objectives is important to advancing the skills and knowledge of the students. “Good art curricula have both closed-ended objectives, designed to teach skills and concepts, and open-ended objectives, designed to allow students to express themselves using the concepts and skills they’ve developed.” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.171). Additionally, the art of making connections with content outside of school and students’ prior knowledge will ensure the authenticity and effectiveness of the learning experiences (Eisner, 2002a).
Another important aspect of the teacher’s role is the willingness to allow the students to become equal participants in the designing of lessons. Sharing the power of decision making and voice in the process of learning can be challenging for educators wishing to control the course of events and outcomes of activities. But as an artist learns to remain flexible, spontaneous and open to possibilities that arise from the nature of the materials or ideas while creating a work of art, an educator must also be inclined to employ the unintended lessons and events that come from the shared responsibility of curriculum design. Encouraging students to share their ideas and passions and validating their concerns allows them to take ownership of the learning through invested interest. When the students become an integral part in what they are learning in school, their ability to take leadership roles and become active participants in life will increase.

In conjunction with treating teaching as a form of artistry is embracing an emergent design of planning. In this form of curriculum design, the activities are allowed to flow from ideas and interests of the students. The teacher plans while the lessons are in progress and is more concerned with “getting students engaged in activities that are emotionally satisfying and intellectually productive (Eisner, 2002a, p.152). The end results are not preconceived and therefore activities are influenced by the unpredictable and inventive solutions to problems that arise are fostered.

For those using a more emergent model of curriculum planning, activities are much closer to the work of a painter or poet. In this model, decisions to do one thing rather than another are decisions that can be made only by considering options as they develop, by ‘reading’ the situation, by exploiting the adventitious,
and by allowing intention to grow out of action rather than requiring them to precede it (Eisner, 2002b, p.34).

Evaluation of the effectiveness of a lesson or activity comes as the significance of the content and the connections the students make are revealed. The ongoing process of experimenting and appraising allow the direction of the process to unfold in a natural, organic way. It also enhances the authenticity and personal value for the students.

Providing experiences for students to make authentic connections between what they are learning in school to life outside the classroom is an effective tool for increasing student engagement in the educational process. In order for this to occur, topics should have value beyond school. Allowing students to be an integral part in the planning and implementation of lessons, investigating their questions and concerns about the larger world, will foster these connections to the content. Encourage students to research and demonstrate their own learning in unique ways that speak to them. Assist students in the active construction of knowledge and meaning by building on prior experiences, incorporating rich dialogue and achieving in-depth understanding of the topic being explored. Promote the inclusion of materials and resources from visual culture in addition to the fine arts. Stay as true to professional disciplined inquiry techniques as possible, exhibiting and practicing the skills and methods required to achieve the desired end results as artists would in the field of art. Finally, include a public display of the final product to increase the authenticity and connections for the students.

Furthering the connections between art and life can also be achieved through the incorporation of thematic instruction strategies. Organizing investigations and
information around themes will cultivate a rich in-depth understanding of a topic as opposed to the accumulation of fragmented facts. Further, delving into themes of human ideas, emotions, intentions and experiences will connect the personal concerns of the individual with the larger world. Engaging students in discovering how people from various times and cultures have used art to explore themes of the human existence will elicit the use of art as a tool for learning and expressing outside of school. “Discussing how their art work relates to their life, society, and time helps students view their own art work in a cultural context and connect scaffolds of learning across disciplines for more holistic and effective learning” (Milbrandt, 2002, p.318).

Summary

The findings of this study have aligned with the synthesized research to support the inclusion of authentic instructional strategies in an art education classroom. When aimed at bridging the connections between art and life to further enhance students’ experiences and engagement with art, authentic instruction can elicit meaningful and empowering results. Encouraging students to explore questions and concerns they have about the larger world within an atmosphere of support, fairness and open communication can lead to the development of appreciation, understanding and utilization of art as a means for exploring life experiences. When this connection with art is fostered students become equipped with a powerful form of expression and tool for investing the world around them.
To help the diverse students we know articulate their stories is not only to help them pursue the meanings of their lives—to find out how things are happening and to keep posing questions about the why. It is to move them to learn new things (Greene, 1995, p.165).

Empowering students with the ability to become reflective and active participants in their world will enable them to develop the skills necessary for individual and communal growth.

Art’s ability to elicit deep understanding and connections to the world and other people affects its ability to influence change. Throughout history, art has served as a bridge, breaking barriers between cultures, times and indifferences. It is a means by which individual stories are told and the identity and liveliness of people flourish. It encourages empathy and compassion in others while struggles and spirits are expressed. In a world of standardization, where students are being asked to choose from predefined answers, the need for art is critical. Providing students with an alternative to the test scores and high stakes achievement currently inundating the educational system can confirm there is a different way to live and learn. Emphasizing the human emotions, motivations and ideas through art can awaken the innovation and wonder of dreaming new possibilities. Exploring solutions to cultural, societal and personal issues and imagining realities that cannot be judged as incorrect give students the potential to live happier and fuller lives.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Pre- and Post- Study Survey

1. Please explain in your own words what you think of when you hear the word “art”.

2. Please give some examples of art.

3. Please tell me the reasons why you think art is important. Please explain.

4. Please list all of the reasons why you make art.

5. What are some reasons you think other people make art?


7. In what ways does art help a person see the world? What would the world be like if we had no art?
APPENDIX B

Reflection Questions

1. What did you learn from doing this project?

2. What was your favorite part about your project? Why?

3. What would you do differently if you were to do it again?

4. What did you learn about yourself?

5. What did you learn about the world?

6. How does this project relate to your life?
APPENDIX C

Critical Thinking Rubric

This rubric was used to evaluate students’ responses to the Reflection Questions at the end of each lesson.

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<th>Level Two</th>
<th>Level Three</th>
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<td>Warranted, justified answers and conclusions</td>
<td>Sophisticated, insightful, warranted answers and conclusions</td>
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<td>States point of view but does not support it</td>
<td>Presents point of view with evidence of some logical,</td>
<td>Clearly explains point of view in a logical, relevant and significant way</td>
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<td>does not support it in a logical or adequate</td>
<td>relevant reasoning</td>
<td></td>
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<td>way</td>
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<td>Clarity of argument/ reasoning is somewhat clear</td>
<td>Clarity of argument/ reasoning justifies inferences and opinions</td>
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<td>Makes some connections to broader concepts and contexts</td>
<td>Clearly identifies connections to broader concepts and contexts outside the</td>
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