MOTIVATING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS IN AN INCLUSION CLASSROOM USING DIGITAL AND VISUAL CULTURE EXPERIENCES: AN ACTION RESEARCH

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The process by which students with special needs interpret images and information has been a concern of mine since I began teaching in 2008. At this time, I was teaching at a high school with a majority population of students with special needs. I struggled to see how each student could be so different, and yet still experience similar daily challenges of school life and adolescence. I quickly discovered that my students were able to most effectively understand information that was not read from books, or written out, but rather from images, videos, and kinesthetic experiences. This discovery opened a door for me, as an art educator, to explore the world with my students through these diverse avenues; it also allowed them to become participants, rather than bystanders, in their own learning.

My first few years of teaching in this school led me to some of the initial questions that formed this study. A common practice among my adolescent students was the collection of objects, images and experiences in order to build a sense of self-worth and a sense of popularity among their peers. This collecting behavior took place among all of the students, regardless of their varying disabilities. Collections could include images and videos from the internet, video games, new music, television shows, clothes, shoes, and tattoos. In an experience with students touring the *Who Shot Rock & Roll* (2010) exhibition at the Akron Art Museum in Akron, Ohio, this behavior was particularly visible. While viewing this exhibition, students were asked to look at photographs of professional and popular musicians from the 1950s onward, and discuss their ideas about these photographs with the docent. The students were strongly attracted to images with which they were familiar, and they reacted to the images with thoughtful and personal

comments. Other images they were not interested in were labeled as not important, stupid, or not worth looking at. While typical students may have been coerced into discussing some of the cultural and social aspects of the uninteresting photographs, my students refused to do so. Instead, they were only drawn to images that would further their collection of visual culture items they deemed to be worthy currency.

Later in a research course, to discover more first-hand information about this issue, I conducted a pilot study of professionals in the fields of special needs and educational research. Through my questioning process, I discovered that the phenomenon I witnessed in my own classroom was present in other ways in different settings. I also realized that my small question about my students' reactions to Visual Culture is interwoven into a larger web of questions, all regarding the challenges students face when progressing through adolescent education and development. These ideas are tied into the formation of students' identities and how they experience their self-image. The special education professionals interviewed for this pilot study observed that their students were not only consuming content, but also producing it, using the technology available to them. Students would use computer programs to make artwork, cellular phones to create videos, and other internet-based software to record music. These compositions were then posted to the internet via social networking websites for their friends and online peers to view and experience. This information added a new dimension to my original research plan, as it added the creating of artifacts to typical behavior of adolescent students with special needs.

My Mission to Teach Artistic Behaviors

Children have thousands of languages that they are able to speak fluently before they are able to read and write (Duncum, 2004). One of these is the language of visual representation.

Before children are able to effectively process language, they are able to collect and create images to describe their experiences, thoughts, and dreams.

In contemporary art classrooms, students from all areas and all ability levels are included in classrooms with students who do not require special assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Students with special needs are capable of creating beautiful artworks that explore technique and ideas in the same ways as general students (Gerber & Guay, 2006). Because of this inclusion, art curricula must be modified to fit the needs of such exceptional students, while remaining relevant and challenging to everyone in the class.

In order to succeed in an art classroom in a public school, students have to follow procedures and directions to create a product. For students with special needs, as with all students, a structured and focused use of time in art class helps them feel safe and comfortable in their routine and express themselves more freely (Woywod, 2004). However, the demands of art projects may not fit into the realm of possibility for many students with special needs because they are asked to create products that are designed with too-specific outcomes (Henley, 1992). If a student produces a project that does not reflect the teacher's example, it may be viewed as inferior work by the student or their peers. Any student who fails to find success in a task will be less likely to attempt that task again. The same is true for any student who creates art in the classroom. If they do not have success in the tasks required by the teacher, they may think they are "not a good artist," or do not have the right skills to succeed (Bruggen, 2002). Students are not allowed to "not succeed" in math or reading, and are consistently evaluated as to their level of proficiency in these subjects. Conversely in the Visual Arts, failure can be perceived as a lack of innate talent, and becomes part of a student's identity.

Working with many students at different ages and ability levels, I have found that motivating students is a major key to their success. If a student does not want to participate in a specific project because they are not allowed to create something that interests them, their artwork may not be as deliberate or detailed as a child who has an intrinsic motivation to create. One strong motivator for students is looking at and discussing Visual Culture. Visual Culture is all the images we see, and visual experiences we have every day (Kieffer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007). Students are constantly interacting with their own specific Visual Culture, and critiquing these images with friends and peers. Including a student's Visual Culture in any lesson plan can capture their attention more readily than text and images that are foreign (Duncum, 2004). In addition, when students are asked to create artworks that are linked to their Visual Culture experiences, they may feel more comfortable thinking creatively, because they are already experts in this area (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Students with special needs experience Visual Culture in the same ways as their general peers. These students may also have Visual Culture artifacts that they value more deeply, or have fascinations with. In addition, they are looking at, collecting, and evaluating images at all times, even if they only relate to this fascination. Including Visual Culture in the art classroom is a logical step, because within art education exists the pedagogical framework for classifying, analyzing and unpacking images (Duncum, 2010). Adding Visual Culture to the visual arts curriculum can help not only students with special needs, but all students, gain an interest for art production. This can be especially beneficial for teachers who have diverse learners in one class at the same time.

Purpose and Justification

Al Hurwitz and Michael Day (2001) claimed that in some elementary classrooms, students create projects whose guidelines are solely determined by their teacher. Lessons are designed with little or no student choice, and students who are the best at following directions are rewarded. These projects are mounted on refrigerators, framed in principals' offices, and given ribbons at art shows. This type of curricula praises the few students who exhibit the ability to follow directions and work diligently and quietly. This method of work cannot yield success for all students. Later, Hurwitz & Day added a chapter on visual culture to their 2012 edition, but this practice of limiting student choice in art-making continues in classrooms I have personally observed. Incorporating choice and interest in an art curriculum can help more students feel excited about participating and creating artworks (Burdick, 2011). When students with special needs engage in an art curriculum that is interesting and engaging to them, they are also able to transcend some of the difficulties of their ability. While making art and viewing art, students with special needs are less likely to display behaviors that are symptomatic of their disorder, and more likely to engage in positive interactions with peers and adults (Henley, 1998; Hoeptner-Poling & Dorff, 2011; Koo, 2010).

I was initially inspired to study Visual Culture through an experience I had working with high school students with special needs. All of the students in my small, independent school were expected to take visual art and therefore, many did not choose to be there. In order to motivate my students, I began to compare the artworks we discussed and created to the students' Visual Culture experiences in order to motivate them and guide the class to greater success. This gradually led me to creating units and lessons that were solely based in Visual Culture, with art production as their end point. I noticed that many students valued Visual Culture experiences as

an aspect of their own identity. When they enjoyed a music video or a video game, they presumed to own that experience. These students were collecting Visual Culture experiences as a kind of "culture capital" that was tied to their own self-worth (McLoed, 2009). This colloquial evidence fueled my interest to conduct an action research study on students' perceptions and collections of Visual Culture to broaden my own pedagogy, and as an extension of my teaching philosophy to include all students. The following sections provide further description of the actions taken as part of this research.

Harnessing Motivations from Outside the Art Classroom

Frank Wachowiak and Robert Clements (2001) define art experiences based on "vivid and meaningful personal experiences" (p.23) as the most successful at motivating students. Visual Culture contains many meaningful and vivid experiences for students, and these can be translated into motivation for art production. Every day, adolescent students are having Visual Culture Experiences. These experiences take place at school, at home, and during a variety of activities which are increasingly happening online (Boyd, 2008). A Visual Culture experience can be as simple as looking at an image, or as complex as the meaning that develops when images or video are juxtaposed (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Each day, students actively search out and share Visual Culture experiences. They can use these as talking points, or as ways to explore common interests with peers (Freedman, Heignen, Kallio-Tavin, Karpati, & Papp, 2013). Endless parts of children's lives are experienced in image format as they are constantly seeing information. Much of this information is now presented without text, making it crucial for students to be literate in the study of images and how they can communicate meaning (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). Art education is the perfect arena for the study of Visual Culture, because it contains tools for categorizing and interpreting images (Duncum, 2004). Art teachers are

specially trained to guide students through the meanings of Visual Culture experiences, and can help students understand how these images affect their sense of the world and their self-image.

In their development as adolescents, students experience Visual Culture not just as images that fly in and out of their consciousness, but as experiences they can share with peers and adults (Ciampaglia, 2012). The television shows, comic books, video games, and other images seen by students are beginning to be categorized into groups of "cool" and "not cool" or "for kids," "for boys" and "for girls". Though students may not be fully aware of this beginning, it is happening every day. Students may use their innate tools, such as cataloging, critiquing, and categorizing these images, mostly developed through conversations with friends and family. Dissecting and unpacking Visual Culture images requires a deeper level of critical thinking to which most students have not traveled (Duncum, 2010). While students have very strong ideas about which images are interesting and which are not, they may not know why. In addition, they may continue collecting Visual Culture images because these images and experiences are important to their peer group.

Students with special needs comprise a growing population within our schools in Ohio and throughout the nation. Within visual art education, there are many pedagogical strategies aimed at reaching differently-abled students in ways that are more effective than traditional modes of teaching. New fields of art education, such as Visual Culture, help to connect the study of the Visual Arts to areas of students' interest and daily existence. Students may not see a famous painting every day, but they are continuously bombarded with thousands of images and sounds that could be criticized as works of art. In this particular action research, I would like to focus on teaching adolescents, because they are becoming the biggest producers and consumers of Visual Culture, and have the most access to these experiences (Boyd, 2008).

Re-examining Visual Art Skills

For some art teachers, using Visual Culture in the classroom threatens to take away from the study of what is considered fine art (Smith, 2003). It is possible that the elevation of the art curricula that is studied in schools is designed to be easily assessed and justified (Gude, 2012). This does not follow the function and purpose of visual art, a uniquely human concept in which the language is constantly changing as new works are made, and older works are re-contextualized within our modern reality (Siegesmund, 1998). With the freedom that many art teachers have to design and implement their own curriculum, it makes little sense that they would stick to an outdated set of objectives based on art's supposed elements and principles of design (Gude, 2012). Instead, I believe art teachers should be looking at artworks, talking about the process of creating artworks, and adapting those experiences of artistic production for the classroom. While the use of color, shape, and line remain important in the creation of any image, other qualities that were previously deemed elements of good artworks may no longer be relevant (Gude, 2004).

A study of art in contemporary schools is not intended to make a generation of fine artists, but to allow for students to grow and create in different languages than they do in other school experiences. It is obvious from a young age that some students experience more happiness from the kinesthetic production of art than others. However, the process of using art as a problem-solving tool or as a form of communication can enhance student learning and engagement in many other areas of their learning. While a traditional study of practicing art techniques can be helpful, this does not always allow for practice in visual literacy. Visual literacy helps students to read and mine for meanings within images, and by extension, within their own artworks, and the artworks of others (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). Using a curriculum

based on Visual Culture in the art classroom will expose students to visual learning in its different forms. As students are required to read, assess, and create images, they will become more fluent in this rich language of symbols.

Using Visual Culture in the art classroom may be initially difficult to transition; ultimately its benefits of reaching more students and teaching visual literacy can outweigh a curriculum that rests only in practicing art techniques. In my conversations with other teachers, school administrators and parents, there is sometimes a tone that art education in schools is a positive opportunity for students, but is not an absolute necessity. Some believe that while learning about art is valuable, learning techniques to draw, paint, and sculpt will not prove useful in the students' futures. For me, it has been interesting to hear these ideas about art education, because they reflect a belief that art education's purpose is to only teach art-making skills.

A curriculum based solely on teaching art-making skills, and excluding other facets of art production, is doomed to become obsolete and indefensible in our current educational climate (Wilson, 2003). A comprehensive study of visual art can teach students to explore, reflect, observe and envision their world (Hetland, 2013). While skills in drawing, painting, and sculpture may not serve students in the years to come, studying visual literacy can be valuable in many different future contexts. Schema developed in the brain through a study of images, combined with practicing skills, will aid students in future learning tasks, art or otherwise (Jensen, 2001). These two ways of learning in the arts –studying images and creating images— can be accomplished separately, but together can augment each other.

In other subject areas, students practice skills to succeed in future tasks. Outside of creative careers, however, the ability to draw, paint, and sculpt representationally is not

necessary to live. Though it has been argued that learning in the arts may greatly enrich a person's life, (Henley, 1998; Jensen, 2003), not knowing how to draw is not the same deficit as not knowing how to read. To be specific, the state of Ohio currently mandates the assessment of reading with its *Third Grade Reading Guarantee* (Third grade reading guarantee, 2015). Therefore, students need to learn more beneficial skills from art education if we as art educators are going to break through the myth of art being something special, or something *other* than what is expected to be taught in a public school. Many of these skills of visual literacy and visual communication are already being taught, but possibly in a hidden way. In order for a revitalization of the art education curriculum to take place, teachers need to diminish emphasis on the value of students creating products, and find ways to show the other visual and cognitive skills students are learning. This does not mean taking away traditional practices, but rather, marrying them to more contemporary pedagogy, so that art education can continue to be meaningful and relevant to students. Thus, one of the main goals I set for my curriculum and pedagogy is to include the teaching of useful skills to my students.

Designing Engaging Curricula

Implementing Visual Culture into my classroom offers multiple ways of engaging students. This is also a main proponent of Universal Design. Universal Design advocates that a teacher present material in multiple ways, and allow students to express their knowledge in just as many formats (Glass, Meyer, & Rose, 2013). Creating curricula for students with special needs by differentiating, adding, and changing the content follows the principles of Universal Design. Universal Design works because it creates a system, practice, environment or object that is easy to use for all. The same way that modifying instructions and procedures for students with special needs can help them to succeed, creating open-ended lessons based on students' likes and

desires can also level the educational playing field (Burdick, 2001). When the objectives of the lesson plan are changed to focus on the intent and meaning of the artworks students create, instead of focusing on technique, students with special needs can succeed. At the same time, shifting the focus of the art classroom to Visual Culture experiences, rather than traditional art images, can gain the interest of all students, some of whom would not normally participate enthusiastically in art-making tasks.

Adolescents at all ability levels desire a positive self-image, which is necessary to their personal and emotional development. Sometimes this self-image can be appropriated from the success and wealth of others with whom the student identifies strongly, or who are perceived positively in their peer group. When they have success in the daily routines of school, students with special needs are often able to maintain a global self-perception relatively equivalent to that of their peers without disabilities (LaBarbara, 2008). When students have success with Visual Culture Art Education, this can add to their global self-perception and consequently motivate them to participate in procedures in the art classroom.

Selecting What is Developmentally Appropriate

Because Visual Culture exists as soon as we begin to see and have emotional responses to images, it may seem as though it is appropriate for all ages of students as a basis of study. However, within a school context, some images are not appropriate for younger children to view. More specifically, many schools have written or implied policies about what kinds of content are appropriate to use in the classroom. This can affect the choices in a a teacher's lesson plans, or deter art teachers from using Visual Culture images for fear that they may violate some unspoken code. It is up to the classroom teacher to act as a curator of the images their students will view and study and that will inspire discussion and art production. Artworks typically used for study

are not specifically created for use in the classroom. Viewers can find a similar ratio of images, whether in a museum or in a magazine, that would not be deemed appropriate for the classroom. Because some images are labeled "Art," they seem to take on an importance and an academic reverence that veils them from criticism when used in the classroom. Images taken from non-art contexts, such as magazines, television or the internet, do not possess this veil, making them easier for viewers, parents and principals to scrutinize.

When beginning to structure this action research, it was important for me to take time to curate Visual Culture images for my students to view and study that would lead our discussion about the ideas of the lesson. This was especially challenging in my selection of famous celebrities and athletes for a project to lead a discussion based on celebrity images. Celebrities' culture capital often comes from their ability to capture attention using coded symbols of violence and sex (Barrett, 2003). These codes are not always as readily decipherable within the visual art examples that the students in this research had studied in the past. Therefore, I had to take extreme care in selecting images that were symbolic, but also appropriate. In the instance of a project about personified animal images it was easier to filter out some of the more adult themes that occur in this remixing practice. A huge portion of the text and image compositions I found on the internet were not appropriate to be shown in school because of their text content. Although humorous and eye catching, many of them also contained foul or sexually charged language. I was cognizant that most of my students have internet access and could have already been exposed to these images. However, in the classroom, the teacher is responsible for the content. I ended up choosing images that would capture the students' interest in discussion while also adhering to the unspoken code of standards for content in the classroom.

Development of Action Research Interests

Before formulating a central question to focus this action research, many other ideas and hypotheses were examined through preliminary self-inquiry during a previous teaching placement. In my classroom students routinely discussed the many Visual Culture experiences they had every day. They actively compared images and advertisements on their televisions, on the internet, on social networking websites, and on their cellular phones. In my own teaching journal and reflections, I began to formulate the seeds of this study. How do adolescents with special needs use Visual Culture experiences as part of their self-worth? How are these experiences helpful or worthwhile to the students' social development?

During a pilot study conducting several interviews with experts in adolescent literacy, my research interest broadened to include forms of literacy such as visual literacy and digital literacy that students with special needs use to learn and communicate. In addition, many students have a great experiential knowledge of using technology and internet-based systems to convey information to each other (Boyd, 2008; Cyari, 2011). I began to wonder: How can adolescents with special needs use Visual Culture as a bridge to learn concepts and skills? How are students able to understand and create complex images and video, while not being able to complete language and math assignments that are "at grade level" in some cases?

A connecting source of ideas developed when the concept of personal dress and costume was introduced in the *History of Costume* course I studied at Kent State University. Dress is a way for students to become a Visual Culture experience unto themselves by using and remixing clothing in the same way that the images and text are remixed, combining the inherent meanings of each piece of clothing together to create a new meaning. A student walking down a hallway listening to a specific song and wearing specific dress (hair, clothing, etc.) is creating a Visual

Culture experience for any audience they come in contact with. Students produce and consume experiences online the same way that they produce an experience with their costume and dress. This online content can be in the form of sharing images, videos and songs that are created or remixed by the students. My key research topic evolved: Are these students creating content to achieve popularity among their peers? Are the students aware that they are creating something that could be criticized as a work of art?

Primary Research Questions

At the core of my action research is whether incorporating Visual Culture into a study of visual art for my students with special needs can increase their motivation to create art and engage in art criticism and aesthetics discussions. My primary research question is:

- How can digital and Visual Culture be used as a bridge for adolescents of varying cognitive and academic backgrounds to motivate them to learn artistic behaviors?

This research question is informed by my previous teaching experiences which incubated throughout the pilot study and my graduate coursework. I was intrigued by the notion that students are able to learn and communicate using other forms of literacy, and use this learning to circumvent social barriers. Using technology and internet based systems, students with special needs could develop ways of expressing themselves outside traditional written and spoken language. Using Visual Culture to motivate students to participate in the artistic process may help them to create on the same level as their general peers. A second idea came as a result of my observations of the adolescent students participating in my research at my new teaching placement:

- How can teachers deliver a Visual Culture art curriculum to adolescent students of varying cognitive and academic backgrounds, while remaining responsive to their developmental needs?

Transposing the projects I had initially written for an older adolescent group, it was apparent that many activities and questioning strategies would need to be changed to accommodate the new group of students. At ages 10 and 11 years, the participants in this study are classified as adolescent, according to the World Health Organization, which defines adolescence as taking place between 10 and 19 years (WHO, 2014). In this study the participants are just beginning this developmental stage. Reworking these projects to reach a different age group of students caused me to question the content I had originally proposed.

Definition of Terms

In the process of designing and conducting this action research, several common threads were present throughout the data and observations collected. The three terms below help to frame the body of this thesis, defining the categories into which the literature review, data representation, research findings and discussion are divided. Focusing on these three ideas helped me to unravel the experiences I had with the two student groups during this study.

Inclusion

One impactful movement in art education is the inclusion of students with special needs in the art education classroom. In 1975, Congress passed the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* which mandated that all students are provided with a thorough and efficient education (public law 108-446). Students with special needs are being more rapidly identified, and in greater numbers, so it makes sense for art teachers to be prepared to educate these students in their classrooms. Teaching these students starts not with the knowledge of their ability level,

but with the commitment to the values of art education (Gerber & Guay, 2006, p. 5). It is important for teachers to create individualized assignments with open-ended goals, so that each student can participate in a way that is developmentally appropriate. It is also important for teachers to create a "least-restrictive" environment for the student. This term means that each student should legally be included in the regular education classroom as much as is appropriate.

Visual Culture Experiences

Visual Culture, previously mentioned in this chapter, is the mass of images that we see each day. An influx of material culture has occurred over the last few decades, although humans have always collected images (Burdick, 2010). Art education has been impacted by this development, because much of the material culture of our human civilization is being perceived in images instead of text. These images contain meanings that are related to the messages they communicate.

These Visual Culture experiences are bound by different aesthetic rules than those present in the traditional art room (Ciampaglia, 2012; Freedman et al, 2013). Young people construct definitions of what makes a good or a bad Visual Culture experience based on their own ideas, and the ideas of their peers. Looking at a piece of art or an advertisement can be equally relevant Visual Culture experiences, as long as the audience can describe a meaningful experience with both objects. In a typical study of art, students are expected to look for deep meaning in one artwork, or a careful selection of artworks which may be painstakingly created over countless hours by one artist in an isolated studio. In a study of culturally relevant images, many mass produced images are examined, and the emotions, memories, and ideas of the audience are collected as "Visual Culture experiences" (Duncum, 2004).

Culture Capital

Culture capital can be defined as the acquired knowledge which helps students to understand cultural codes and interpret "unspoken language in their culture" (Martin, 2003, p 211). This capital includes the collection of a student's ethnic, social, and geographic knowledge that is inherent in their development of learning. McLoed described this as "knowledge, disposition and skills [which] are passed from one generation to the next" (2009, p 98). This could also include the students' outward appearance or dress, such as the accumulation of clothing, shoes, hairstyles, and other items which are specific to a person or cultural group (Johnson, Torntore, & Eicher, 2003).

Assumptions and Limitations

The purpose of my action research study, which focuses on young adolescents and their relationship with Visual Culture, is to identify how these students are motivated by collecting and experiencing Visual Culture. As an undercurrent, I also examined looking at whether this participant group of fourth grade students collects Visual Culture experiences to maintain or construct a positive self-image. The selected group consists of students with special needs who have different ways of communicating than other students. Many have deficits in written and spoken language, and could be benefited by a connection to Visual Culture in the classroom. I assume that because the avenues of communication are digitally based or arts-based, they are more easily accessible to these types of students with varied developmental ability levels. Many of them may not have the cognitive skills to consistently form complete written or mathematical thoughts, but they are able to draw pictures, write songs, and edit videos that express their ideas. If they do produce and consume Visual Culture as a means to socially interact with each other,

and also promote their self-worth, I can know for sure to use this in the future as a motivator for them to develop and grow socially.

Initially, this research was supposed to take place in a high school classroom with many students who identified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Mild Autism, or Emotional Disturbance. The study was then modified for a fourth grade classroom where students with cognitive delay, as well as some students identified as gifted, were included. The change of age range places these students in early adolescence, as they are just beginning to experience the development of their identity based around their personality and interests (Wachowiak & Clements, 2009). At this particular site, fourth grade is the highest grade level students reach before moving on to intermediate school. They are becoming more sensitive to their peers' opinions, and may show hesitance to make art (Hurwitz & Day, 2001). In some behavioral ways, the participants in this research do resemble the initial high-school-aged group, but their development is at a much lower level. Switching from one end of the spectrum of adolescent development to another may have impacted this research in different ways because student's awareness of the power of Visual Culture experiences has just begun.

Another limitation is the amount of time spent with students during this study. Students in this action research are required to have art all year, and have art instruction for 35 minutes once every four days. The number of students studied increased from 15 students in a high school classroom to 70 students in two fourth grade classrooms, diminishing the individual time spent with students. While these limitations are not detrimental to the study, I noted that the outcomes of discussions and art-making activities differed because of time and quantity of students. This action research is meant to provide guidance for others in similar situations with the intention of eventually transferring some research findings to other classrooms. As such, it

was beneficial to conduct this study with these limitations because many other art teachers work within the same time constraints and with large class sizes.

Brief Summary

This action research is meant to investigate the use of Visual Culture as a tool for engaging adolescents with special needs in art-making activities. In an inclusion classroom where students of differing abilities learn simultaneously regardless of their ability, it can be difficult for art educators to design projects where all students can participate equally. Using a curriculum centered around Visual Culture Art Education, many students will be motivated to share their personal experiences, and create artworks based on personal experiences with Visual Culture.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter will outline the related research that is interwoven to construct basis for this thesis. Many of the themes presented in this introduction may initially seem unrelated to each other, meaning that the ideas of visual culture, universal design, and motivating adolescents exist in separate fields. In this study, the classroom site acts as a place for all these things to become interwoven in the lives of students. Students are having Visual Culture experiences and interacting with technology on a daily basis, designing and delivering lessons that include these concepts can help students connect to more meaningful and relevant art making experiences.

Research Related to Inclusion

Research on the topic of special needs students and their interactions with Visual Culture is rare, possibly because the study of Visual Culture in art education is relatively new in its formation. However, a breadth of literature does exist about these subjects separately, and in different fields. Studies of students with special needs and their sense of identity are very prevalent, but many researchers only focus on the students in an elementary school setting.

Adolescent students with special needs, like general students, are strongly aware of the need to build a sense of identity, and that they need to have positive interpersonal communication with their peers. Students with special needs sometimes have difficulty using traditional reading, writing and even speech as communication. Some students may have a disability that makes it difficult to read other student's body language and facial features. These difficulties lead to students looking for alternative ways to build interpersonal relationships with

their peers. Alternate forms of communication such as drawings, comics, video, and online communication can be used to satisfy this need (Boyd, 2009; Freedman et al, 2013).

Because students with special needs cannot consistently communicate effectively through traditional forms of reading, writing, and speech, it is important to give them alternate ways to express themselves. In *Exceptional children, exceptional art*, David Henley (1993) describes the creation of art is an outlet for all the experiences, feelings and ideas that a student with disabilities cannot express. These forms of expression are important because without them the student would not be able to express these feelings and ideas, and would become weighted down with the burden of carrying all this extra, if intangible, baggage. The creation of artworks allows students at all ability levels to purge themselves of this excess weight so they can start afresh in their thinking. This action also allows them to process troubling feelings and ideas that become more upsetting if remain unexpressed. The action of creating is particularly therapeutic for these students, and empowers them to express ideas or feelings they would not normally have the ability to using writing or speech (Henley, 1992).

Adolescent Students With Special Needs

As students become adolescents, their focus turns inward as they begin to develop new ideas about themselves and their identity (Clemens & Wachowiak, 2010). Things that were once important or interesting may become irrelevant or undesirable. Experiences of childhood may become replaced by new desires, hormonal urges, and the need for interpersonal communication (Boyd, 2010; Cyari, 2011). A classical or formalist study of art may not be interesting and engaging for adolescent students, if only because the student is now motivated by completely different stimuli. If art teachers do not provide a program of study that is intrinsically interesting

to the students, and focuses on ideas and images that the students can relate to, these programs may become obsolete (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

With the increasing number of students with special needs included into general classrooms, it is important for teachers to know how all their students can be successful in arts learning. Teaching these students starts not with the knowledge of their ability level, but commitment to the values of art education (Gerber & Guay, 2006, p. 5). It is important for art educators to create individualized assignments with open-ended goals, so that each student can participate in a way that is developmentally appropriate. A least restrictive environment is important for participation in art, and includes the modification of tools and processes to adapt to students' needs. A student's attention level, interpersonal skills, or communication channels are not assessed by scientific norms, but by what we as a society believe are normal. In this view of ability, all students would seem to have special needs, because no one student can perfectly encapsulate this idea of normal (LaBarbera, 2008; Mears & Stevenson, 2006;).

Special Needs Foci In This Research

In this thesis study, the research focus is placed on students with cognitive and behavioral disorders, in particular, students identified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. The American Psychological Association categorizes ADHD as a behavioral spectrum disorder (2011). People identified with this disorder may be affected in different ways, but display one or more of several common symptoms. Students with ADHD are often categorized as impulsive, hyperactive, and display behaviors that are sometimes not appropriate for their age group. This disorder may appear to negatively affect cognitive performance in students when compared to students not identified. In schools, this may result in poor retention of information, inadequate performance on assessments, and inability to display appropriate social skills. These

students are prone to physical and verbal outbursts and may disregard directions of teachers and other adults. Students with ADHD may also be easily daunted by long-term tasks such as reading, due to their decreased attention level. It is common for these students to perform below grade level in reading, writing, and math assessments; and usually require one-on-one instruction or adaptive methods of teaching to fully understand concepts (Perry & Franklin, 2006).

Because of these circumstances, students with ADHD are found to spend more time involved in independent activities such as watching television, playing video games, and surfing the internet. These activities are enjoyable to these students, because they match their levels of attention. In addition, the student controls the type of media and the time spent on a specific task. Students with ADHD were found to spend large amounts of time watching television in a study by Acevedo-Polakovich, Lorch, and Milich (2007). These students also had more electronics equipment in their homes, and had less available reading materials. The authors stated that there may be different reasons for this correlation. One reason was that parents of these children used television as a management tool for their child's hyperactivity. Another reason was that students with ADHD were more able to understand the content and language of television programs more easily than reading materials. In both instances it was found that watching television was an activity that the subjects could engage in for long periods of time without becoming restless.

Another focus during this action research is students identified as gifted. In this action research setting, gifted students are identified through their math and reading scores on standardized tests, and these students are taken out of the general classroom to work on higher-level assignments and special projects. While these students are defined as gifted in their classroom, this giftedness may not always transfer to art. Some correlations to art education exist with the identification of gifted students and their abilities to draw and understand visual

languages at an earlier age than their general peers (Alexander, 1981). Gifted students can be encouraged to translate their proficiency for problem solving and spatial reasoning through a curriculum that is open ended, and challenges them to stretch assignment guidelines to new levels (Wachowiak & Clements, 2009). These students should be encouraged to learn concepts on their own when possible to deepen their understanding of ideas and processes (Hurwitz & Day, 2001)

Art Education as Therapeutic Practice

Activities in the visual arts have been proven to help students with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder succeed socially and academically. Training and creativity in the visual arts is shown to help students who normally suffer from inattention and poor motivation to find success. These students may not have sufficient skills to sit still and do assigned tasks in the classroom, but may be motivated to attend to tasks that require movement. Manipulating art materials such as paint, pencils and clay is shown to focus the students' attention on a specific activity for extended periods of time in a way that other reading or written activities would not. In addition, while engaging in art activities, students with ADHD are more likely to interact with peers. Art teachers and therapists use art-making activities to inspire discussions between students, and allow them to reflect on how they use interpersonal skills. Because student behaviors are more manageable during art related activities, some therapists use this time to model appropriate social interactions between the student and teacher, and the student and their peers (Henley 1998).

Many times students with special needs cannot express their emotions, wants, and needs through traditional written or spoken language. If left untapped, these unexpressed feelings could become dangerous to these students, causing them to have feelings of depression or aggression

(Henley, 1998). Through a program of creating and looking at visual arts, students with special needs can release some of these feelings through creative expression using a variety of materials. David Henley (1988) refers to this release of emotions as sublimation, in which emotional energy is expelled in the creation of artwork. Many times, these activities could just be the kinesthetic joy of drawing on a piece of paper (Henley, 1992). However, as students gain skills to use these materials more effectively they begin to express more complex ideas. Students with ADHD may be able to slow their thought processes and maintain better focus while they are creating an artwork more than they could doing other activities. Some studies show a decrease of undesirable behaviors that are associated with the student's disability while they are engaged in the art-making practice (Koo, 2010). The act of creating art becomes a therapeutic practice, and students feel more calm and at-ease while they are creating.

Inclusion in Practice

In the contemporary classroom, students with special needs learn alongside their general peers, and are exposed to the same content, as it is appropriate. Teachers must use strategies to engage the whole classroom, and make sure all students receive similar instruction and are able to meet state and federal imposed standards. In the art classroom, this can be accomplished through using open-ended lessons that are based on broad themes. Students are allowed to create artworks based on their own ideas, feelings, and experiences that are personally meaningful to them. Students with a variety of ability levels can potentially learn and create together in a community that promotes respect and creativity (Henley, 1998). However, the teacher must be able to come up with projects that are still based on assessment, and tied into standards the teacher, school, or state creates (ODE Content Standards for Fine Arts, 2014). Providing access

to students with special needs means that they will go through the process of imagining, creating, and assessing their artworks along with their general classmates.

Visual Culture in the Universal Design Framework

Because students with special needs often have fascinations that deal with Visual Culture Experiences, these can be used as one of the multiple methods of instruction prescribed by the Universal Design Framework (Glass, et al. 2013). Often these students will not engage in meaningful ways with images and experiences presented to them in the art classroom, but will instead create their own art experiences that are do not follow the curriculum (Burdick 2009). In a study, students developed tools for identifying messages in our global and visual world and can use their studies in Visual Culture to become more "multiliterate" (Duncum, 2004, p. 253). This term mirrors the Universal Design framework of having students decode symbols, images and text when representing and creating (CAST, 2011).

Another concept that is emphasized within Universal Design is the idea of student choice. When students are asked to make decisions about the outcome of their art, they will be more inspired to create artworks (Burdick, 2011; Freedman et al, 2013; Gerber & Guay, 2010; Henley, 1992;). Students with special needs are more likely to have interests and fascinations that will not align with typical art lessons, and may choose not to participate. When art teachers ask students with special needs to make choices about the outcome of their projects, these students can be empowered to create their own artworks on their own terms. Students' interest is an integral part of an adolescent inclusion classroom. If every child is to be educated in the arts, than art teachers can no longer rely on the intrinsic, kinesthetic joy of drawing a picture, playing the trombone, or doing a dance to continue as students become adolescents. There are much more interesting

things than artistic experiences in an adolescent's life as they grow and develop new feelings, emotions, friendships, and identities (Boyd, 2008; Cyari, 2011; Nakajima, 2012).

In the presentation "Attention, Please!" by Hoeptner-Poling and Dorff (2011) at the NAEA convention, these two researchers recommended modifying instruction so that students would have quick transitions between activities without a lot of downtime. This would stimulate the students, and also become an embedded behavioral monitor. Information should be presented in a variety of ways to help students better understand concepts. This is consistent with the standards for Universal Design, which state that students should be able to learn express themselves in different modes (http://www.cast.org/udl/, 2014). Universal design and the visual arts are appropriate partners, because a study in the visual arts can offer students a variety of means to represent, explore and explain their learning (Glass et al, 2013). Students with special needs require far more supports and differentiated strategies to their instruction. Using universal design to enhance the quality of instruction for all students in the included classroom can also help to give these students alternate routes to understanding.

Research Relating to Visual Culture

As art educators, we can help students to peel off the glossy veneer of their Visual Culture experiences, and encourage them to find the meanings and messages underneath. Discussions of power, ideology and representation of the students' world can take place within this framework more easily than when looking at art images (Duncum, 2008). Issues of power can be discussed by looking at mass media images that feed on the social hierarchy that is both real and imagined. Students look at images every day which challenge the structure of power between many different groups of people. Representation relates to how students view and find meaning in different images that they identify with. Cultural groups are represented and

misrepresented on a daily basis to students, and they are impacted more so by these images because the students can easily relate to them in a familliar way (Duncum, 2010).

In conjunction with this research's emphasis on arts based learning – teaching skills through the art-making process - and therapy, educational theorists have identified the study of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) being one of the most important, because students interact with so many images in their daily lives. Adolescent students are fully immersed in this Visual Culture, despite their various learning and physical ability levels. Because they participate in watching television, using the internet, and interpersonal communication through social media, it is fully appropriate to discuss Visual Culture in the classroom and use it as the basis for lessons. Students with special needs, have different ways of seeing, and different ways of learning, so they may not perceive Visual Culture in the same way as general students. VCAE helps students to look at and dissect images with which they interact. These may not necessarily be art images, but they are still relevant. Traditionally, images thought of as art are created by artists, hang in galleries, and are treated as treasures by many. Visual Culture images are more relevant to students than what is traditionally defined as art because they more directly represent students' lives and experiences (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Freedman et al, 2013; Gude, 2000).

Visual Culture as Motivation

One way of helping included students to engage in the art classroom is by allowing their interests to guide curriculum development. In a presentation at the NAEA National Conference about students with autism spectrum disorder, Corrie Burdick (2011) challenged educators to think of students' fascinations with objects or ideas not as a hindrance to their art education, but as a door to a more relevant creative practice (Burdick, 2011). Many students in adolescence are increasingly interested in looking at and categorizing Visual Culture experiences. In this stage of

development, they are more aware of themselves, and how media they consume can help them construct an identity (Duncum, 2008). These meaningful Visual Culture images take on new ideas when viewed through different social, political and cultural lenses, much like the study of art. These images are separate from Art images in that they are fleeting and ephemeral, and the experience a person has with the image is more important than the image itself (Duncum, 2004). These experiences can include art, but are wide enough to include electronic media, such as online image and video sharing, and video games (Keifer-Boyd, Amfurgy & Knight, 2007).

Students are having art and aesthetic experiences every day that are not connected to the specific experience of an art classroom. Students look at signs, ride in cars, watch television, use the internet, play videogames, go shopping, and share messages with each other, and all these activities can be image based (Boyd, 2010; Cyari, 2011; Duncum, 2004; Smith, 2003). Visual Culture Art Education encourages teachers to use new images as well as technologies and cultural experiences that are specific to our 21st century lives (Tavin & Hausman, 2004). This multitude of new images can be utilized to inspire art-related discussion that can span the scope of social issues in our world (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). If these experiences are seen as separate from what students study in the art classroom, than art teachers are not valuing these experiences, and by extension, not valuing out students' lives. Although some students may make the connection that they are having an aesthetic experience in their everyday lives, many will separate their experiences in the classroom with what happens when they leave. When adolescent students are not engaged with what happens in the classroom, they are less likely to absorb content or instruction, and less likely to put emphasis on what teachers want them to learn.

Integrating Visual Culture as a means of engaging students in art, teachers can benefit from taking on the role of Visual Culture theorist, who looks at trends in the variety of images and how students react to them (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). The research shows that students of all ages are having Visual Culture experiences all the time, and these experiences are meaningful to each student (Duncum, 2010; Freedman et al, 2013). In general, school age students interact with many images every day, whether or not they seek out these experiences. Students spend an average of 4 hours a day interacting with some type of electronic media, including television, video games, or the Internet (Baumgartner, Weeda, van der Heijden, & Huizinga, 2014; Cooper, Uller, Pettifer, & Stolc, 2009). In their interactions with all of these sources, students see thousands of images each week, sometimes in a single day. Although they have many choices about what media they consume, companies and businesses routinely attempt to get their attention through a variety of means (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

Research Relating to Culture Capital

In a 2008 case study of alternative schools in Sweden, Susanne Brüggen found that adolescent students identified as having learning difficulties benefitted from the ability to work in smaller settings and build positive relationships with their peers. These relationships helped them to build the culture capital they needed to succeed in their coursework, and feel empowered as individuals, and the students were able to have success in their later school careers. In his book, *Ain't no makin' it,* Willam McLoed (2009) describes two disparate groups of teenagers whose lives progress in different ways because of their varied culture capital. One group of students is able to make informed decisions about their lives, and is successful both in academics and athletics, while another group's members commit crimes and abuse drugs, which the researcher describes as a lack of motivation to create a better life. In the comparison between

these two groups, McLoed describes the difference between the two groups as a deficit of experiences and personal relationships that would lead them to achieve more as students and citizens.

While popular images and ephemera may seems trivial to outside observers, these Visual Culture experiences are helping students build culture capital, and communicate in the cultural language of the classroom (Martin, 2003). In order to communicate in these cultural languages, students must know the rules of using these images, but also act creatively to put these images into new situations (Freedman et al, 2013). Coming up with new and different juxtapositions of images can increase a person's culture capital or popularity online by drawing meaning from several different sources to create a new idea (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

Expanding further into this notion of collecting experiences to create culture capital, is the pervasiveness of Material Culture, which encompasses Visual Culture, but is not limited to just the visual aspect of the experience. Students collect Material Culture objects in the form of toys, video games, and clothing which they use to help construct their identity and this behavior can expand to experiences online (Boyd, 2008). Bringing Material Culture into the classroom can provide spaces for students to learn about their contemporary world (Bolin & Blandy, 2003).

Creating identities with Visual and Digital Culture

In addition to being inundated with Visual Culture images since their childhood, students with special needs have also been witnesses to a major growth in interactive technology. In the context of the internet, students with special needs are freer to express themselves in ways that are not always related to reading or speech. Some skill working in digital modes must be apparent for students to interact online, which sometimes referred to as digital literacy. Students with special needs in middle school in 2013 will have spent most of their lives interacting with

computers in some way (Boyd, 2008; Cyari, 2011.) Also, these students (incongruent with their economic status) will have access to a phone or other portable device that can connect to the internet. Using these digital literacy skills, students are able to connect with each other online through many different means. One of the most common form of digital literacy shown is using social networking websites like *Facebook* to talk to friends and peers, and "like" things that they post in their profile (Cyari, 2011). These social networking websites are an opportunity for these students to create an identity for themselves that is controlled by them and the things they post or create on the internet, but is also informed by their public interactions with others (Boyd, 2008).

Another way students interact with the internet is to participate in the re-contextualizing of phenomenon, or "memes" (Feeman et al., 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Nakajima, 2012). A Meme is an internet phenomenon, usually in visual format. These "memes", usually based on visual images and text, can be combined with different text to have different meanings. Students can use these "memes" to express ideas about themselves, or create jokes that only they and their peers will understand. These artifacts are created and distributed over the internet using many different social media platforms. For the purposes of this study, a meme is an image with superimposed text which creates a meaning that is more interesting than the image itself. Memes are often created to be humorous or entertain others. Below are two such occurrences of these images (Figure 1). Both are based on a picture of a bear, but the two different creators have assigned a different meaning by using different text. In both of the images, the bear is personified to make it more accessible to the viewing audience. This personification of animals phenomenon began taking place as early as 2006, but is based on a tradition of personifying animals in art and literature for countless years.

Figure 1a-b: A personified animal image. Source: http://icanhas.cheezburger.com/

Gaining Culture Capital Online

Because of this hyper-connectivity of people online, Visual Culture objects and ideas can become very popular over a short time period. Within months of its release in July of 2012, the video for the Korean Pop song Gangnam Style became the most watched video in the United States, outperforming decades of videos posted online (Ramsay & Klip, 2012). This video, which portrays Korean recording artist "Psy" doing a horse galloping dance and rapping to a simple back beat has been watched hundreds of thousands of times, and has also been the subject of parody from independent users to other famous artists like Yoko Ono. Suddenly, participation in this phenomenon is a way to gain importance or notice within communities on the internet (Boyd, 2008).

Young people construct definitions of what makes a good or a bad Visual Culture experience based on their own ideas, and the ideas of their peers (Ciampaglia, 2012; Freedman et al, 2013). Using these experiences in art education is important because the students are already studying images, but may not have the vocabulary to fully deconstruct or unpack the variety of images they encounter. Art educators are skilled in teaching students to look at and evaluate art images, and can do the same thing to Visual Culture experiences. The aesthetic criteria needed to evaluate these experiences may be different than those of Fine Arts, but the process of

questioning, examining, and reflecting on images is the same. A study of Visual Culture incorporates images that students see every day, but also allows for students to examine and unpack these images (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

Collecting and Producing Visual Culture

Students are also producing the Visual Culture experiences they and their peers are having each day (Nakajima, 2012). This new generation of students is not afraid to use Visual Culture as a language, sending messages back and forth over our increasingly digital landscape. These students are the first generation to have life-long access to the internet, and thus have a stronger and deeper digital literacy than the previous generation (Boyd, 2008). Much of this digital dialogue takes place in the form of *remixing*, in which two or more types of media are collaged and combined together with other elements and then published. These remixed artifacts can be sounds, but are often images or video (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). When students select and remix images and texts together that they enjoy, they can create new images that may have different meanings than the original source materials. It is important, however for students to have tools to mine the deeper meanings in these images, and understand the concept that *to see is not necessarily to believe* (Struken & Cartwright, 2001).

Students develop collections of Visual Culture experiences that they may feel help to define them as people. A student's collection of Visual Culture experiences can help them to create an identity that is related to their likes, things they find visually interesting, or Visual Culture experiences that they share with friends (Boyd, 2008; Cyari, 2011; Nakajima, 2012). Students will also create Visual Culture learning groups based on shared interests, or share experiences. These groups may be centered around a different type of art production activity or collection activity that is popular among these individuals (Ciampaglia, 2012). For example,

groups of students may all enjoy creating fictional artworks that relate to a certain television show, comic, or film. These artworks are called “fan art”, and are usually based on actions or anticipated actions of the characters in the original work. Students in these fan art communities communicate with each other, often through social networking or blogs, to share these artworks (Freedman et al, 2013). A common fan art activity for all the students in my class was drawing *creepers* (Figure 2), which are fictional antagonists from the video game *Minecraft* (2011) that explode when touched.

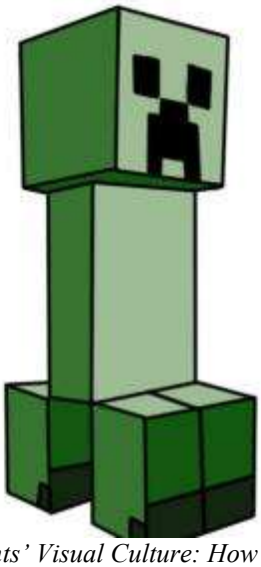

Figure 2. An example of students’ Visual Culture: How to draw a Creeper ™ step four. Source: http://www.wikihow.com/Draw-a-Creeper

Brief Summary

This new generation of students was born with access to the internet, and the wealth of Visual Culture experiences that exist within this other space. Students with special needs have strong affinities for specific Visual Culture artifacts, and collect them to share with their peers. Not only do students collect Visual Culture experiences, but they also participate in the creation of media online to share with peers and others through images, music, and videos. These media artifacts can be taken by other peers and remixed and sent back into public space online to further the conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This chapter describes the design and plan for the research conducted in this study. Action research was chosen as a methodology for this study in order to focus on a relatively small group of individual students for a short time (Frankel & Wallen, 2013), amidst my full teaching schedule with 700 students each week. In addition, action research can be directly beneficial to my current teaching practices, allowing me to collect data from students, myself as a teacher and the classroom environment all at once. This rich collection of qualitative information can be directly applied to the researcher's pedagogy, and can positively affect change in a timely manner (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2003). Qualitative data was collected during several lessons and activities designed using Visual Culture as a focus, and used to construct a narrative about the experiences of the students, the teacher, and the classroom. The student groups studied were two classrooms where adolescent students with special needs are included. Within the subsequent description of these chapters, I will refer to myself as the "action researcher" whenever my dual role as teacher and investigator were equally prominent in this study.

Instruction as Research

At this teaching placement, I am one of three art teachers spread across six buildings in the district who teach students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Within this art teacher team, the teachers have set individual and group goals to adapt and modify our instruction. While I

hope to be continually reflective in my teaching practice, it is not uncommon for this to be re-active rather than pro-active. In a normal class cycle, I would teach up to four classes of a single grade level, allowing me to subtly make changes from one group to the next depending on the successes or failures of the previous session. The changes of a word or phrase in a question, or the alerting of steps in a demonstration of a skill happen as one group of students shows more or less understanding. These changes and switches are usually automatic, and happen sometimes without notice. Using an action research framework allowed for an examination of these internal reflexes, shifting them outward for reflection and evaluation (Holly, et. al. 2003).

This action research methodology also helped to justify my use of Visual Culture within my own pedagogy. With the large amount of access to these students as their teacher, I was able to collect observations both in the classroom and outside, and also with other teachers in the building to construct a more complete narrative of the effects VCAE had on these students. When I talk with other art teachers, and read other research (Smith 2003, Tavin & Hausman, 2004), there is debate over whether Visual Culture is included. However, I have always used Visual Culture in some way in my lessons. My action research shed light on why VCAE is more suited to my method of instruction, and why this practice is comfortable and logical to me to use as a motivational tool for my students.

Narrative Construction of Research Data

As the research progressed and data was collected in this study, it seemed the most logical to create a narrative of the students interaction with Visual Culture in the art classroom. Borrowing conventions from narrative inquiry is useful in this case, because the action research is "describing an interpretation of the participants' experiences" (Frankel & Wallen, 2013, p. 427). The action researcher bears the burden of crystallizing the events, collected audio and

video data, and artifacts into a version that is digestible for other educators in the field (Holly et. al, 2003). Finally, narrative in this study acts as a structure to construct a basis of understanding from a seemingly chaotic environment – the art classroom – which contains multitudes of sensations, thoughts and emotions. Teaching in this environment requires shifting from minute to minute, and a narrative inquiry can accommodate this shifting and searching that a teacher must do on a daily basis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A clear narrative can act as a needle threading its way through this din, carrying with it thin threads of purpose, interwoven to create something useful.

The action research has worked predominately with students with special needs (students on an Individualized Education Plan), and has limited experiences in a general classroom with which to compare these experiences. In addition to having special needs, many also came from low-income households and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Some students were from minority backgrounds, and most students were male. Because many personal observations were recorded on this population of students, it is hard to say which factor or combination of factors lead to the students' behavior of collecting Visual Culture objects. This behavior may not exist in other populations of adolescent students with special needs, and in order to transition to working with a new group of students in this action research, preliminary interviews with some educators to determine whether the population will respond to the study were necessary. This process included observations of students, teaching journals, and field texts created by conversations online with friends and peer teachers. Next, the action researcher explored ways to unravel all these different threads.

Setting

This action research took place over a two-month span at an elementary school in East Central Ohio. The subjects include two classes of fourth grade students. Each class period is 35 minutes long during the morning of the school day. The action researcher rotates between three school sites, and this was the first year teaching in this placement. Teachers of Art, Music, Physical Education, and Library rotate each class of students on a four day cycle, meaning that students had Visual Art instruction every fourth school day. Because of this schedule, students may have two art periods in one week, but may also miss an art period in the rotation because of a calamity day, or a special assembly or activity. At this particular site, the administration is adamant about all students going to their required Arts class times, and changed daily schedules as needed.

This district contains demographics of students who are from urban, suburban, and rural areas of Stark County, Ohio. Students may come from considerably wealthy or poverty level living situations, depending on their location within the district.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling. While there are two schools in the action researcher's current teaching placement, the classes in this study were chosen because they best represent groups of students where students with special needs as well as gifted students are all included together. The choice to work with students at this specific school placement was further encouraged by the convenience to contact the students inside and outside of the art room, and to talk with other faculty they saw throughout their school day. Because the students in this setting are socialized within this group, and possibly have been in this group for several years before my arrival as their teacher, it seemed useful to use these pre-

arranged classroom groups for this study. The following paragraph lists some general characteristics of the students included in the sampling, and more details will be elaborated as collected data in Chapter Four.

The sample included students in two fourth grade classrooms, and the students ranged from 10-11 years of age, including several students with special needs. Special needs in this school setting refers to a student with a physical, cognitive, or behavioral disorder that is documented with an IEP (individual education plan) or 504 behavioral intervention plan. Each classroom contained approximately 34 students, but fluctuated with students arriving and leaving the group within the time period. The students came from mostly middle class living situations, but some were lower income than others. In this particular school, 30% of students are on free and reduced lunch. This school site also serves to house the district's cognitive delay unit for students in grades k-4. Cognitive delay can include, but is not limited to, students with Autism spectrum disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, and language or numeral difficulties such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. Other school buildings house units for students diagnosed with severe physical disorders, and students with emotional disturbance, though these may overlap. Students identified with these conditions are pulled out of their homeroom class to work in small groups with an intervention specialist. Other students within this group of participants have been identified as being *gifted,* and also receive small group instruction with a gifted specialist.

While these students are in groups of 25-27 students with similar ability levels most of the day, they were all together at once for the activities in this study. During the 35-minute periods, students all receive *specials* instruction which is the general term for Music, Art, Physical, and Library education classes. While these students generally know each other through other community times like lunch and recess, preliminary observations showed that the social

dynamics would not be the same as in the students' homeroom class, because of the larger number of students, and the lack of intervention for students who need extra support to complete learning tasks. In one of the classes, an instructional aide was present to assist with a student with autism, but did not help other students. In the other class, an instructional aide was sometimes present, but did not stay for the whole period, or only came to de-escalate one student with emotional disturbance.

Previously, these students were taught art in a completely different way that focused on skills and craft. From conversations with students, they were rarely taught to look at and analyze images, but rather to create projects based on the teacher's studio model. This was a deficit to overcome as a curriculum based on Visual Culture Art Education was introduced to this group.

Projects and Procedures

Using an Action Research framework, the action researcher-teacher developed and instructed several lessons that are related to the Visual Culture that students may experience through the transmission of images on the internet to two classes. These images may also come from television advertisement but are commonly spread through various social media websites. In the first lesson of the first project, students from both classes looked at images of celebrities, and discuss how this quality of celebrity is portrayed in the images through visual qualities. Over four 35 minute-periods separately, both the classes viewed similar images of celebrities taken for publication in magazines, and discussed what visual attributes contributed to that person's identity as a famous person. The students then used these visual symbols discovered to create new, celebrity versions of themselves based on some particular talent or skill they have. The students could choose to have possessed any skill or talent that would make them famous such as creative or athletic ability.

In a subsequent project, the action researcher discussed creativity that occurs on the internet through the remixing of images and text. Over another four 35 minute-periods separately, the class discussed several examples of text and image artifacts found online that depict an animal. The text superimposed on these images most often represented something the animal was saying or thinking. The images were manipulated in subsequent viewings to have no text, or student created text. This was a way of trying to illustrate how different juxtapositions of text and images would create different meanings. These images are often referred to as remixes. A remix is a combination or transformation of images in which the overall meaning of the images is either fused or changed completely (Gude, 2004). Students were then asked to create their own artworks which were based on animals they were most interested in. Students used tablet computers and other classroom technology to research and draw their animals, and also look up other text/image artifacts already created online. Then each student planned and created a text and image composition featuring their chosen animal.

In a critique activity, the students used the internet structure of leaving anonymous feedback or, "likes," to comment on each other's artwork. A "Like" is an action a user can take on an online content sharing service to show their their approval for an image, text, or video. Users can click an icon next to the content to add a "Like" to these items by clicking on an icon, usually a thumbs up sign (👍), or a heart shape (♥). The students each received a critique sheet (Figure 3) with thumbs up symbols (👍) followed by lines where students can write anonymous comments about each other's work. Students were also able to circle smaller thumbs up symbols (👍) underneath comments that students write in order to affirm those comments. During a single class period, students cycled around the room and wrote anonymous, positive feedback on other's critique sheets, and circled symbols of feedback they felt they agreed with that was

written by others. After this activity, students read aloud their favorite feedback they received in a large group discussion.

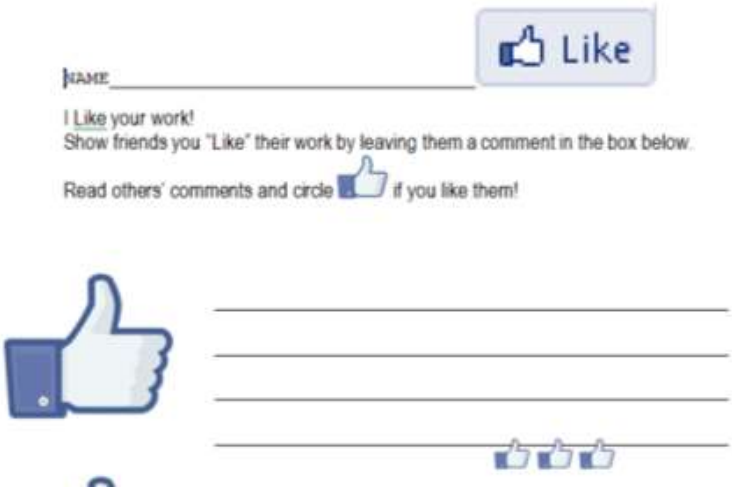

Figure 3. The "Like Critique" assessment tool.

Data Collection

The instruction for this research took place over three months, from October 2013 to December, 2013. Qualitative data was collected including field notes about the experiences working within the class. These notes were either written or audiotaped after the two class sessions completed, or each day after school. Audiotaped reflections were more useful because the action researcher was able to more thoroughly express the success of the lessons that day, but also hear voice intonations expressing underlying happiness or stress. Reflections on the lesson plan, and student responses to the work produced by themselves and their classmates were collected during informal critiques before a teacher demonstration, and during a formal critique at the end of the project.

Discussions about images and artworks were recorded in video and audio format to collect a documentation of these responses. Institutional constraints of the research limited the video recording to just the teacher, but students' voices were recorded on the video to be played

back later. An audio recording was also made of each discussion. Each class period lasted for 35 minutes, and was recorded with an audio recorder placed in the center of the classroom. The introductions to each day's lesson which sometimes took up to 15 minutes of instructional time, were videotaped with the camera focused only on the action researcher per the stipulations of the institutional review board of Kent State University. Each student's parent signed a consent form for their student to be involved in this research, and be audiotaped. Students understood the basic concept that they would be taped, and these audio recordings would be played back later by the action researcher. Student artwork and writing samples were collected and photographed using a tablet computer for review later.

Data Analysis

The data from this study were analyzed and compared to find trends that relate to each other among the student responses, and relate to the literature reviewed for this study. This data were also compared with themes found in interviews from educators and researchers during the pilot study to see how the data from this purposive sample fits into a larger context. These interviews with scholars of adolescent and special needs learning were examined again and presented in chapter five.

The action researcher used selective transcription of the audio and videotaped discussions to find common threads in data that related to the literature, interviews with experts, and previous experiences. Samples of students' artwork were examined by the action researcher in conjunction with these taped discussions to find connections in the perceived success of the discussion and the outcome of the artworks that the students created during this research. Regular observations and interactions with the students helped the action researcher ascertain individual student's perceived success level with their project. The student's anonymous

feedback was also considered in this assessment of the projects. The students' writing was examined for patterns in speech and style, such as use of adjectives and formation of complete sentences, in which they wrote their positive comments.

Role of the Researcher

The action researcher acted as an interpreter and guide for the students on this mission to think of images in new ways. Many students in this focus group have not been asked to look at images in a critical way by their previous teachers. These students may have seen works of art that went along with a lesson, or looked at artworks in a museum context, but may have not been asked to examine and unpack these artworks to find more personal and emotional meanings within.

The researcher acted as a translator or interpreter between the language of the students (images, videos, dress) and the academic and scholarly language of educators and researchers. Adolescents with special needs have a lot of information and ideas but not always the means to express it, they are ill equipped with-appropriate means to express these affinities. Since this research seeks to discover why students with special needs are so drawn to Visual Culture experiences in their lives and online, they requires an interpreter to discuss the students' ideas and biases in an academic manner.

Brief Summary

An action research study with a small group of students was conducted to answer the two questions posed in this proposal; "How can digital and Visual Culture be used as a bridge for adolescents of varying cognitive and academic backgrounds to motivate them to learn artistic behaviors?" and "How can teachers deliver a Visual Culture art curriculum to adolescent students of varying cognitive and academic backgrounds, while remaining responsive to their

developmental needs?" The action research method allowed for the researcher to investigate students, teacher, and classroom environment at the same time. Purposive sampling was used to select two classes whose characteristics represent standards of inclusion within this school district. A narrative structure is present in the thesis as the researcher uses story as a tool to describe the data collected in this research, and later synthesize data with related literature. The researcher created and taught curricula about the aesthetics of online visual cultural experiences to two inclusion classes, and collected student responses and artworks as data to answer the primary research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION OF MY TEACHING

Introduction

This chapter describes the significant qualitative data collected during the course of this study. Data was collected using audio and video recordings, personal notes, and student art and writing samples. Students participated in lessons based on different kinds of Visual and Digital Culture experiences. While these lessons were designed with specific themes of celebrity and text-image remixes, students' own visual and digital culture experiences surfaced as part of their participation in these lessons. Students referred to in this action research are given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Preliminary Observations of the Participants

Class 1

Class 1 is held every fourth morning from 9:55 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., and contained 35-37 students for the duration of this study. This class contained mostly general students, the word "general" being used to describe students who do not have an IEP or 504 intervention plan, and do not receive any special educational serviced throughout the day. This class also contained several students identified as gifted, and three students not labeled, but who showed ADHD and Emotionally Disturbed behaviors. The ADHD behaviors exhibited included talking out, inability to control voice volume, self-stimulating behaviors like tapping and drumming, and attention-seeking behaviors such as wandering around and standing on chairs. This mixture of students would have been an interesting research environment, but because of many discipline issues among several of the students, I felt like this was the least successful group. In order to provide a consistent sample of qualitative data, I tried to keep both classes structured the same way, but in

retrospect, this class dynamic demanded a different style of teaching, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Working with these students every day, we followed the same format, even in the questioning strategies I used had to remain consistent. I asked questions where students answered first as a group poll, then questions that required a 1-2 word answer, and finally with higher-order thinking questions that required more discussion. This strategy was to make sure all students were participating at the level of their ability, and were able to follow along with our discussion. Also, this style of questioning made sure that every student could give some input either by speaking or raising their hand, due to the unusually large number of students in the class. Though we did the same sequence of activities each day, this group still had a difficult time waiting for their chance to give verbal input.

In particular, two students who displayed ADHD behaviors, one of whom was also identified 'gifted' did not want to share the spotlight. Many minutes of the collected video recordings are dedicated to direct interventions where I try to outline the correct behavior for this situation. A third student, Frank, who displayed ADHD and ED behaviors would frequently wander around the room during this time, talking to other students and accusing them of making negative comments about him. Frank was generally interested in what was happening in the class, and wanted to participate in the art-making activities, but has little confidence about his ability and was easily distracted.

Class 2

Class 2 was held every 4th day from 11:10 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. in the late morning, just before lunch. This class consisted of 35 students. Of these, five are identified as having a cognitive delay and received instruction from an intervention specialist. One student with autism

also traveled to art with an aide. This aide generally only helped her student, and did not contribute or detract from the instruction. One student, Joe, was classified as homeless, and displayed some emotionally disturbed behaviors. However, Joe was very interested in drawing, and had future aspirations of being a musician.

In this class, students seemed more prepared to have large group discussions and interact with each other in positive, constructive ways. I was surprised how willing these students were to wait their turn to answer discussion questions, and to build on each other's answers. Even though a portion of these students had language and cognitive issues, I engaged them in discussions by using them as examples during demonstrations, and asking them questions during our discussion that were on their level. I was able to have better, faster discussions because of the willingness to participate, and the students' understanding of the discussion process. Also interesting was that many students with special needs in this class had a general or gifted student as a friend or partner to them who would help with their understanding of instructions and participation in activities. These partnerships seemed informally assigned, but were helpful when I was instructing other groups of students or working one-on-one with someone else.

During a normal class period, the class would follow a specific format used each day to make sure all students knew how to proceed. We started each day by coming into the classroom and sitting in assigned seats in a circle of tables, with some students sitting in "satellite" or independent desks. When students were quiet, we would do a brief, 5-10 minute instruction/discussion session using the overhead projector or other images at the students' desks to talk about the learning task for that day. After this discussion, the students would do several stretches to focus their mind and control their body before watching a brief demonstration from the teacher. After this demonstration, students had between 15-20 minutes to work on their

projects before it was time to clean up all materials and leave the classroom. Initially, in-process critiques and wrap-up activities were planned for the class, but due to time constraints and behavior concerns during the class, many of these activities were done as a separate time during a later class period, or individually with students.

Observation and Analysis of Project 1: *My Famous Self*

In this 3-day lesson students create a self-portrait as someone who is famous. This could include artists, musicians, athletes, actors, for example. Before the start of the lesson, students did gesture drawings of each other in different poses while listening to energetic music. Each student stood on a table in the center of the room, and did three ten-second poses while their classmates drew volume sketches of the student. This time period was lengthened or shortened depending on the level of completion of the sketches by the class. The action researcher did prompt some of the poses for the students, but mostly they were able to make their own interesting poses by bending their arms and legs in different directions. While students were posing, the action researcher walked around the circle of desks to give assistance, and point out where students were doing well. A majority of the students created sketches with large, disproportionate heads, and small arms and legs. We stopped to change models, and we observed together where the arm, leg, and waist joints fall on a person, as well as how large a person is compared to their shoulder width. This was designed as a pre-assessment to see how students would react to drawing human forms, and using each other as models.

During the first and second instruction day, students looked at images of famous people and were asked to comment on attributes of these photographs to figure out what made these people “look famous.” Teacher showed images of “famous people” (Figure 3) on the overhead

projector, and asked students to comment on what made these people famous using a series of guided questions, such as:

- "What do you see in this image?"
- "Describe some of the shapes, colors and lines you see"
- "Who is this person?"
- "Why do you know this person?"
- "Would you describe this person as being 'famous', yes or no? why?"
- "Describe evidence in this image that tells you this person is famous?"
- "Would this person still be famous if you didn't take a picture of them?"

Figure 4. An image shown in class, Justin Bieber cover from Vanity Fair©, February 2011. Source: Vanityfair.com

The students were eager to answer these questions, but from the audio recording, they were more interested with shouting their opinions about the celebrity in question than thinking about the symbols. The action researcher tried to use these questions to construct a top-down

analysis of the Visual Culture artifacts, starting with observations of the image and working toward higher-order questions about what made the students classify the people in these images as celebrities. The students were not able to reach some of the deeper, symbolic meanings of these images. After this discussion-activity, students were given wire-frame bodies to plan their famous-self-portrait. Each student was asked to draw a "normal" self and a "famous" self.

On the third instructional day, the teacher superimposed images of the students' faces onto famous bodies, and had students guess who the famous person was, and also discuss why it was so easy for students to guess the identity or occupation of the famous person. Students worked to complete their brainstorming activity in which they were asked to draw a 'normal' version of themselves, and a 'famous' version using a wire frame model.

On the subsequent days, students worked on their final 'famous drawing' of their self. Students were expected to use their previous gesture drawings and 'wire frame models' to draw their final famous self. Students used dry media of their choice, and also used metallic or neon pencils to highlight areas that made their image important. Some students enjoyed the act of drawing their celebrity identities, and discussed their skills with other students at their seat. Other conversations that could be heard in the video and audio recordings included discussions of the famous people we had just viewed in a presentation, or other celebrities and athletes that the students were interested in. From personal observations helping individual students, they were hesitant to draw their self-portrait without aides or guidelines. Even though students had spent a whole class period drawing gestures of bodies, they were nervous to start drawing, or would try to draw the figure, only to crumple or rip up the paper moments later when they were dissatisfied with their artwork.

Evaluation of My Teaching Performance during Project 1

As a pre-assessment for this project, students were introduced to figure drawing. Students took turns standing on a centrally located table and the class drew ten-second gestures of them. Students were very engaged and interested in what poses their student 'model' would make next. Many students drew an approximated version of what they thought a pose looked like, including all of the model's arms, legs, and head, even if they were not in a position to observe those appendages. While observational drawing can be taught at many ages, these students seemed stressed and anxious about drawing the figure, and may have regressed in their drawing ability during this and the following exercises, using symbols to represent people rather than what they observed.

On day 1 of this project, we started to define and discuss Visual Culture. As part of the curriculum, I wanted to include the correct terminology of the concepts we were learning about, so that the students could accurately talk about what they were learning to their peers and parents. In this brief overview of Visual Culture, we talked about the ways that the students themselves make and distribute Visual Culture. Surprisingly, even at 11 years old, these adolescents have Instagram and Facebook accounts which allow them to share images and visual messages with their friends and others online. Many reported sharing images with each other that they found interesting or humorous. When making the distinction between Visual Culture and art, however, many students were skeptical. We discussed what would happen if a student took a picture of the falling autumn leaves and shared it online. Would this be art? Half of students answered yes, saying that any image that a person makes because they like it is art. The other half answered "no" because maybe the person taking the picture and posting it did not intend for it to be an artwork. The students who wanted the image of falling autumn leaves to be considered

art described other pictures they liked to take, such as pictures of flowers and pets. The students who disagreed that a picture of falling leaves shared online would be art disagreed because of their belief that sharing images online was not an interesting practice.

Students were then asked to look at photos of celebrities and talk about why each looked famous or had qualities of 'fame' attached to the photos. Students reacted much differently than expected during this activity. Instead of showing interest in the photos by discussing them, the students reacted with a variety of loud noises and negative comments. I tried to engage students in conversations about the images to try to glean some meaning. Students all were able to identify what they what they liked or disliked about the images, but were unsure why. Specifically with an image of the singer Justin Bieber (Figure 4), the students agreed that he did not choose his haircut, style of dress, or the fake lipstick "kiss" marks that were on his face and neck. This agreement only took place after many of my questions and redirections to the class. With an image of fictional pop star Hannah Montana, students were able to agree that this persona was a construction of celebrity and not a real person. This lack of comprehension could be because the students were not at the stage of development to understand these abstract ideas. Talking with the students' core subject teachers, they are asked to perform many higher-order tasks of analyzing writing and mathematics problems, however, it was difficult for students to transfer this skill into the art classroom.

On the second day, students viewed more images to discuss, and were asked the same guided questions in order to unpack some meanings and possible probe deeper. This time the teacher created altered images with students' faces superimposed on top of celebrities' bodies. The students had to guess which celebrities/students were represented in each picture. Then, using guided questions, the teacher/facilitator helped the class to think about the visual clues they

used to determine the identity of the altered photograph. Woven into this lesson was also a simple study of logos, so that students could begin to talk about how images are used to mean large amounts of information.

Students were much more excited to see the celebrity images when they were superimposed with fellow students' faces. The superimposed images helped bridge the concept of celebrity for students who may not have undergone social and cognitive development necessary to understand this social construct. As each image flashed on the screen, students had some initial outbursts of reaction, but these were more positive than the previous day of instruction. These comments were replaced by delighted surprise at their peers' transformation into musicians, athletes, and the President of the United States. Joe, a student from Class 2, was superimposed into a picture of the band *The Clash* in order to play off of his aspirations of being a rock star (Figure 5). The other students knew his plans from talking with him during school, and were excited to see this image; however, he was absent when it was first shown. The students told him about the picture, and four days later in the subsequent art class they waited to see his reaction to this remixed picture.

Figure 5. An image shown in class, Altered image showing a student as part of the rock band The Clash.

These adolescent students seemed to have an abstract sense of what celebrity meant; they knew the people in the photographs and were able to articulate that these people were important. However, they did not understand fully what visual qualities linked the photos of the famous people, for example, shininess, good lighting, expensive clothing, or props, hair, and makeup. When the faces were covered with the faces of their fellow students', the class was able to see these qualities being attributed to familiar people, and could more easily access and unpack the images.

During the art-making phase of this project, students were similarly confused. Even with preliminary exercises of drawing the human form and using the wire frame, students were still unsure of their drawing ability. More specifically they doubted their ability to draw themselves and to draw a person representatively. Initially I thought that the transformation of the student from ordinary to famous would be enough of a separation to curb their apprehension for drawing things correctly. However, this ended up adding more pressure for the students. Not only were they expected to draw a person, they had to draw themselves, and they had to create an idealized version of their celebrity identity. Instead of removing students from their drawing anxiety, I had created three levels of possible failure for this task.

This project concluded with mixed results. Students with some previous drawing proficiency were able to move past their anxiety and think about the nuances of their celebrity identity. Some chose to be athletes and musicians. Zoe, a student identified as gifted, captured herself as a fashion designer (Figure 6a). She emphasized her creation of a dress with metallic pencils. For other students, it was a struggle to complete a basic figure and add details. No students refused to finish, but a number of them who struggled did not complete the assignment in the class periods allotted. In figures 6b and 6c, two male students wanted to be famous athletes

and can be identified by their equipment, a skateboard, and a football jersey, respectively. Tom, the skateboarding student (figure 6c), is a student with ADHD, but his filling in of the page and details in his figure make it similar to the general students' artwork also pictured. In figure 6d, this general student said that she wanted to be a famous singer and created a patriotic costume to wear while singing the national anthem.

Success in this project is related to the student's drawing product, but also to the level of frustration the student felt while creating the project, and how willing they were to add more details and fill the page. It should be noted that in these examples, the students had similar degrees of success, despite their designated academic ability levels. Some gifted and general students who normally performed well on other drawings felt frustrated here because of their inability to representationally draw the figure, and some students with special needs were so excited to create their famous persona that their motivation helped them to exceed their drawing ability. Conversely, students who were frustrated or felt unsuccessful with their artwork during this lesson seemed to regress in their drawing ability. Observational drawing can be taught to students at any stage, but the students seemed to revert back to simpler forms of drawing schema when they became stressed, instead of using the supports provided or recalling their figure drawing experience at the beginning of this lesson.

Figure 6a

Figure 6b

Figure 6c

Figure 6d

Figure 6a-d. Examples of students' Project 1 – My Famous Self

Particularly with this age group, however, the value of these artworks may not be found in the finished product, but throughout the process. Ivashkevich (2009) finds that in [pre]adolescents, the process of drawing a figure is more informed by contemporary culture as much as or more than the drawing is informed by the students' own identity, and contemporary culture can be even more influential.. These figures are often not representational, but contain symbols that relate to specific physical traits, personality traits, or articles of clothing. While some students may have not been confident in the drawing skills to create a fully representational figure, they included many visual symbols linking their drawing to visual cultural experiences they remembered. These are not just visual examples, but a process in which students combine different elements and interweave them to create meaning.

Observation and Analysis of Project 2 – *LOL Animals*

The first day students were asked to look at images of animals with humorous sayings, and think about why the people who created these images would make these connections. The teacher used presentation software to superimpose text that the students suggested onto 'blank' images of animals. Teacher asked students to suggest captions for the animals to be saying or thinking in the situation, and typed them into the slides so that the whole group could see them at once. After this discussion-activity, Students used tablet computers and handouts to practice drawing images of their selected animal for this project (Figure 7). The teacher modeled a method of drawing using different-sized ovals to create the different parts of the animal.

On the second day, students repeated the process of viewing animal images, and adding captions as a class using the presentation software. Students continued to use tablet computers to draw their animal, and teacher had individual meetings with each student about their artwork.

The third day, students reviewed animal drawings and were taught some shading and blending techniques with colored pencils. Students finished up their art with words or phrases to personify their animal artworks such as the ones we previously viewed.

Figure 7. A student uses an online guide to practice drawing an animal on a tablet computer.

Before we started this project, we talked about the word "personification," and what it meant to the students. This term is in the standards for 3rd and 4th grade language arts, so some students were familiar with it. We defined it as a class for our project as giving an animal human thoughts and feelings. When the action researcher initially asked the class if animals had feelings like people, many students surprisingly believed animals do have emotions. This idea is consistent with the students' motivation for creating personified animal images and sharing them online. Humans have a need to understand experiences, and we do so by contextualizing them in terms of our own experiences (Carlson & Berleant, 2004). Animals have vaguely human body parts such as arms, legs and faces, and we can use these symbols to create a human meaning for what the animal may be expressing in the image. These contrasts are often created because they are humorous or absurd.

Figure 8. An example of students' Visual Culture: Added text on an animal image

This project was far more successful than the first. In their early adolescent stage, these students were much more able to grasp the idea and the humor of the personified animal images (Figure 8). The action researcher tried to only select images for the classroom, but also those that would be at the students reading comprehension level. After viewing several personified animal images, the action researcher showed pictures of animals without text, and asked students to give suggestions as to what words or phrases should be superimposed over the images. Students enjoyed giving the animals different and creative things to say, sometimes building on or modifying others' suggestions to make them fit or make them clearer.

Evaluation of My Teaching Performance during Project 2

My morning session, Class 1, was less successful at this activity, still not understanding the protocol of discussions we were trying to have. In this particular class there seemed to be a culture of needing to answer first and with maximum volume to make sure everyone heard your voice. This attitude was perpetuated by two or more students with ADHD, and both suspected by other staff to have insufficient interventions for this behavior (medicine, behavior counseling).

Frank, a student in Class 1, was initially hesitant to draw his animal until he noticed the reference image of a bear's face in the materials for this project. He was insistent that I work with him independently to help him draw this animal. During previous projects that school year, Frank would often wander around the room and start arguments with other students when not attended by an adult. During this project he seemed more able to focus on drawing the bear's face, and adding the text, "My bear go to the ground", which in this context meant that his bear was the best (figure 9). He later chose this work from his portfolio to be framed in the spring art show.

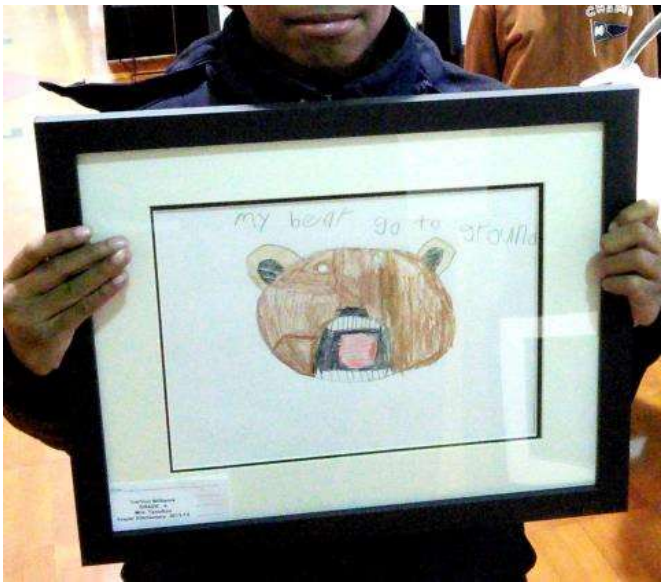

Figure 9. A student holds up his LOL Animal artwork at the art show. Text reads "My bear go to [the] ground"

The afternoon session was far more likely to give interesting and creative answers. This group contained more students from the cognitive delay unit, but was more calm and ready to learn. Notably, in Class 2, students with special needs were treated in this class as equals by their general peers. Not only were the general students quiet and respectful while students with special needs were answering questions, they encouraged them to participate in activities.

During the creation phase of this project, other strategies were used to help students to work more independently on their artworks. Each student used their table PC to search for images of the animal they wished to draw and in some case, even used 'how to draw' resources that gave them step-by-step instructions. Each student drew different animals, though some 'friend groups' chose to draw different versions of a similar animal. Most students were able to think of a clever personified idea, but not all were humorous. Some students simply chose to convey what the animal would say if it could speak, considering the fact that the animal would talk humorous enough. Others used the interesting spellings of words or turns of phrase that they invented or appropriated from an image they saw or remembered.

The animal drawings were far more successful for this group. Using the technology as a drawing aide and the less-daunting task of drawing an animal instead of a person was freeing and motivating for the students (Figure 10a-c). Drawing an animal with a funny thought or phrase was motivating, because the students were excited to draw this humorous image, and freeing because it took the focus away from the failure students perceived when they were drawing the figure. The examples below show students with different cognitive ability levels who all participated enthusiastically in Project 2. Figure 10a shows a tree kangaroo with text that reads "I'm flying!! … or am I[?]" In Figure 10b, a bird of paradise with wings outstretched screams "I'm coming at you!", and in Figure 10c, the student created a scene with a mountain lion and a smaller animal in which the mountain lion is saying "food!" while the smaller animal pleads for help.

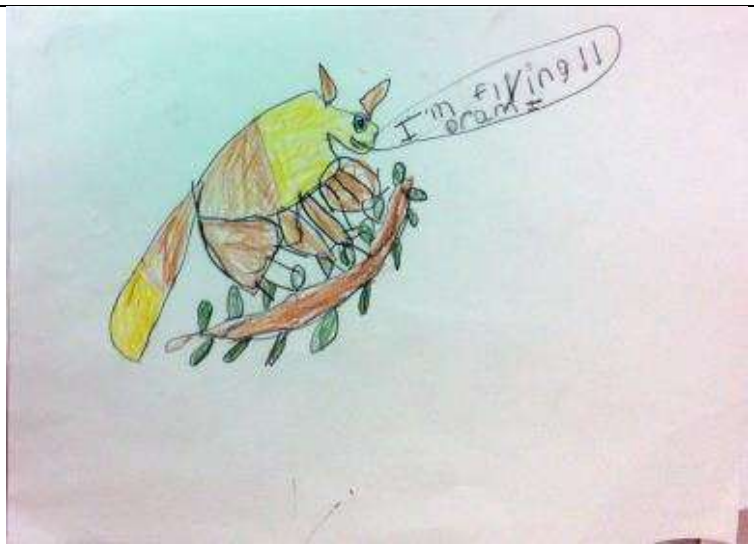

Figure 10a

Figure 10b

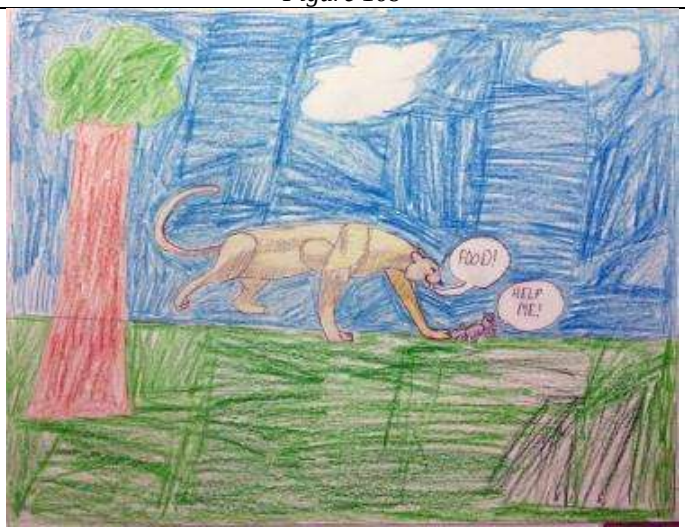

Figure 10c

Figure 10a-c. 10. Examples of students' Project 2 – LOL Animals

Another interesting occurrence during the discussion portion of this lesson was guiding the students to understand what parts of these constructed images helped the viewer to see the animal as having human characteristics. In one example, I removed the text from an image of a cat jumping into the air that was captioned "riding an invisible bike." Without the text adding to the meaning of the image, the students were able to imagine other scenarios for the cat. They hypothesized that the cat could have been trying to catch a laser-pointer, or had just been startled by another animal. During this project, I tried to use guided questions to play off of students' knowledge of animals from other classes, and from their own interests. Many students in this group had developed a specific knowledge around an animal that was most interesting to them. Many students could quote facts about these animals ranging from where they lived to what they ate to how many years they can live. Students were distraught during the discussion when they were told that they had to draw animals that could be living today (this taking away the possibility of mythological or prehistoric animals).

Reflections and Evaluation of My Transition to VCAE

Because this research took place in my semester of this new teaching placement, the implemented curriculum may have been less successful than if I had taught this group of students previously. Unfortunately for this research, the previous art teacher and I shared no similarities in our teaching style. I did not personally contact this teacher, but she was my art teacher in high school, and was firmly rooted in a teaching style that focused solely on art skills and production. It is not surprising, then, that the concept of discussing artworks and images during the very short class time was foreign to this group. At the beginning of each class, many students would automatically ask me "what are we going to make today?" Students were not interested in the

images we would see or what we would talk about, but wanted desperately to have the kinesthetic pleasure of drawing, painting, or sculpting (Henley, 2004).

In my teaching philosophy, however, I believe it is important to emphasize viewing and examining images as well as the creation of artworks. Through a balance of these three domains we can better see the artistic process, and let it guide students to more meaningful work that is not just beautiful. It became very apparent in the early days of the school year that students were not taught, or had not really been asked to critically look at images as part of an art lesson. During my time as a student in grades K -12 in this district, I remember distinctly seeing three artworks; The *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo DaVinci, *Water Lilies* by Claude Monet, and *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth. These paintings were briefly discussed and then never really returned to as part of lessons on painting and drawing. Asking these students to pause their need for kinesthetic enjoyment of making art and focus on Visual Culture images was a struggle. It was confusing to the students why we would not just come into the classroom and immediately pick up a pencil. Students did have folders with sketching exercises for this purpose, but in general they did not want to be bothered by looking at pictures to be inspired to make things.

In my curriculum, I generally try to balance a mixture of Visual Culture experiences for the students to look at that include fine artworks, advertisement, videos, and even images I create. This is so that every student can have several entry points into the concepts we are discussing. Instead of teaching students to draw in these lessons, I was focusing on the motivation to create art. In this instance the two motivations were to make an idealized version of the student as a famous person, or to create a humorous work of art with a personified animal. These motivations were supposed to help carry the student through the complex of drawing difficult subjects such as animals and people, and allow them to be successful. Success in this

case was measured not on the ability to draw well, but also the ability to use drawing to communicate the ideas of celebrity, or the humor in their animal artwork.

Ideally, this group of lessons would be approached from the students' indoctrination into Visual Culture Art Education by having me as their teacher for one or more years. Even if they would have had art instruction from my current elementary colleague, who is strongly informed by art historical inquiry, the students would have understood how to talk about images. Instead, this research took place at a time when students are transitioning in their own minds and bodies during adolescence, and also transitioning to a new kind of art instruction that is totally different than the year previous. In lessons before this study, I had tried to model processes of looking at and talking about images and making artwork based on broad concepts rather than based on skills. This was generally well received by the students, but in those lessons, the images we looked at and the artworks we created were very similar. We had discussed prints of sounds by Pakistani artist Zarina, and then created our own sound wave prints. This art-to-art process was accessible to the students, and their products were generally successful. In the lessons for this action research, however, no fine art images were used in our discussions about the project. Using only mass-produced images from magazines, or edited images distributed on the internet was confusing to some students, as there was no immediate fine art connection. Though it is debatable whether the images shown were fine art, they were not what the students were used to contextualizing as Art.

Incorporating Visual Culture through Anonymous Feedback

This lack of preparation to discuss images was compounded by the amount of time allotted for each art class. Within 35 minutes, I had to show, discuss, demonstrate, and help students individually work on projects. With this time limitation, and more than 30 students

needing help and attention, it was virtually impossible to make sure every student was on task and understood the project. Throughout the school year, I tried other strategies with smaller groups and more independent instruction, but was unable to change the dynamic of the class, especially in Class 1. Given more time, I could have built in more ways for students to be personally responsible for their learning, and that could have prevented some of the behavioral issues. However, these students were untrained (or unwilling) to take art seriously as a learning experience instead of an activity time. This made it difficult for me to move past that attitude and to a deeper understanding of what we were trying to accomplish.

One of the more successful ways of incorporating Visual Culture is through my design of written peer assessments in the form of anonymous feedback. Since this tool resembles what students would readily find online to express their "likes" and comments. The students embraced this familiar concept as they completed this activity.

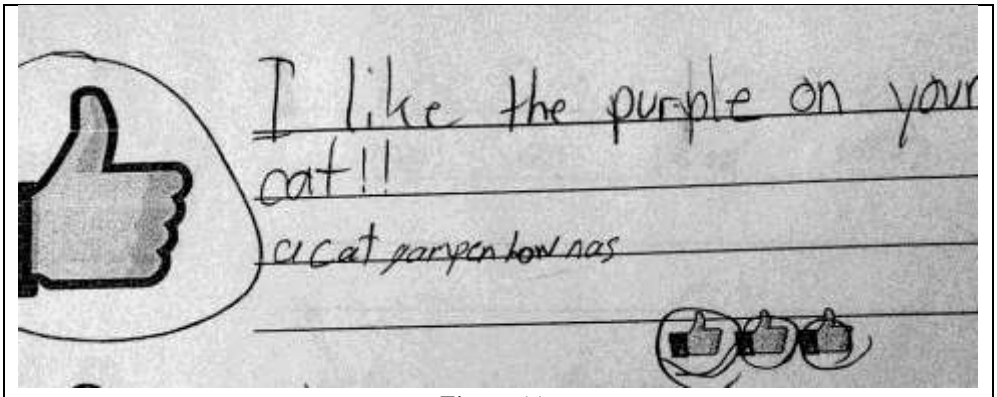

Figure 11a

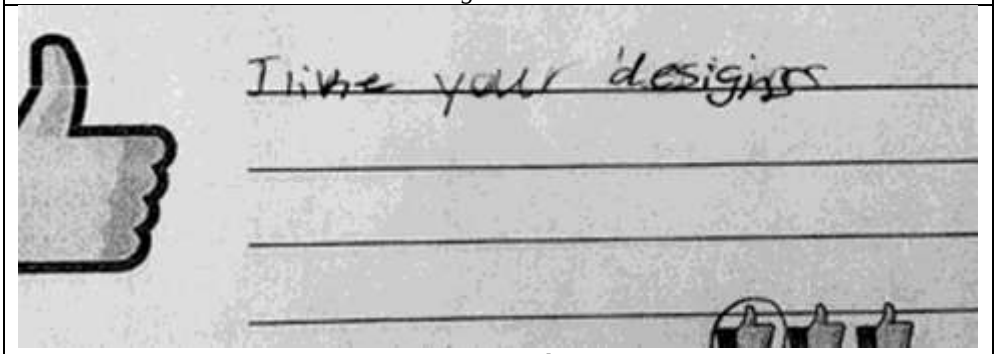

Figure 11b

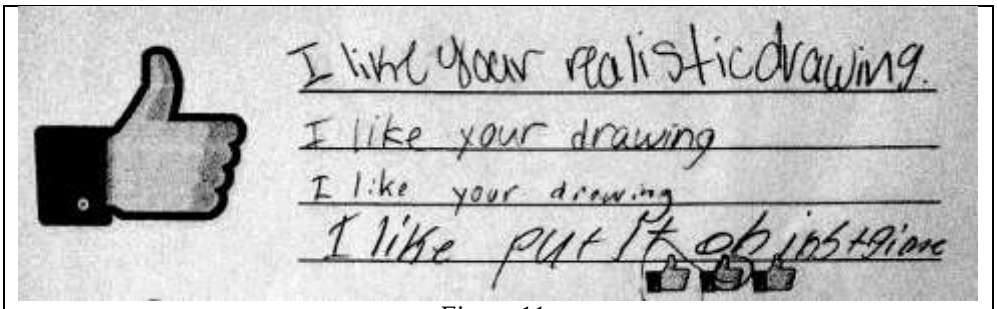

Figure 11c

Figure 11a-c, Examples of students' "Like Critique" responses

Students gave each other "likes" for their artwork using a critique sheet. Each student put one "like" sheet next to their artwork and the whole class of students walked around the room writing complete sentences describing an attribute of the person's artwork they thought was interesting or well done. Students did not sign their names, and students were not allowed to stand by their own artwork waiting for others to write on their sheet. Additionally, students could "like," or affirm others' comments on the sheet by circling a thumbs-up symbol located under each of the lines for comments.

During this activity the room was buzzing with activity of students walking around and picking out which artwork they would "like". Before this activity, the action researcher instructed students that the nature of the feedback they would write for this critique exercise should be positive in nature, and that it should be something the students liked or enjoyed about the artwork. The students were also instructed to pick out specific things from the other's artworks to give feedback about. From the above examples (figure 11a-c) students mostly responded with specific feedback about their peers' artworks. The common response of "I like your drawing" was present on many students' forms, but it was surrounded with other more meaningful comments about the use of color, detail, or something humorous in the artwork. Another trend was the crossover of themes from the students' digital and visual culture experiences. In figure 11c, the commenter tells the artist to post their artwork "on insta[gram]"

referring to the website *Instagram*™ where photos are shared between users. This trend continued in other responses where students referred to the paper as the student's "wall" (a virtual message board on a *facebook* ™ user's account) or used informal slang speech or syntax in their comments.

Brief Summary

During this study, data was collected using video and audio recordings, personal notes, students' artworks and responses. Lessons for this research were developed using different types of Visual Culture experiences that students may have in their everyday lives. While these lessons were conducted with some success, they were adapted from the initial lessons included in the pilot study to accommodate the larger number of participants in each group, and the short amount of time for each class period.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will attempt to mine the collected qualitative data for insight into this study. The collected data will be analyzed in conjunction with the literature to come to some brief conclusions about the implications of this research.

Students' Visual Culture Experiences In Flux

Within a school setting, individual students can have diverse and various fascinations, despite being the same age. In early adolescence, students are starting to build an identity out of the things they like and activities in which they participate (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005; Sparks, 2013). In this sample of 75 students, they were found to have diverse Visual Culture experiences. During discussions and class activities, each student seemed to know special information about specific images in the presentations, or specific information about other Visual Culture experiences in their lives. In the course of this study, it has become apparent that while a curriculum of Visual Culture does help to engage students, it is most effective if the Visual Culture we are studying aligns with the students' immediate interests.

Whether we were looking at and describing images of people, animals, or other Visual Culture phenomenon, the students always reacted most to images and experiences they felt they had the most knowledge about. One of these areas of expertise was the video game Minecraft (2011), which is a building game that takes place in a virtual empty space. The player's job is to create objects and structures out of items called blocks that serve a specific purpose. Other players can interact with structures their friends make by connecting with each other online.

Many students were so excited about this new form of creating that they asked if they could create their self-portraits in the style of this game, using small block units instead of lines and shading. This game is developed in a way that appeals to a variety of age groups, and has become popular with younger users. Students are able to engage in activities that resemble play and exploration in their own world. Because there are no stated objectives in the game, players are able to develop their own world as they deem fit (Cayatte, 2014). My students mostly enjoyed the more directed parts of the game, such as building structures that would keep enemies away and destroying zombies, despite numerous other more autonomous user directed actions that the avatar in the game could take, such as taming wolves.

Another Visual Culture phenomenon taking place at the time of this study was *The Lego Movie* (2014). While Lego toys have been popular for many years as a building toy, this new movie focuses on the identities of the small person-like figures called "minifigures" that Lego produces and sells with many of their sets. Like *Minecraft*, Lego toys allow users to play with different parts, called bricks, to build objects and environments. While minifigures were initially avatars to help children interact with the Lego toys, some have now taken on their own personalities. Figures from popular culture like the comic book hero Batman have been remade as Lego figures, using the style and design specific to Lego minifigures (Figure 12). My students in particular have become increasingly attracted to this world, bringing these figurines to school to share and play with other students. As part of their collecting behaviors, students compared the figures to see who had the newest or the best. These objects contain within them a plethora of information based on their visual symbols but also their material makeup (Blandy & Bolin, 2012). The Lego brand still tries to produce toys that engage and encourage building, however, these figurines, introduced in 1976, have become the almost human face of the brand (Bartneck,

Obaid, & Zawieska, 2013). For my young adolescent students, some of these figurines are more famous than the celebrities we looked at during our lesson plan.

Figure 12. An example of students' Visual Culture: Anatomy of a LEGO Minifigure ™
Source: Bartneck, Obaid, & Zawieska, 2013

Both of these Visual Culture phenomena include a system in which avatars (both virtual and physical) are used to interact with an imagined world. While older adolescents in previous research may have used celebrities or media figures as an avatar into a world of fame, these young adolescent students may not have this connection or capability. The students in this study were able to connect more easily to these small, simplified forms more than they were able to connect with other humans. This could be connected to Olga Ivashkevich's study (2009), where students created self-portraits that eschewed representational drawing in favor of creating avatars that reflected the students' personal interests and self-image. In the future I would like to further investigate this idea to see how the creation of avatars within our Visual Culture can intersect with art production and visual literacy.

Perception of Celebrities as Visual Metaphors

While the students may not have been old enough to be inspired by famous actors or singers, they were, however, very vocal about the athletes we looked at during the presentation of these lessons. As noted before, many of the images of famous people were edited to superimpose the students' faces on the body of a famous person. However, the students immediately knew the athletes I had chosen for the presentation, and almost as immediately had opinions about these athletes. These opinions came from both male and female students, but they were all very strong opinions relating to how good the players were and how well they would do in the future. The students were most vocal about basketball and football players, possibly because those sports are emphasized in our geographic region of Ohio, and because I picked easily recognizable figures from local sports teams. These opinions of the player's ability and 'coolness' could have come from the students' own watching of sports, or from their parents' viewing and discussion of these players.

In my particular classroom, I was at a deficit when starting this Visual Culture Art Education program because of the time students had each class period, and the amount of experience they had talking about images. In addition to helping them practice their art skills, I also had to create new avenues for discussion and critique in their minds. These two roadblocks may have prevented some success in the beginning stages of this research. While I initially thought that the questions I was asking could be too difficult for the students, I conferred with the other classroom teachers that the students in this study had been asked to think abstractly in other academic areas. The students seemed unable or unwilling to transfer this skill to our art classes each week.

One initial disappointment was the lack of student enthusiasm during their drawings of their famous identities. This could have sprung from the lack of understanding during our discussions of Visual Culture artifacts featuring celebrities. Students had a lot of trouble separating their reaction to the images of famous people that we looked at from the information the students already knew about these people. When asked the question "How do you know this person is famous?" students would pull from other information they already knew about the famous person in the image instead of looking for clues or symbolism in the picture itself. This was especially true of students who knew a lot of information about the celebrities in the images. Students who were interested in that particular musician or athlete wanted to give answers that can seize the attention of the rest of the class, often more information about the subject than actually identifying visual symbols in the photograph or magazine cover presented. When asked about a famous football player, one student quoted that player's stats with his team, but it took several questions to get that student to say he could identify the player by his player number, and his dreadlock hairstyle.

The questioning process generally began with an analysis of the constructive elements of the photograph such as the colors, shapes, and lines used. Regardless of how I prepared and tried to lead a structured discussion with questioning, the stimulus of the celebrity image was too exciting for students who were anxious to share their knowledge in front of their peers. In another instance, when students were shown a magazine cover featuring the famous rap musician Drake (Figure 12), and asked the question "What about this picture lets you know that this person is famous?" many students answered that Drake was famous because he was the best rapper they knew, or because he made a lot of albums. None of the students immediately picked out other obvious visual cues, such as his shirt in the image which is black with white letters that

say “Unstoppable.” Much like previous research I have done with adolescents, students wanted their peers to be aware of their culture capital, or their wealth of knowledge of relevant cultural information or experiences. They wanted to demonstrate their knowledge of this image, and that the music and cultural experience that Drake represents was part of their collection. Rather than focus on the images or the answers, they focused on the amount of information they possess about a specific celebrity in order to determine who qualifies as an expert, and therefore who had more cultural wealth. This demonstration of expertise relates to the students’ building of culture capital within the class’ social structure (MacLoed, 2009).

Figure 13. An image shown in class, Portrait of Drake from Vibe © magazine, December 2009© Source: http://www.vibe.com

Another explanation for this phenomenon could be that celebrities in our culture are viewed as symbols instead of people. Earlier in the lesson when we did an exercise to see how many logos students could name, students reported that it was important to know what the logos were, so you know what kinds of products are being sold, or the quality of those products. Images of celebrities, while being human, still seemed to carry a large amount of connotative information. Even though the students were shown specific images of celebrities that were

curated by the teacher to show specific visual characteristics, the students could not separate the information they had already collected about those celebrities. While students are able to identify these characteristics within their own costume and dress, they were not able to unpack these subtle things from the celebrity photographs.

The images of celebrities had been shown so many times as symbolic of a certain kind of music, or attitude, or other cultural experience, hence it became impossible to separate the image of the person's face with the things they create, the sports they play, or the products they are hired to sell. When looking at an image of the hip hop/rap musician Macklemore to decode its different meanings, one student answered the question "Why does this person look famous?" by saying "He has money on his face!" This answer was probably a non-sequitur from the student, but in an abstract way it is appropriate. We look at celebrities' faces as symbol for a much larger context. Seeing this picture of Macklemore somehow reminded this student that Macklemore is a popular musician, has a popular song on the radio, and probably has a lot of money. The description of having "money on his face" is fitting, because this face at this time in popular culture is a symbol of wealth to that student.

When the faces of celebrities were covered with the faces of students, the class was much more willing to find qualities in the photograph that were creating the persons famous image. Taking away the celebrities' faces, even though the students still knew their identity, weakened the connection between the celebrity image and the massive amount of information attached to that person's identity. To add a layer of ambiguity, the celebrities' faces could have been blurred or obscured in some way to completely delete their identity, allowing the students to focus just on their dress and other symbols or visual cues in the picture.

Fascination of Animal Personification as Humorous Display

During our *LOL Animal* lesson, students were far more able to unpack images of animals and text, and talk about why those images were humorous or interesting. Students seemed very familiar with these images, but unlike images of celebrities who had more contextual meanings attached to them, they were able to appreciate these images and judge their effectiveness. While a student may have initially reacted to an image based on their like or dislike of an animal, many students found that they enjoyed the image when the combination of text and photograph was funny. This interest bled into their art-making, with much better results than the previous project. While this drawing process may have been more technically difficult for some students, the emotional connection to the animal or the humor that their artwork would create helped them to succeed in this task. Duncum (2014) writes that in pre-Renaissance art history, artworks were aesthetically judged not on their representational or formal qualities, but on their ability to stir the emotions of their audience.

Similarly, the emotions created as part of their animal personification artworks was an intrinsic motivation to finish this task. The students were excited to see the final result of their own work, and of their fellow students' drawings. Because they were more interested in the outcome of the intersection of text and image, instead of the formal aspects of the drawing, they were more able to enjoy their creations. In modified versions of this project in the future, I hope to tap into the motivation I saw in this group of students while they were creating their personified animal images. The motivation to create something humorous to themselves and to their friends created a strong drive in each student to complete the planning and execution of this project.

In addition, this lesson added the use of tablet computers as part of the instruction, allowing students to make more choices about their learning. Students with ADHD tend to process information more effectively when technology is integrated, especially if they are able to control the flow of input (Fabio & Antonietti, 2012). Using technology as a different mode of instruction helped to alleviate the stress of many students in the classroom, as they could work at their own pace as they were accustomed to in other learning experiences during the school day.

Demystifying Adults' Assumptions About Culture

Students have an inherent knowledge about Visual Culture images, as they have been learning about the world visually since birth. It is important, however for students to have tools to mine the deeper meanings in these images, and understand that to see is not necessarily to believe. Images of great artworks have been reproduced so many times that some consider them the graphic equivalent of a "lol cat" image created by seemingly untrained persons on the internet. Ultimately it is students who will identify what images are most meaningful to them, and relevant to their experiences (Struken and Cartwright, 2001).

While planning this research, I discussed with students and colleagues what kinds of things they would be interested in that would be relevant to the study. This could be a source of my own cultural bias at the outset of the lessons. As a result, I fell into the trap of making assumptions about students' experiences based on my own cultural bias. While I was able to adapt my curriculum to fit the needs of this particular student group by creating new motivational materials, I was constantly wondering how much more successful this project would have been if the curricula were developed over a longer span of time with more student input. Some of these modifications were impossible due to the time constraints on my teaching, but a comparison between the discussions and products from both project revealed that students

had a more authentic experience with the *LOL Animals* project, because these images were more relevant to them, while images of celebrities were not as relevant.

Another assumption I made about these students was their ability to have discussions in a large group format. Factors such as their familiarity with me as a teacher, the time spent in each class, or the size of the class could have could all have limited the potential for good discussions. It is also possible that these adolescents were not trained to have a whole group session with their current or previous instructors. Later conversations with classroom teachers about their procedures with these students revealed that much of their school day is spent in small group sessions, working independent with or without the use of technology. This posed a problem because the students were so used to using technology and multitasking individually rather than working and participating as a member in a full class that demanded a different level of attention. This corroborated with recent findings that adolescents who multitask using technology are more likely to not be able to focus on one activity for long periods of time (Barmgartner, Van Der Hejden & Huizinga, 2014).

As the class went along with this projects designed for this research, I developed more strategies for engaging students during discussion, one strategy is to stick to a consistent format so that each art class would have a predictable timetable, allowing the students to be more comfortable. Later in the school year, desirable effects began to happen as students became more comfortable with the structure of art class. I noticed long after this research concluded that the daily question changed to, “What are we going to do today?” from, “What are we going to make?” While “do” and “make” seem like synonyms, it is possible that my young adolescents students understood that we would not spend our whole class creating with our hands, and therefore changed how they thought to ask about the plans for our art class time.

In order to create a situation where students' Visual Culture can be integrated into the classroom it would seem that every art teacher should become an expert in every new trend in visual culture. At my current placement where I teach over 700 students, all with varying interests and fascinations, this is not sustainable. In this research, and in subsequent teaching, I have tried to open up lessons to include the students' own outside Visual Culture experiences, and strategically channeled them into the curriculum.

Creating Learning Communities

One underlying current that was helpful in judging the success of this project was how the class acted as a unit, rather than how individual students performed. In order to partake in the activities required to study Visual Culture in the art classroom such as discussing and remixing, a community environment should be established. Visual Culture learning communities exist outside of school environments, and encourage school-aged children to create many new and remixed images while they unknowingly build art skills (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). However, to replicate this environment in the classroom in such a constricted time frame is almost impossible, because these communities are usually found online where time is not an obstacle (Freeman et al, 2013). The curriculum in this case was designed to have a catalyst effect for this large group of students, and get them to all focus in on one particular type of Visual Culture experience. By examining and immersing ourselves in this way, I was able to try and counteract deficits for students who may have never thought about images as having layers of meanings.

In other projects throughout the school year, I noticed the building of camaraderie of student groups around learning different skills or practicing certain kinds of design concepts. During the personified animal project, many students engaged with each other in conversations about how to best draw animals, and what websites they could navigate to in order to find

tutorials about drawing animals. Some students at their sitting groups even organized around drawing the same animal or similar types of animals to create an informal narrative between their artworks. Christine Thompson and Sandra Bales (1991) describe a similar phenomenon happening in preschool children in which the students compare, contrast, share ideas, and entertain each other with their artworks. In this research study, however, the adolescent students have developed past this "egocentric speech" (p 47), and are less likely to talk to each other while drawing. While this did not create a true Visual Culture learning community where students were constantly interacting and sharing their ideas surrounding a theme, the students were more engaged in each other's art, which is atypical for my half hour, public school class.

In another project weeks later where students designed illuminated letters using pen and ink, the class was very engaged with each other, discussing how to best use the dip pens, and what symbols they would add to their monograms to make them more unique. I noticed that students were practicing some of the conversational structures we used during the research lessons while we discussed visual culture artifacts. Not all students showed evidence of using these techniques during their studio time, but many of their artworks showed more meaningful ideas and thoughts. Even though pen and ink were new art supplies and new ideas, students were also more willing to engage and persist in the given task.

To get past the students' other interests, to have them be interested in the lesson, and to then jump into individual conversations about the art they are creating in such a short time is a feat. While this may not have the same potential as Visual Culture learning communities that exist outside of schools, it would be interesting to explore the implementation of more learning community catalysts in the classroom.

Recommendations for further study

Whether or not they were able to effectively learn from each other as a Visual Culture learning community, Visual Culture was a way to present the curriculum so that my young adolescent students were engaged. While the makeup of students in the sample group was mixed in their cognitive ability, the introduction of Visual Culture artifacts helped to neutralize the bonds of their traditional academic groups. Students classified as being 'lower' in their reading and math scores were able to participate in discussions with those students classified as 'gifted' because the Visual Culture images and artifacts they talked about were so familiar to all of them. While I did still level questions for specific students' needs, all were able to confidently discuss, and then later understand the project we would be creating.

This research was enlightening to me as a teacher in helping me test and observe how a curriculum built around visual and digital culture experiences could be successfully administered in a public school setting as motivation for adolescents with special needs. It would also be interesting to take some of the themes that this research has uncovered, to further study into these areas. While this study provides a detailed snapshot of the discussions, motivations, and creativity that exist in my classroom, it does not accurately represent the broader scope of art education focusing on Visual Culture. In future research I would conduct a longer study possibly with a smaller group of students. In my own teaching, I will continue to informally develop and design new ways of incorporating Visual Culture experiences as a motivation for art production across the curriculum.

In re-teachings of the lessons in this research recently, I have begun to use the data and observations to modify the instruction. The *My Famous Self* lesson transitioned to a lesson about superheroes that retained the focus on decoding symbols and drawing the figure. When the

students looked at Visual Culture artifacts representing superheroes, such as images and videos, they were more able to separate their knowledge of the superhero's identity and the symbols and ideas contained within the image of that superhero. During the art production of the student's identity as a superhero, I employed a system of copying the student's initial gesture drawings with tracing paper so they would not have to draw freehand. Tracing the body allowed some students to work quickly though their figure drawing and concentrate more on the details, symbols, and background around their superhero artwork. I also speculate that the freedom to cover up parts of their superhero portrait with masks or capes as part of the hero's costume allowed them to edit out parts of the figure they felt uncomfortable drawing. Gifted students participating in this lesson made a "TOP SECRET" folder detailing the abilities and backstory of their hero persona that they sent to students in an eighth grade digital media class inspire a comic book cover or a movie poster based on their hero.

During a re-teaching of the *LOL Animal* lesson, I curated images of detailed animal drawings into an online gallery that students could access on their tablet computers by going to a specific web link. Students who needed less individual instruction could use this resource, which freed up time to work with other students one-on-one. This was especially helpful for students with ADHD, using their fascination with technology to circumvent their difficulty with attention (Fabio & Antonietti, 2012). Using the tablet computers, all students were able to view images they were interested in, and access online guides to help them draw specific animals.

Recommendations for Small Details of Instruction

All art teachers have very different ways of instructing students, and there can be many different ways to effectively teach visual art. In the case of incorporating Visual Culture, an art

teacher's routine may have to change in order for this instruction to be implemented authentically.

In an art classroom where students are not asked to analyze images on a regular basis, this may be a rough transition. Building out time within the class period for good discussion or discussion activities can be tough, especially in elementary environments where time is limited. For these lessons, I noticed that I spent about 10-15 minutes of time just trying to get students to respond to the images in an organized way. This seriously limited our time to work on artwork and achieve good results within the time allowed. Setting up good questioning strategies can take a lot of time, but one of the most important things for a curriculum of Visual Culture is to include the students' own experiences. Without this element, its magic ingredient of tapping into the students' interest will not work. Before and during this research, many adult colleagues and friends confided to me that this concept of viewing and analyzing images seemed foreign to them. My conviction, however, was strengthened with this research. Time to analyze these images may feel wasted or frivolous, but is one of the most important parts of working with Visual Culture (Duncum, 2008). With any Visual Culture experience, it is utmost important to take time to unpack images to discover all the various layers of meaning contained within.

Modeling good discussion could be the most important part of a curriculum that includes Visual Culture. In this research site, many students did not display experience with large group discussions, or even smaller group discussions. This could be because in their homeroom classes they do not engage with material in this way, and do individual activities or use technology to learn. This could also be because these students had a specific expectation of what was going to happen in art class, and when this expectation was not met they were confused. Finally, the age and maturity level of the students in question could be inhibiting their ability to have good

discussion about things they feel so strongly about, such as images of celebrities, in their transition from Piaget's classical stages of concrete and formal operations as documented in Lansing's (1966) article. Only a small number of my adolescent students were able to think critically about abstract concepts and several were able to scaffold on older peers' and adults' opinions. Even though recent psychological studies (Parent, Rasier, Gerard, Heger, Roth, Mastronardi, & Bourguignon, 2005) have suggested that some students may start full adolescence as early as 10 years old and may be transitioning out of that stage, it is unclear if the physical and mental development of my students is happening at similar rates. I speculate that this may also constitute a reason why the majority of literature written about Visual Culture is focused on older students.

Though an underlying focus of this research was to remove the emphasis from the skills of art production, the adolescents participating in this research still had a desire to make art in a skilled and representational way. While this was not part of my primary research question, there was a noted difference in the students' view of success in their artworks from Project 1, *My Famous Self,* to Project 2, *LOL Animals.* Reviewing the concerns from my own research notes during Project 1, and listening to audiotaped feedback from this first project, I was able to alter the lesson delivery in Project 2. I used technology, handouts and access to online animal drawing guides to avoid the confusion I observed while instructing the lessons in Project 1**.**

The final concern of this type of program would be the availability of technology within the classroom. There are obviously ways to interact with Visual Culture without using technology, but since we use electronic devices and the internet to spread images, it was easiest to use these devices in conjunction with our investigation. While I was not able to have students creating, remixing, and sharing images online during class, we replicated those experiences with

activities we did in the classroom. It was fortunate that our class had access to student tablet computers, in which students used individually or shared with a partner. Working with this classroom technology for the first time, I was unsure how much we could do. There are many other ways we could have used these devices within the context of the lesson, but many students were unfamiliar with some of the skills needed to complete the activities, and so I decided that instructional time would be better spent teaching them how to discuss and create images traditionally rather than how to use technology. If this technology, as well as the digital projector with which I showed images and videos, would not have been available, the lesson delivery would have changed dramatically. In future lessons at this site, I would hope that their technology literacy will increase and we can integrate more technology into the classroom.

Implications for the Field of Art Education

In order to implement a curriculum of Visual Culture in the art classroom, the teacher must be willing to adapt, change, and re-contextualize lessons on a class-by-class basis to ensure that the students are having a successful and authentic experience. Furthermore, students must be trained to use a new set of dissecting and decoding skills in order to unpack the images used in the classroom. Visual Culture has been advocated for use in the visual art classroom by many theorists (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Duncum, 2010, Duncum, 2004; Freedman et al, 2013; Keifer-Boyd, 2007). While these theorists have identified proponents and building blocks of this (new) pedagogy, it is up to art teachers to figure out how best to implement this into their classroom teaching. Because Visual Culture is such a nebulous concept consisting of all the images that we see and experience each day, it is difficult to identify singular, specific ways that it can be used to teach children about the visual arts.

Conclusions

While this research has transformed and re-contextualized itself in different ways since its conception, this process has helped me understand more deeply the motivations behind my own teaching. The transformation and shifting of focus in itself is evidence that although the research about Visual Culture is constant, my pedagogy has always adjusted to cater to the needs of the particular groups of students I am currently teaching. In order to make this group of lessons applicable to the students at my current placement, I made a lot of changes to the original design, just as I would make adaptations to the standards that are given to me, or adjust lessons that I am supposed to teach as part of our school curriculum. Through this documentation, it seems as though I was trying to build a Visual Culture learning community, not by trying to force the students to all become interested in one part of Visual Culture, but rather by giving the students challenges that they would have to struggle though. The most organic conversation about the students' art came from lessons designed to really make students plan and then execute their ideas for their art based on a structure from outside the art classroom.

In addition, I learned that some aspects of visual and digital culture can be replicated in the art classroom, such as giving anonymous feedback, but others cannot. Without inventing a replica of the internet structures students use to create and share Visual Culture experiences, I was not able to completely replicate the surge of creativity that can happen online. In the research some flashes of this creativity showed through during the regimented art periods, but not in the same way that they can if students have unlimited time and space to formulate ideas and remix images.

Another useful skill within this research is the participation in the artistic process. Through this study of Visual Culture students were also guided through the process of art creation that practicing artists use every day. Students were inspired by images and their world,

created work in practice, and then analyzed their work, and critiqued he work of others to continue the process. This artistic process could be used in any type of art production, but it was most appropriate to connect it with the study of Visual Cultural images, because these are things that students are actively viewing and thinking about each day. Using these Visual Culture experiences as a base was a strong enough catalyst for students to undergo the artistic process with a motivation that might not exist otherwise.

Finally, though Visual Culture may be extremely relevant to us in the current swell of visual language, this may not always be true. Though my pedagogy may use Visual Culture as a focus for learning, my teaching is not married to this theory. There must be room for different theories of art education to combine and mingle within any given teaching style in order to fit the needs of the students. Through this trial, I found that Visual Culture, while omnipresent, does not always contain the best and most relevant ideas for young adolescents in a fourth grade art room. I would recommend that a continuation of this study be conducted at higher grade levels to find out the changes that occur in students' relationships with digital and visual culture as they progress in adolescent development.

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