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PERCEPTIONS OF OPEN-ENDED ART BY FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS AND
THEIR TEACHER

By

Amanda Swanson

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Amanda Marie Swanson is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of Education and the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

PERCEPTIONS OF OPEN-ENDED ART BY FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS AND
THEIR TEACHER

By

Amanda Swanson

This qualitative classroom action research began with a problem that developed
over the course of a school year at a rural kindergarten through fourth-grade Title One
elementary school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Before beginning this research
project, many of the students were highly engaged in their learning; however, some
students were identified as not engaged and seemed to be coasting. The teacher
researcher decided to try something new to engage all fourth-grade students. She decided
to present her students with a constructivist approach to solving the problem of stacks of
unwanted phonebooks from the district office. She challenged fourth-grade students to
each repurpose a phonebook, thus inviting students to be an active participant in
constructing reality and not just a passive recorder of one's environment (Elkind, 2004).
Rather than being told what to do with the materials, students had to make a plan for
themselves. The only instructions were that students must repurpose the phonebook so
that the phonebook became something new. What possible impacts might open-ended art
projects have on the perceptions of fourth-grade students learning in art? Data were
collected in the form of student and teacher completed rubrics, open-ended and multiple-
choice questions completed by participants, and the teacher researcher's anecdotal notes.
Four primary themes in the data: student choice, social interaction, recycling/repurposing,
and success. This research will inform the teacher researcher's current and future

classroom teaching practices regarding the use of constructivism in fourth-grade art

lessons.

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In addition to the thesis committee at Northern Michigan University who guided me through the thesis process, my work would not have been possible without the support of my friends, colleges, and family. Thank you especially to the colleges of mine that undertook this thesis project along with me. Your parallel work was inspiring and encouraging. It is incredible to work with such fine educators. Thank you to all those inspiring educators that came before me, blazing a path of excellence in education. I sit on your shoulders. Thank you to my family, especially my husband, for picking up the slack and allowing me the time to spend on this important project.

Last but not least, thank you to all of my students whom I learn from every day. It is because of you that this thesis research is so important. My goal is to continue learning and working to become the best teacher that I can for my students both now and in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I teach at a rural kindergarten through fourth-grade Title One elementary school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. My schedule includes teaching three fourth-grade sections of art and technology. All fourth-graders attend my classes once in the computer lab, as I am the school's technology teacher, and once in the art room, as I am the art teacher. Over the course of the year, I noticed lessons in which instructions offered students choices seemed to increase students' engagement, interest, and quality of artwork. All students seemed to enjoy these art lessons and fourth-graders seemed to feel more ownership in their choices when the lesson was more open-ended. Recently, fourth-grade students completed an open-ended recycled art project in which they were instructed to create something new using old phonebooks. When lessons were open-ended and challenged students to solve a problem, students were even more engaged. What impacts might open-ended art projects have on the learning of art in fourth-grade students?

Statement of the Problem

In general, most fourth-graders are excited to enter both the computer lab and the art room each week. Fourth-grade students seem to enjoy working with computers and working with various materials in the art room. I began noticing a trend as the school year progressed. Some fourth-grade males seemed to stop identifying themselves as artists. These male students began to show signs of disinterest. When students cease to see themselves as creative, I fear a lack of creativity may have negative impacts on their learning in general, now and in the future. Fourth-grade males showing disinterest in art

and creative activities is a problem in my classroom. Fourth-grade students have completed an open-ended art project involving the repurposing of phonebooks. Most students seemed to be highly engaged and the quality of work also seems to be greater. Some quality projects were being made by some of the previously "disinterested" males. This classroom action research paper will detail my findings as I look closely at my perceptions as a teacher researcher and the perceptions of my fourth-graders as artists regarding an open-ended art lesson.

Background on the Problem

Watts (2005) described his study in which he surveyed students between the ages of seven and eleven about why children make art, why adults make art, why art is important, and will they make art as an adult. The younger students responded more positively to the questions about making art as an adult. The highest percentage of students said that art was important for their personal development. As students grow older, some students lose interest in art (Watts, 2005). I also wonder why some students seem to lose interest in art, and what I can do to encourage creativity in their work. When older students are highly engaged in art, I wonder why. What parts of the open-ended art project foster this engagement?

Pavlou (2006) studied eleven and twelve year olds' perception of art competence, motivation and engagement in art activities. Sixteen students were interviewed after filling out a survey and indicating interest in being interviewed. Students were selected to be interviewed based on their perceived competence in art. Students low in confidence were described in a similar way to how I described my disinterested fourth-grade students. Low in confidence students remarked how they were motivated to finish

artwork and interested in the creative process when drawing tools were not used in the project. The projects the students note as the most interesting were also projects where a lot of student choice was included. Students also noted that projects were most engaging when they included the use of technology. Multiple step projects also were a favorite of the students. More complex projects interested and challenged students (Pavlou, 2006). Why do multiple step and complex projects challenge students in an engaging way? Could this be true for my own fourth-grade art students?

Theoretical Framework

The goal of this classroom action research is to inform my own classroom practice with a Constructivism approach to integrating open-ended art. Constructivism represents a mixed and differing body of theoretical approaches across many disciplines, including education and psychology. In education, Constructivist Theory involves the child as an active participant in constructing reality and not just a passive recorder of one's environment (Elkind, 2004). Two versions of constructivism have educational implications as termed by Piaget and Vygotsky. First, socio-interactional constructivism is widely used in school curriculum across the United States. Social constructivism puts emphasis on the collaborative nature of learning and the significance of cultural and social context. All intellectual functions are believed to originate in, and are explained as products of social interactions. Piaget theorized that children develop by learning and achieving knowledge. Children adapt to existing conditions in order to 'fit in' better with the surrounding conditions and their environment as a whole. Second, Vygotsky's cultural-historical or activity-based constructivism is expanding within the education community today (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006). Vygotsky theorized that children develop

and learn as they actively change the world. Simultaneously, children change themselves and gain knowledge of themselves and of the world through changing the world. Change and learning happens all through the process of transformative collaborative practices with other people (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006). As children learn about their environment through living in and changing their world, ideas develop. The theories of Vygotsky and Piaget suggest a close association between constructivist strategies and teaching methods such as open-ended art projects, these theoretical views guide my thinking about my research question.

Throughout my professional career I have taught both in the self-contained classroom, where I taught all subject areas, and in classrooms where I focused on two or three content areas. In both of these teaching and learning situations the collaborative and interactive aspects of constructivism have been apparent in my classrooms. I have always been a social and hands-on learner myself. I enjoy collaborating with colleagues and have found the product of a group can be more meaningful than a solo-project. I value the ideas and thinking of students and work to incorporate the interests of students into the subject area or learning topic, when working with students in both the self-contained classroom and the content area classroom. When learning is enjoyable and meaningful for the students it is also more enjoyable to teach students that are engaged. I find myself more excited to work with students on a difficult project if the students are just as excited or more to work through a problem. It can be difficult to allow students to work collaboratively but my years of classroom management have given me the experience to effectively teach students how to work collaboratively. In my experience, the product and energy present during student collaboration efforts seem to increase student learning.

Elements of constructivism can be found in nearly all aspects of the teaching and learning environments that I create for students.

Metacognition or meta-learning is a concept concerned with the development of an awareness of oneself as a learner and the application of this knowledge toward becoming a more effective learner (Winters, 2011). Teaching and learning in the art classroom is about supporting students and guiding them to find their way as a creative individual. It is my job to guide and encourage students in the highly sought-after quality of creativity by educators, colleges, and employers. Learning about learning, meta-learning, can be used to make content area topics and characteristics and expectations more explicit to students. The reflective process associated with meta-learning helps students to build more sophisticated conceptions of a subject which in turn, may help students develop more advanced conceptions of learning. Meta-learning helps students make conscious changes in their methods of learning and help them become more productive and independent learners (Winters, 2011).

Research Question

Based on prior teaching experience, students seem to attend better and produce higher quality art when choice, visuals, technology, or open-ended problem-based projects are incorporated. Investigating the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher concerning learning through open-ended art raises the following research question:

What patterns can be found in the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher about learning through open-ended art?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are essential to the classroom action research of student and teacher perceptions relating to open-ended research.

Authentic education. Authentic education ensures that material taught, how material is taught, and how the learning of material is assessed, are all closely connected to "real world" activities. Students use their prior knowledge to engage with "real" problems, tasks and challenges (Splitter, 2009).

Classroom action research. Classroom action research is research done *by* teachers *for* themselves. Classroom action research is systematic inquiry conducted by educational professionals with interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how teachers teach and students learn (Mertler, 2006).

Constructivism. A theory in education where the child is an active participant in constructing reality and not just a passive recorder of one's environment (Elkind, 2004).

Fourth-grade students. Fourth-grade students are students between the ages of nine and ten that are entering their fifth year of education. Most students enter public schooling at the age of five and attend kindergarten. Some fourth-grade students participated in a pre-school program or developmental kindergarten program before kindergarten. Fourth-graders attending public school in the researcher's district spend most of the day within a self-contained classroom with one highly qualified elementary certified teacher. They attend specialized classes throughout the week such as music, art,

physical education, and technology in a separate classroom with different area specialized teachers.

Open-ended art. Open-ended art is the product of an art-making process that is driven by student choice. Open-ended art activities avoid patterns and predetermined outcomes provided by a teacher. The art produced by each student is different due to individual student's input (Szyba, 1999).

Perceptions. The researcher defines perceptions as the way one thinks about or understands someone or something (Merriam-Webster, 2014). In the case of this research, the *something* is open-ended art.

Problem-based learning. Problem-based learning is "an inquiry process that resolves questions, curiosities, doubts, and uncertainties about complex phenomena in life. A problem is any doubt, difficulty, or uncertainty that invites or needs some kind of resolution" (Barell, 2007, p. 3). Problem-based learning is a way to challenge students to become deeply engaged in a quest for knowledge relating to their own questions. Problem-based learning is a student-centered approach to learning (Barell, 2007).

Success. Throughout this action research I define student success in art with student effort during the art-making process. I know the abilities of my elementary students and I attribute success when students display increasing effort in their work to improve their creative process and in turn improve their product. Students are expected to take risks and challenge themselves during each lesson and project. While in art I attribute student success to student effort, in other subjects success would be defined

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differently. Success in other subject areas can be measured with problems answered correctly, fluency scores, or test percentages.

Significance of the Study

This paper details my work during a classroom action research project in which I sought to inform my teaching practice. Do my current teaching strategies value the differing strengths and hidden literacies that students bring to the classroom? I see a gradual shift happening within our schools from a "sit-still and listen while the teacher talks" to more student-centered, creativity-driven projects that cross over curricular boundaries. This action research will inform my teaching as well as allow me to spark critical conversations with colleagues about the perceptions of open-ended art concerning the learning of fourth-grade students.

Overview of the Proposed Study

This classroom action research was conducted during one of my fourth-grade art classes. Gender demographics, as reported by the school district, includes fifteen males and ten females. I teach art and technology at a rural Kindergarten through fourth-grade Title One elementary school located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. During this qualitative action research study, I examined my perceptions as a teacher researcher and the perceptions of my fourth-graders as artists regarding an open-ended art lesson. I kept a research journal with anecdotal descriptions of conversations with students and between students during class periods. Upon completion of the art project, I asked students to fill out the same evaluation rubric that I used to evaluate their work (see Appendix C). These evaluation items are typical of standard teaching practices.

Limitations

Some limitations exist when generalizing the findings of this study. The findings were from one fourth-grade art class following one open-ended project during the school year; therefore, generalizing findings to other subjects, students, or classroom situations would be difficult. The basic findings of this study will have implications for both my current practice as an art teacher and my future practice as a general education classroom teacher.

Experiences build upon one another, inform the teacher, and improve professional practice. Additionally, students responded to their art during one class period following a project that spanned several weeks. Students could have made different judgments of their work on another day.

Summary

Although most fourth-graders appear to be highly engaged in art activities, some seemed to become increasingly disinterested as they progressed through their fourth-grade school year. Toward the end of the school year, fourth-grade students were challenged to complete an open-ended art activity. The work and choice involved in this project seemed to motivate all students to finish the project and create high quality works. I sought to gain insight into the perceptions of my fourth-grade students about their work and mine pertaining to this open-ended art activity. I will explain what patterns I found in these perceptions as found in students' reflections. The findings of this study will inform my own teaching practice within my art, technology, and general education classroom.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the school year, some students, especially male students, in my fourth-grade classes seemed to become increasingly disinterested in creative art activities. I felt as though the students were failing to see themselves as artists. This disinterest and lack of creativity in students' work concerned me as a teacher. I feared that a lack of creative thinking might negatively affect present and future learning of students. The following literature addresses the current research and thinking surrounding open-ended art activity, problem-based learning, effective art instruction, and student perceptions of art activities.

Art Education

While most literature relating to art education focuses on how schooling and education could better serve students and teachers in their quest to learn and practice the best strategies to foster creativity, Baldacchino (2008) argues that art education should be 'deschooled'. Today's system of education assumes learner-centered education and gives "lip service to progressive education" while allowing no space for a system where "learning could become open enough to give learners their due autonomy" (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 248). For arts education to allow students to create freely, students must be outside of the school environment Baldacchino asserts. The removal of physical school buildings would be unreasonable, the debate is raised over the place art has within school education systems. Concerning art in education, art is neither natural nor necessary to schooling, and that art itself is recognition of groundlessness so there is no aesthetic or

pedagogical imperative for art to be included in schooling. Since art remains part of education, the teaching and learning of art are trapped between the assumptions of process and product. Artists should remain free of mind by the notion that art is neither a product nor an object, and cannot be reduced to a process. Schools should allow for diverse pedagogy where art practices are marked by open-ended conclusions. Art learning will not be able to "emerge unless a radically different set of conditions give way to a state of affairs where knowledge is a matter to be *discovered* but never *determined*, and where a fixed ground is transformed into a wide horizon" (Baldacchino, 2008, p.241).

Unlike Baldacchino, researchers Smithrim and Upitis (2005) posit that arts instruction in elementary schools makes important contributions to the motivation of children toward all learning, creativity, and communication skills. All of these areas increase students' engagement in school. Smithrim and Upitis followed a quasi-experimental design to select 650 students from 15 elementary schools across Canada. These students were attending elementary schools that were participating in Learning Through the Arts (LTTA) programs for at least the next three consecutive years. Smithrim and Upitis selected 20 control schools for comparison. 2,602 students were studied as part of the control group. The control group included students from schools that had a different special initiative in place such as a technology integration initiative or from schools with no special initiatives in place. The researchers collected quantitative data from standardized tests in reading, writing, and mathematics. They also collected data from surveys about students' attitudes about school, learning in the arts, and hobbies. Qualitative data was collected through open-ended survey questions, one-on-one

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interviews, and focus groups. The treatment groups received arts integrated curriculum designed by teaching artists in collaboration with classroom teachers. Control groups did not receive arts integrated curriculum. In the third year of the program, students in the treatment group scored higher than the two control groups on mathematic computation and estimation. Learning in the arts went hand-in-hand with engagement in learning in school.

Catterall and Peppler (2007) used quasi-experimental research design with pre- and post-test measures and treatment and control groups to investigate the effects of art education on student self-efficacy, a sense of control of one's surroundings (Bandura, 1977), and creativity. Catterall and Peppler focused on two inner-city art programs that worked with students impacted by poverty and issues surrounding economic hardship. The treatment group consisted of 103 students in third grade classrooms and the control group consisted of 76 students in third grade classrooms that did not participate in the art programs. A survey instrument developed by the researchers was based on the Torrance Test for Creativity and included scales to assess students' self-efficacy. Both the treatment and control groups were given the instrument before and after the programs. Data collected from the pre-and post-tests and observations of art and academic classes were analyzed. Key findings of the study include those students in the treatment group made significant gains in their self-efficacy where in the control group only one third of students made significant gains in self-efficacy. Students in the treatment group also made significant gains on the originality subscale of the creativity measures. Originality was measured by students' beliefs that they could generate creative ideas in art and gain originality in broader thinking patterns. High quality visual arts education encourages a

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sense of self-efficacy, creativity, and original thinking. All of these attributes would benefit all students.

Problem-based Learning and Open-ended Art Activity

Minimally guided instructional approaches called by various names such as discovery learning, problem-based learning, inquiry learning, experiential learning, and constructivist learning are not effective teaching and learning approaches (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). When students are challenged to solve "authentic" problems within information-rich environments teachers are assuming the learners constructing their own solutions leads to the most effective learning experience. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) argue that students do not have the capability to learn all the important information necessary for learning. "Minimal guidance during instruction is significantly less effective and efficient than guidance specifically designed to support the cognitive processing necessary for learning" (Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark, 2006, p. 76). The authors assert that teachers who attempt to implement constructivist instruction in their classrooms end up providing considerable guidance to students who learn very little.

Hallam, Lee, and Das Gupta (2014) study student art by exploring the conversations and interactions that lead to the creation of artwork. Their research is centered on the artistic process rather than the finished product. By studying the narrative associated with students' art one can conclude that students engage in social talk while working, and this talk influences their work that makes the art a collaborative activity (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014). The strong presence of materiality, elemental and physical aspects surrounding art creation are important to the students' art process and product. I think about my own fourth-grade students and how each of them had to

negotiate for space when creating their open-ended project from a phonebook. I wonder what influences the physical and social learning spaces had on students' art.

In his book, *Awakening Genius in the Classroom*, Armstrong (1998) cites twelve qualities of genius that students exhibit in the classroom. He urges teachers to learn the signs of these geniuses and to encourage students by fostering learning through students' natural talents. Three of these genius qualities pertain to the work my fourth-grade students completed during the open-ended phonebook project. They are imagination, creativity, and inventiveness. Armstrong (1998) asserts that imagination has become something negative in some classrooms rather than a potential source of cognitive power that a student might use to write stories, put on plays, create art, or engage in other activities that relate to important school outcomes. "Creativity designates the capacity to give birth to new ways of looking at things, the ability to make novel connections between disparate things, and the knack for seeing things that might be missed by the typical way of viewing life" (Armstrong, 1998, p. 6). While creativity is primarily the work of the mind, inventiveness implies a certain "hands-on" quality sometimes not associated with creativity. Students are naturally inventive in that they often come up with bizarre and humorous uses for common things. Armstrong asserts that educators are afraid to allow students time to exercise their inventive natures for fear that time creating would take valuable time away from the core curriculum. Armstrong (1998) argues that inventiveness should be part of the core curriculum allowing students to contribute to whatever is being studied with their cognitive powers and thereby enriching the experience of learning.

Student Perceptions of Art and Open-ended Art Activities

A qualitative research study by Watts (2005) addressed the attitudes of children toward making art. Three hundred sixteen students ages 7 to 11 at a primary school in the United Kingdom were asked, 'Why do children make art?' 'Why do adults make art?' 'Do you think that you will make art when you are an adult?' 'How is art important?' Many unique responses to each question were gathered. Responses to each question were categorized under headings. Data analysis involved an interpretive approach where responses were categorized under headings and shown as percentages of all students that participated at a particular age. Data were arranged to show differences between the responses of younger and older students. Younger students demonstrated more positive attitudes toward making art than older students demonstrated. The majority of students said they make art for fun or enjoyment and adults make art for money and fame. Almost three-fourths of students reported responses to the question 'How is art important?' pertaining to themes of communication, aesthetics, and personal development. Students reported that although art is a powerful communication tool, students make art because it is enjoyable. Also worth noting is that students did not identify development of creative thinking as a primary reason for making art. Older students lose interest in art activities as they grow older. Individual results show that possibilities exist for engagement with art activities. How teachers explain the reasons for art making may have a significant impact upon the attitudes of students. While not all students will make art as adults, schools have an interest in encouraging students to develop, extend, and retain their curiosity and creativity in our visual world.

A qualitative research study by Malin (2013) looked at several cases studies of student artists. Malin searched for patterns in students' art making by examining student art products and observing student art making activities within the art classroom, general classroom, and home settings. Themes for why students made art appeared in the research. Participants were 14 children including four first graders, two second graders, four third graders, one fourth-grader and three fifth graders. Ethnically, students represented the school's diversity and were six girls and eight boys. Some students were avid artists who worked on art projects whenever possible and others were less interested in art and did not much more than complete assignments. Students attended art classes four times a week. The visual art class provided many open-ended art-making opportunities for students. Ethnographic methods that included field observations in the art classroom, interviews with students and analysis of documents, and artifacts from students' art activity were used. Field observations lasted one academic school year. Malin collected observational data during six class periods each week. In-home and after school club observations and individual and focus group interviews were included and analyzed during data collections. An emergent coding method was used to determine patterns in the data. Five categories emerged to describe why students made art. Categories included storytelling, representing self and experiences, experimentation, imagination, and aesthetics and relationships. All artistic activities were intentional and driven by the personal objectives that students set for themselves. The five listed intentions are not the only possible intentions students may engage in their making of art.

Pavlou (2006), in a small-scale qualitative study, looked at students' perceptions of competence and motivation toward art experienced at school. Students' perceptions

and motivations are very important in shaping learning and teaching processes. Pavlou focused on the role that perceptions of competence play in students' quality of involvement and achievement in art. Participants included sixteen eleven and twelve-year-olds chosen with consideration to their age, gender, and stated perceptions of competence in art. Participants were eight males and eight females from middle to lower-middle socio-economic backgrounds with varying perceived abilities in art making. Students' interviews were semi-structured and included questions about students' feelings toward art and art activities. Interviews also included questions about most and least favorite school activities, and about perceptions of confidence, art's usefulness, support given by the teacher, processes of art making and engagement with art outside of school. Interviews were conducted in groups of three and individually where students were asked to talk about specific art work. Interviews were transcribed and main categories were sought using a constant comparative method of interview data analysis. Two main themes connected to students' motivation and engagement in art activities emerged: issues relating to initial engagement and issues relating to level of engagement. Engagement in art activities and the quality of students' engagement was tied to perceptions of art activities' importance, interest level, usefulness, and worthiness of students' time and effort. Pavlou indicated the importance of teachers in encouraging students to create art and put time into creative efforts. Teachers should consider what students' think in regards to the nature of art activities and how they capture and maintain student interest. Pavlou concluded that art activities engaged both male and female students with both high and low confidence in art described in the following ways: were novel or unusual activities, were complex and more challenging, helped students build

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skills such as observation, introduced students to other forms of art such as abstract, allowed for choice and a sense of control over work, had topics students' were interested in, and allowed collaboration and social interaction.

In a qualitative study, Winters (2011) studied students' perceptions about meta-learning or learning about learning. Meta-learning is a concept concerned with the development of an awareness of oneself as a learner. The student then applies knowledge of one's learning to be a more effective learner. Winters states that learning within the art classroom is open-ended in that students many times determine their own learning needs. Successful art students operate with a high degree of independence and self-direction. Winters developed a three-zone inquiry cycle visual to help students reflect on their learning within art as an ongoing, open-ended conversation with one's work. The study involved 22 freshman students enrolled in a fine arts degree program at a university. Students participated in seminars that introduced them to the idea of meta-learning. A questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data on the approach as well as the components such as the inquiry cycle visual. Ninety one percent of students agreed that the inquiry visual contained information that helped them think about their learning in art. Seventy two percent of participants agreed that learning about meta-learning pertaining to their work in art was helpful. Students were generally very positive about meta-learning and using the inquiry visual. One negative factor reported by students was the time that learning about meta-learning took away from their actual art-making. Engaging art students in meta-cognitive thinking about learning enables students to become reflective, self-reliant and independent learners. I think meta-cognitive thinking is a worthwhile goal for educators at all levels.

Summary

These studies provided me a model to emulate as I conducted my own classroom action research about the perceptions of fourth-grade students and my own perceptions as a teacher of art. While some researchers argue that art education should be deschooled and given a separate place where it can be taught correctly Baldacchino (2008) others assert that art education is an invaluable part of public schooling and has beneficial implications for all academic areas (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005 and Catterall & Peppler, 2007). Minimally guided instructional approaches called by various names such as discovery learning, problem-based learning, inquiry learning, experiential learning, and constructivist learning are not effective teaching and learning approaches (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Students need guidance from expert teachers and that even when teachers try to implement constructivist approaches teachers fail to leave students to solve problems and end up guiding the learning significantly. The role of the entire surrounding environment of art-making and the environment's influence on art creation was evident in a study exploring the conversations and interactions that lead to the creation of artwork (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014). Students are natural proprietors of genius qualities. When fostered in the school environment these genius qualities create a more engaging learning experience for students (Armstrong, 1998). Other researchers detailed their work to study the perceptions of students and teachers surrounding art activity, the reasons students create art, and the importance of art and art creation in general (Watts, 2005; Pavlou, 2006; Malin, 2013; & Winters, 2011). The meta-learning or thinking about one's learning is an important and valuable learning tool to improve the art-making and learning process in the art classroom (Winters, 2011).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to understand my use of open-ended art projects by investigating both fourth-grade students and my own perception of art following the completion of an open-ended art project. As I looked closely at these perceptions, I also wondered what patterns can be found in the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher about learning through open-ended art. This chapter includes a description of the participants of my study and the context of my research, my data collection procedure and data, an analysis of data, and a summary.

Research Context

This study of fourth-grader's perceptions of open-ended art took place in a rural Kindergarten through fourth-grade Title One elementary school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. To inform my own teaching practice, I chose to study my current teaching practice of using open-ended art projects by systematically considering students' perceptions upon their completion of an open-ended art project. This classroom action research was conducted during one of my fourth-grade art classes. The class consists of fifteen males and ten females as reported by the school district. The study took place during the last month of school.

Students began their open-ended art project in April. The open-ended project commenced after I received a delivery of several hundred phonebooks from our school district office. I did not know what students could do with phonebooks; I just did not want to see them go to a landfill. I presented my students with a challenge to repurpose

their phonebook in a creative way. I showed students many pictures of what other artists had made with phonebooks and phonebook paper in a Google Presentation. My directions for the assignment were simple: Each student's phonebook must not look like a phonebook when they are finished. Materials and recycled objects both from school and home could be incorporated into the project. Students seemed excited about the challenge and seemed inspired by the pictures of other phonebook projects. I wanted to know more about what was different with this assignment as compared to the others I had assigned throughout the school year. Why did this project seem more engaging to students? Many students later chose to display their finished project in the school art show.

After completing the phonebook project during approximately four class periods, fourth-grade students evaluated their work and experience with the phonebook project toward the end of May and beginning of June, in one class period. My teaching practice already included a process of evaluating art choices and a finished product was part of the routine after finishing a project. Student success throughout the phonebook project caused me to want to analyze data from students and myself in order to find any patterns in our perceptions after the completion of the open-ended project.

Research Participants

Participants included twenty fourth-graders from my art class. While all students completed the self-evaluation art rubric and answered questions about the phonebook project, only those students that returned a permission slip signed by their parents indicating consent for the students' data to be analyzed were included in this study. Permission letters were sent home with all fourth grade students that completed the self-evaluation. One classroom teacher (class A) was more proactive in reminding students to

return the permission letters than the other. Participants were primarily from class A with a return rate of 60%. Class B had a return rate of 20%. Class A students represented 75% of the participants in my research and class B represented 25% of the participants. Nine females and eleven males returned permission slips to participate in the study. Participants represented a range of ability levels, socioeconomic status, and motivation levels in the art classroom. Participants represented 25% of the fourth-grade population at the elementary school.
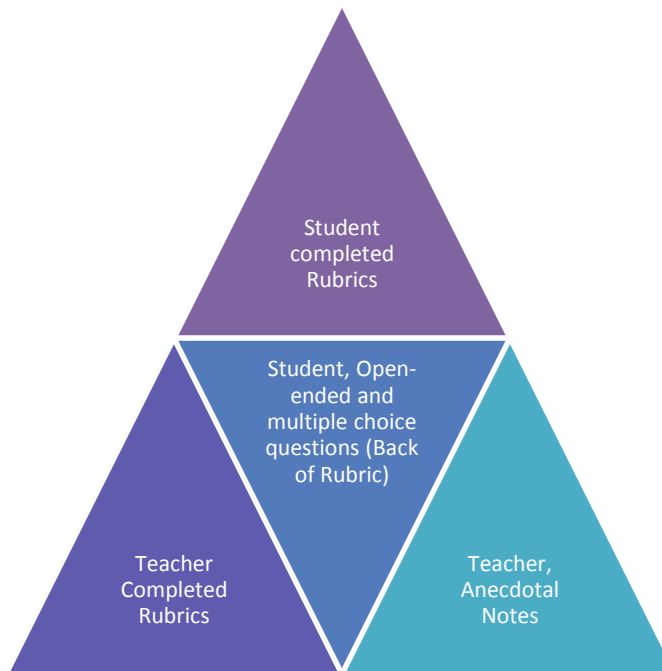
Sources of Data

Figure 1: Visual of all data sources.

Student completed rubric. All fourth-grade students were asked to complete a self-evaluation rubric for their phonebook project (see Appendix C). The rubric was a process oriented rubric that enabled students to evaluate what the students thought of their own work during the phonebook project. The rubric was not a tool to

comprehensively evaluate the product that was created by the students. Other rubrics would have been used if the product of students was being studied. The rubric could be considered a meta-learning tool. The teacher researcher first read each section aloud to students before asking students to choose the phrase that best represented their efforts or work during the phonebook project. After each category was completed, students added up the total number of points received on the rubric.

Open-ended and multiple choice questions. After students had completed the rubric they were asked to explain their thinking further by answering four questions printed on the back side of the paper that the rubric was on (see Appendix D). Students were instructed to write detailed information that might help the teacher improve her instruction practices and inform her about the students' thinking concerning important aspects of the phonebook project. Upon completing both sides, the self-evaluation art rubric and the questions, papers were placed in an envelope. Students began working on another art activity when they finished.

Teacher completed rubric. Before reading students' rubrics and answers to questions, I filled out the same rubric for each student concerning their work during the phonebook project and their final product. The rubric was a tool to enable me to evaluate a students' work and art-making process. The rubric was written so that students would be easily able to decide which statements best fit them. I used the same rubric for consistency during this action research even though the rubric was worded for students. I referred to my research journal and photos that I had taken of students' projects. I totaled the point score for each student using the rubric. My intent in scoring students' work was to enable me to compare my evaluation of students' learning during the open-ended art

project with the evaluations students made of themselves and their work throughout the project.

Anecdotal notes. Before and after collecting data with the fourth-grade students I wrote about my thinking concerning students' work and my perceptions of the open-ended phonebook project. I wrote about how students were responding to the completion of the project and the experience of evaluating their work and the assignment of the project. When analyzing my research journal, I included only those students who had permissions from a parent or guardian to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

When analyzing my data I followed the data analysis and interpretation process detailed by Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2009) similar to the comparative method for grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The comparative analytical method described by Glaser and Strauss can be applied to social units of any size. Both Holly, Arhar, & Kasten (2009) and Glaser & Strauss (1967) detail similar data analysis methods and steps to make sense of collected data. Following are the steps found in Holly, Arhar, & Kasten (2009) that I used to analyze my data set.

Organize and sort data. I first readied myself to analyze and interpret my data by reviewing my research question. Keeping my research question in mind helped me view the data through the appropriate lens; looking for patterns in what the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher have of an open-ended art project. Next, I assembled all of my data sources and separated out data concerning students that I had parent or guardian permission to analyze. Data from students who did not turn in a

permission slip is not included in this analysis in any way. I made a copy of student data to keep originals free of notes and marks.

Read and reread data. After data from all sources was organized and sorted, I read through all data sources once entirely, mentally noting any themes. During the second read, I highlighted words or phrases that seemed to represent reoccurring themes in the data. I also wrote notes in the margins of the data pieces.

Categorize data. During a third and fourth read of the data set, I looked for words, phrases, behaviors, ways of thinking, events that seemed to repeat in my data. I made a list of the themes immerging and grouped data pieces into each category theme. Notable outliers were kept separate but noted for further analysis. As I assembled data pieces into categories, some categories were revised to include a broader set of data pieces. Patterns began to emerge in the themed categories.

Look for patterns. After themed categories were labeled and data were grouped into these categories, patterns emerged. Certain words, phrases, and ways of thinking repeated themselves in both student and teacher writing. I thought about the relationships these ideas had with one another and how their meanings connected to my classroom practice of open-ended art. I color-coded the data pieces that I highlighted earlier. I counted those color-coded pieces and determined their frequency. I wanted to know how many students responded in a particular way compared to the entire group. I also wanted to know of any patterns in thinking that differed between males and females.

Synthesize. After taking apart all of the data, it was time to put it all back together. I took information from each of the data sources that I had collected and

organized in the charts. I noted the most frequent and significant findings to address my research question.

Make assertions. What do the data mean? What issues emerge from the categories of data? What are the perspectives of each group? What statements can be made based on the analyzed data? In chapters 4 and 5, I explain my thinking concerning each of these questions, making assertions that have implications as to how I will improve my current and future teaching practice.

Summary

In this chapter I explained my data sources and how I analyzed the data set. This chapter included a description of the context of my research, participants of my study, data collection procedure, and data analysis procedures. The qualitative research I conducted served the purpose to inform my current teaching practice using open-ended art projects considering the perceptions of fourth-grade students and myself as their teacher. In chapter 4, I describe what patterns were found in the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher about learning through open-ended art. I detail how my data analysis led to certain assertions that will inform my current classroom teaching practice and what implications the synthesis of these assertions may have on my future teaching practice.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative research was to learn about the perceptions of fourth-grade students and the researcher as their teacher of open-ended art projects. As I looked closely at the data I collected, I wondered, "What patterns could be found in the perceptions of fourth-grade students and their teacher about learning through open-ended art?" This chapter includes a description of the patterns found in the data set, the themes that immerged from the student data set, the themes that immerged from the teacher data set, and a summary. I also explain what each emerging theme means in my classroom context.

Patterns that Emerged

When reading my data, I expected to find evidence of students enjoying the open-ended phonebook project. In my classroom, I had observed fourth-grade students especially enjoying their artwork during this time period. I did find several themes in the data related to why students enjoyed the phonebook project. I also found patterns in the perceptions of males and females that were interesting to me. The most common themes that emerged in the data collected from students were the social interaction during the project, choice in all aspects of the project, success, and recycling or repurposing materials. Other patterns in student responses worth noting were creativity and the visual presentation as a catalyst for inspiration. In the following sections of this chapter, I describe and explain each of these themes and provide examples from the data.

Four primary themes emerged from the data collected from my completed rubrics and my anecdotal notes as the teacher researcher. Themes from my teacher researcher data included students enjoying the social nature of the project, student success, lack of time, and student work ethic. Also worth noting, patterns emerged when I compared how students evaluated their work to how I evaluated their work. I explain these themes later in this chapter. I also include evidence from my anecdotal notes and teacher completed rubrics to support each theme. Chapter 5 explains what each theme indicated as I look to improve my current and future classroom practice.

Student and teacher completed rubric scores. When comparing the scores from the student rubrics and the scores from the teacher rubrics evaluations were similar. I was expecting a possible difference in how I would evaluate students' work compared to how students would evaluate their own work. Fourth-grade participants scored their work during the phonebook project with an average of 16.5 out of a possible 20 points. As their art teacher, I gave an average score of 16.1 points out of a possible 20 points. The students and I used the same rubric to determine the scores. Individual student scores varied from the scores I gave by up to five points. Seven students scored their work higher than what I thought and six students scored their work more harshly than I did.

Perceptions of Fourth-grade Students

Choice. Choice was the primary factor in students' enjoying the open-ended art project. Nineteen of twenty participating fourth-grade students (95%) remarked that choice was a factor of the phonebook project that they enjoyed. Males and females responded similarly with ten of eleven males (91%) and all nine females (100%) mentioning choice as a reason they liked the phonebook project.

The phonebook project allowed students choice during their work and thus gave students a sense of control over their work. Each of the art assignments that I presented to students allowed for some choice in art materials used, topic, or content. None allowed for as much choice as the phonebook project, which allowed for choice in project type, design, materials, theme, and function. Students were allowed to choose what they wanted to do with their phonebook. I presented several pictures of what others had done with phonebooks and phonebook paper in a presentation projected onto my screen to serve as inspiration. Most students came up with a list of ideas and sketches of ideas from which they chose the idea that they most wanted to create. Fourth-graders had to come up with a plan as to how they were going to go about making their project. Students could either draw their plan or write it out. Fourth-graders presented their plan to one or two friends that had to sign off on their project noting that the plan seemed feasible. Peers were instructed to ask each other questions to better understand what the details of the plan were. Peer discussions helped the fourth-graders see gaps in their plans and better solidify what actions they were going to take in order to complete the project. As the only teacher, I could not give the "okay" to all of the student projects. During this process, students chose what materials they wanted or needed to use and listed materials that they would need from me in the art room and those materials that they might need to gather from home.

Student remarks taken from the student completed rubric open-ended questions included:

You could do anything you wanted.

We could build whatever we wanted and we could use whatever we wanted.

I liked the fact that we had no supervision (teacher direction), and we could practically make anything.

We could do anything.

You could pick what you wanted to make.

Student choice was the motivating factor for a majority of my fourth-grade students. Allowing students to make many of the decisions involved in this open-ended project was a rewarding experience for most.

Social interaction. Fifteen of the 20 fourth-grade students (75%) that participated in this study made remarks relating to a social theme of enjoying working with peers. Males and females responded similarly; eight of 11 males (73%) and seven of nine females (78%) made remarks about working with peers during the open-ended art project.

Students were allowed to work with others if they wanted to during the phonebook project. The phonebook project was the first assigned project of the school year in which students were allowed to work in collaboration with a classmate if they wished to do so. After the explanation that students could work together, some could hardly wait to get together with a friend seated on the other side of the room while others were excited to make all of the design decisions themselves and not have to share the project with a friend. Some very social students chose to work alone and some not so social students decided to work with a partner or small group. Even though in real life

people collaborate frequently, collaboration in the elementary classroom can be a complicated process and many times the opportunity is denied to young students. Learning is commonly a social process; wanting to share the learning experience with a peer is natural. I was not surprised to find that students enjoyed the social learning opportunity presented to them during the open-ended phonebook project.

The following are student remarks taken from the student completed rubric open-ended questions as evidence pertaining to the social theme.

I made it with my friend.

You could work with a friend.

The best part was that I could work with my friends and talk at the same time.

You could have a partner. We worked good together.

Creating together was an engaging option for many of my fourth-grade students.

Recycling/repurposing. Thirteen of 20 participating fourth-grade students stated that they liked the recycling or repurposing aspect of the phonebook project. Again, males' and females' commented similarly, seven of 11 males (65%) and six of nine females (67%) mentioned recycling or repurposing the phonebooks and other items.

Fourth-grade students were presented with the phonebook project in the month of April. April is the month when we celebrate Earth Day and Arbor Day. April is also a time of year when classroom teachers are teaching students ways in which to be good stewards of Earth's natural resources. I rescued the many phonebooks used in this project from a wasteful fate in a dumpster or recycling bin. The evidence points to the notion that

students were motivated during this project, in part, because they were working with materials that had no other purpose than to become something new or better than what they were, unwanted phonebooks and items destined for a recycling plant or a landfill. A state of comfort is evident when working with materials that are not valuable or exceptional in nature. Students knew if they made a mistake more phonebooks and recycled materials to work with were available. Students also seemed excited to work with and change a familiar object such as the phonebook and make the phonebook new and different. Creating a new function for the ordinary phonebook was enticing.

The following are student remarks taken from the student completed rubric open-ended questions as evidence pertaining to the recycling/repurposing theme.

I liked making something while recycling.

I liked that we were helping the Earth.

Doing something good for our planet made students feel important and helpful while creating something new.

Success. Ten of 20 participating fourth-grade students (50%) noted that their success was a factor in their liking of the open-ended phonebook project. While only four of the eleven males (36%) in the group mentioned ideas relating to success, six of the nine females (67%) cited success as a factor of their approving of the phonebook project.

My direction to students was that they must take a phonebook and repurpose or create something new that no longer resembled a phonebook. I think at first students felt that my simple direction would be easier to accomplish than some of my other

assignments involving drawing materials and representing realistic objects, events, or places. Once students began the planning stages of the phonebook project they realized that creating with a phonebook was much more complicated. I think students were motivated by the openness of the project, excited by the many inspiring pictures of other projects made with phonebooks, and unintimidated by medium of the project, the phonebook. Students were challenged in positive ways by the complexity of an open-ended project. I found that students appropriately challenged themselves without my encouragement or frustration on their part. Most fourth-grade students finished their projects including several students that had failed to complete assignments earlier in the school year. Many students also chose to display their completed phonebook projects in the school-wide art show where they were charged with the task of choosing one piece that would best demonstrate their learning in art throughout the school year. These students wrote about their piece, recorded a vocal explanation of their thinking, and printed and attached a quick response code (QR code) to the art.

Success was the second theme. The following are student remarks taken from the student completed rubric open-ended questions as evidence pertaining to the theme of success.

I did something that was difficult. I finished it completely. My work was neat.

I liked making it look how it was supposed to.

Being efficient at it was something I did well.

Success in the art room can be difficult in some students' eyes when self-expectations are high. Students showed evidence of completing something and having it look the way it was supposed to, was a rewarding learning experience.

Table 1

Themes Found in Student Data

Category	N (%)	N Males (%)	N Females (%)
Choice in Project and Materials	19 (95)	10 (91)	9 (100)
Social	15 (75)	8 (73)	7 (78)
Recycling	13 (65)	7 (64)	6 (67)
Success	10 (50)	4 (36)	6 (67)
Creativity	9 (45)	5 (45)	4 (45)
Helpful Ideas from Presentation	8 (40)	6 (55)	2 (22)

Note. N = Number of students compared to all participants. N Males = Number of males compared to all 11 male participants. N Females = Number of females compared to all 9 female participants.

Other noteworthy themes. Since one of my classroom rules requires students to be fearless in regards to their creativity during art class, I expected more students than nine of the twenty participating fourth-graders to comment about their creative choices. I see one of my primary goals as an art teacher is to foster a creative mind in each of my students. Using one's creativity is not only one of my classroom rules; creative thinking is encouraged and praised during class. I may have to be more explicit about teaching students the importance of and inventive and creative mind in the arts as well as in all academic areas.

I also expected more students to say that they were influenced by the presentation that I presented at the start of the open-ended phonebook project. I know many students did get several ideas from the presentation from listening to their conversations and talking with them during the planning sessions in class. I think students were so far past

the initial stages of the project that they no longer were considering how they got started

with their idea. The idea had now become so much their own that it may have seemed

always to have been their own.

Perceptions of a Fourth-grade Art Teacher

My perceptions as the teacher researcher are based on my observations of

students' work during class periods, the notes that I took during the phonebook project,

and the rubrics that I filled out after the completion of the phonebook projects. Four

themes arose from the evidence containing my observations. The four themes include a

lack of time, work ethic of students, social interaction, and success. These themes tell

about my teaching in that they show how I value the working process of students over

their finished product at the elementary level concerning artwork. The evidence

surrounding the themes also illustrates how I noticed the importance of social interaction

in making art. Social interaction was also important to my fourth-grade students. In the

following paragraphs, I explain the evidence pertaining to the four themes found in my

teacher researcher data.

Lack of time. Fourth-grade students attend art class with me once a week for

forty minutes. Taking in account clean up time, unexpected interruptions, and missed

school due to our long harsh winters in Northern Michigan, my time with each fourth-

grade class seems brief. I noted several times that students would have been better off if

they would have had more time to work on their project, when writing about 11 of the 20

participating students (55%). I also noted that I wished I had more time to help

individuals. All students learn differently and at differing paces. Some students needed

more support than others. While some students were able to bring their project home to

get help from family members, others were only able to work on their project at school (in the general education classroom or in the art room during class), and still others were only able to work on their project during their art period, that was once a week for forty minutes. When thinking about implementing this project in the future, I will have to consider this challenge and make appropriate adjustments to enable all students to be successful. I further address this finding in Chapter 5.

Work ethic. Since my family and school environment value a strong work ethic, it was no surprise that I found myself noting how students were working throughout the project. Unlike some elementary art teachers, I value a student's work process over their product. The reader should consider the bias that I have concerning work ethic versus product. It is important that students learn to take initiative in creating learning experiences for themselves that challenge and stretch their capabilities without reaching the point of frustration. The presence of self-determination to work hard and do one's best work is a quality that is valued both in schooling and in the workplace. In my anecdotal notes, I wrote about how 10 of the 20 participants worked.

Social. Earlier in the school year, I presented my third grade classes with a project in which they had to work with a partner. Even at the end of the school year, third grade students remarked how that project was their favorite. I think the social project related so closely to what was important to the students and their friends that working through the assignment was very enjoyable to the group as a whole. After the completion of the third grade project, I thought to begin the phonebook project with my fourth-grade classes. In part, because I could not find a lesson that used phonebooks and would satisfy the needs and learning goals of all my fourth-grade students, and, in part, due to the fact that I had

experienced such success with the third grade project that required collaboration, I chose

to present the phonebook project in that way that I did. I explained that students were

allowed to work with partners or alone, they each had their own phonebook to repurpose,

and they were allowed to use other materials and supplies in the art room and at home to

create their piece. My anecdotal notes included evidence that I was observing students

enjoying the opportunity to collaborate with one another.

The following are remarks taken from my anecdotal notes as evidence pertaining

to the social theme.

She spent the time planning and talking over ideas with friends.

He spent his time talking to others.

She worked with (student name).

(Student name) worked with her best friend.

They did not always work well together; they argued in class during work time.

I mentioned students working with their peers when writing about nine of the 20

participating students (45%).

Success. Student success in the art classroom is important as it relates to student

learning and has implications for students' overall academic achievement. I see my role

in students' development as one that fosters students' appreciation for the arts and a

creative mindset that will serve them throughout their schooling, careers, and life in

general. Success in my art classroom will serve each student differently. While not all

students will go on to work in an art-related field, all students will benefit from creative

and critical thinking skills. Most students try to do their best work on any given day. When I can support students through opportunities for successful art completion, students are able to learn and enjoy their time in the art room.

The following are remarks taken from my anecdotal notes as evidence pertaining to the student success theme.

They were proud that they could wear their paper dresses.

They were proud of their group's project.

He made self-deprecating remarks about himself. He was not happy with his work.

He enjoyed this project very much.

In my data, I made note of students' success when writing about 20% of the students.

Table 2

Themes Found in Teacher Data

Category	N (%)
Worked at home/lack of time	11 (55)
Work ethic	10 (50)
Social - working with a peer	9 (45)
Success - enjoyed the project	4 (20)

Note. N = Number of students compared to all participants.

Summary

  In this chapter I interpreted my data explaining four primary themes in both the data collected from students and myself. I also explained that I thought I might find patterns in the data when comparing male to female responses. Males and females responded in a similar manor to the rubric and open-ended questions. Themes in the student data including the opportunity for choice throughout the project, the social nature of the open-ended project, the fact that students were recycling or repurposing a phonebook and other materials, and that the project was structured in a way that students were able to find success showed that students enjoyed the phonebook project. Ninety five percent of participants noted that choice was a factor as to why they liked the phonebook project. Four main themes arose from the data collected from myself as the fourth-grade art teacher. A lack of sufficient time, student work ethic, a social theme, and student success themes were notable in the data. When writing about the work of 55% of participants, I described how students could have used more time to do even better work. In Chapter 5, I detail what these findings mean to my current and future classroom teaching practice. I synthesize the findings and connect this information to my teaching practice. I also note the limitations of this study and what questions might be researched next.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

My classroom action research began with a problem that developed over the course of this school year. I teach at a rural kindergarten through fourth-grade Title One elementary school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. My schedule includes teaching three fourth-grade sections of art and technology. All fourth-graders attend my classes once in the computer lab, as I am the school's technology teacher and once in the art room as I am the art teacher. Just before beginning my research project, I identified that although many of my students remained highly engaged in their learning in my art classroom, some were not as engaged and seemed to be coasting. After a mid-school year success with a third grade project that required students to collaborate with partners, I decided to try something new to engage all of my fourth-grade students. I had been searching for a project or art lesson that would allow me to use a few hundred phonebooks that I rescued from a wasteful fate in a dumpster. After much searching, I still had not found a project or lesson that would suit all of my diverse fourth-grade learners and engage those drifting to the sidelines of my classroom. I decided to present my students with a true constructivist approach to solving the problem of the stacks of phonebooks. I would challenge fourth-grade students to each repurpose a phonebook, thus inviting students to be an active participant in constructing reality and not just a passive recorder of one's environment (Elkind, 2004). Rather than being told what to do with the materials, students had to make a plan for themselves. My only instructions were that students must repurpose the phonebook so that the phonebook became something new. Fourth-grade

students could use materials found in the art classroom as well as recycled items from home. I presented several visual examples of what other artists had created with phonebook paper. Students were inspired by the openness of possibilities and began to plan their project. What possible impacts might open-ended art projects have on the perceptions of fourth-grade students learning in art? In this chapter, I will detail how the results of my classroom action research will inform and change my teaching practice.

In my Art Classroom

Before conducting this classroom action research, I questioned if my perceptions of student work would match the perceptions of students. I worried that my own and my students' perceptions might differ. I analyzed my data to find if both teacher and student perceptions of success throughout the art-making process were similar. I found that the students, as a whole, were on the same page as I was concerning their work evaluations. Fourth-grade participants scored their work during the phonebook project with an average of 16.5 out of a possible 20 points. As their art teacher, I gave an average score of 16.1 points out of a possible 20 points. I will continue this practice of allowing students to evaluate their work as part of my evaluation process. It was affirming to me that my perceptions of students' work was close to the students' own perceptions of their work. My teacher self-efficacy is reinforced due to the findings of my data analysis (Bandura, 1977). The experience was affirming to me and encourages me to continue the study of my classroom teaching practices. The fact that I even initiated the data collection and analysis of the comparison of teacher and student perceptions concerning artwork rubric scores is a testament to my self-efficacy. I behaved assuredly and judged myself

capable of handling the results even if data did reveal that my perceptions were not in line with student perceptions (Bandura, 1977).

Nineteen of my 20 participating students noted that choice throughout the open-ended phonebook project was important to them. I know that choice is important to students (Pavlou, 2006). Nearly all students expressing that their ability to choose how they would complete the project is important to consider as I plan future lessons. When planning lessons, student choice can be messy and difficult for some students. Part of the success of student choice during this open-ended art project might have been that the phonebook project occurred toward the end of the school year when classroom expectations and routines were well established. An established classroom community would affect students' art-making process and product (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014). Students knew what to expect from me and what I expected from them. From now on, student choice will be a necessary consideration when I plan lessons.

The second most prominent theme from all sets of data was that of the social nature of this open-ended art project. Nevertheless, not all students chose to work with a peer; many chose to work alone. Students liked that they had a choice in whether to work alone or with a partner (Malin, 2013 & Pavlou, 2006). Some of the comments from students said that they liked the energy and noise that comes with a whole class working collaboratively on an exciting project. I think that even though many students chose to work alone and make all design decisions themselves that these students might be open to collaborating in the future after seeing several successful projects made by partners or small groups. Seventy five percent of participants felt that the social opportunities included in the open-ended phonebook project were favorable to them. It will be

necessary to consider the social aspects of future lessons (Pavlou, 2006). Even when students must work alone on a project, online sharing and collaboration might make individual work more meaningful. Since I also teach technology, integration would be possible using the social tools in the computer lab with the work in the art classroom.

The recycling and repurposing facet of the phonebook project was also important to students with 13 of the 20 participants citing the element of recycling and repurposing as favorable. Since the project was presented during the month of April, which holds Earth Day and Arbor Day, being Earth conscience was a topic the fourth-grade students had in mind. Young students value the world that they live in and want to make it a better place. The importance of the art activity as perceived by students is an important motivating factor (Pavlou, 2006). With dwindling budgets in our public schools, using and repurposing items that would have been thrown away is a good way to save money while helping the environment and teaching students to use what they have before getting new. Recycling and repurposing require the artist to think more critically. He or she has to make different decisions based on a limited set of materials (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014). During other projects, materials were limited so there was less decision making on students' part.

Success was the final primary theme found in student data sets. In the art classroom, I attributed student success to work effort. I viewed students as successful when they continually challenged themselves, did their best work, and took risks in order to learn more. Students seemed to perceive their success in a similar way making comments about their work process during various stages of art-making. Fifty percent of the participants noted details relating to their success during the open-ended art project as

important. Students made powerful statements such as *I did something that was difficult.*

I finished it completely. My work was neat. and *I liked making it look how it was*

supposed to. These were the students who had been drifting in my art classroom. These

were the students who had struggled earlier in the year to finish other assignments. These

students were proud that they finished a project and they were proud of how it turned out.

Student success, not only from the perspective of the teacher but also very importantly

from the students' perspective, should be highly considered when planning learning

activities (Malin, 2013). How will students be motivated to be successful? How will

students know that they will be satisfied when the work is completed? I think the open-

endedness of the phonebook project allowed for students to see the wide range of

possibilities and be able to see themselves creating and completing a project in which

they would be satisfied. Statements such as *I did something that was difficult.* and *I*

finished it completely. are reflective in nature. These students may be ready for

instruction on meta-learning or learning about learning (Winters, 2011). The students are

thinking about their process. The next step would be to teach the students how to reflect

on their work and to plan to be even more successful next time. What made you

successful during the phonebook project? What will you do next time to ensure the same

or better success? What did you learn about yourself as a learner?

In the teacher-completed data, two additional themes have implications for the art

classroom. The lack of time with each art section was a concern of mine as well as how

hard students were working. The lack of time correlates with dwindling public education

budgets. Public schools in Michigan have suffered deep financial cuts to their budgets. In

some schools, art programs have been eliminated completely. While schools in other

areas, states, and countries are able to support art programs more than once a week, in Upper Michigan the reality is that I only am able to work with my fourth-grade students once per week in the art classroom for forty minutes. If this practice continues, I will have to continue to look for ways in which to teach more efficiently in a small block of time. During the phonebook project, some students were so excited to continue working on their project outside of the art room that they pleaded to take the project with them. I was nervous at first to allow student to take projects home for the week in-between classes. I was afraid that the materials or project might get lost or damaged. Allowing students to work out of class was essential to many of the fourth-grade students finishing the elaborate projects they had planned to complete. From now on, why should our brief class time interfere or hinder the great ideas that our students come up with? Almost all students brought their work back to class each week with improvements made. Students who did not have their work in class had other ideas to try with the extra phonebooks I had in class. The role and attitude of the teacher can make a significant impact on students' attitudes towards making art (Watts, 2005). I have an important job to use what time I have in the art classroom to encourage students' creativity and curiosity in our increasingly visual world.

Students' work ethics are important to me as a teacher. I know that post-secondary education and the workforce value students who work hard. I want to set my students up for future success by fostering a strong work ethic within them. During class, I tried to support those students who seem to be falling behind while praising and encouraging those students who were good examples of hard-working individuals. I will continue this practice and be more explicit with students about the importance of doing

your best work all of the time. The artistic process and all factors affecting the process are what influences art creation (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014).

Although my instructions during the open-ended phonebook project were simple and my approach was very constructivist in nature, I was teaching constantly. Throughout student work sessions, I circulated the room continuously supporting students with ideas, gathering materials for them, and helping students problem solve. Although some students needed very little support from me or none at all, some students needed more time and support than I could give them to ensure their success in the project (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). The evidence of student enjoyment and success during the open-ended phonebook project encourages me to continue learning how to effectively implement constructivist approaches.

During the phonebook project students were encouraged to look at an ordinary object such as the phonebook in new ways. Students were required to transform it or repurpose it in some way. The ability to take an original idea, make a connection to a very different and unrelated object, an old phonebook, and then physically create something new is the power of creativity and choice at work (Armstrong, 1998).

In my General Education Classroom

In the future, I will most likely return to a general education classroom and leave my position as an art and technology specials area teacher. I will never be the same teacher I was before teaching art and technology. I have learned of the power creativity can have on a child and his or her learning (Catterall & Peppler, 2007). Too often general education classroom teachers are pressured to teach in a way that will generate high

standardized test scores. Teachers seem to feel that they have to teach to these tests and forgo engaging, meaningful lessons that require students to use creative thinking skills (Armstrong, 1998). One of the aspects of my current position that brings me pleasure is being able to foster a child's untamed creativity and wonder about our world. Creative activities and original thinking opportunities impact learning throughout the curriculum (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). When I reenter the general education classroom, I could not leave this invaluable teaching opportunity behind.

When I analyzed my data, I found that I focus on students' processes and work rather than the actual finished piece (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2014). Evaluation of students' learning products is different in all subjects. A math problem is either correct or not correct. The evidence in my anecdotal notes enabled me to learn about myself that the process is important separate of the product. The idea of valuing the learning process on the way to a learning outcome and valuing the metacognition surrounding learning has the potential to transform my teaching practice and the learning of my students (Winters, 2011).

Additionally, after learning the results of this classroom action research, I will also be a more effective teacher for knowing what motivates students through learning of their perceptions of open-ended art. Student choice in learning activities will be a must (Pavlou, 2006). Whether there is a small amount of choice during a more teacher directed activity or a large amount of choice such as during an open-ended activity like the phonebook project, student choice will be a greater part of each lesson I teach. Social learning opportunities are easier to manage in a general education classroom. More

flexibility with time is a positive aspect of the self-contained elementary classroom. Individual, partner, small group, and whole group lessons can run more fluidly.

Theoretical Framework

My classroom teaching practices are primarily constructivist in nature. I believe that students should have the opportunity to learn by changing and manipulating the physical space around them as they learn about the world. Students should be given real-life experiences in which to learn through (Elkind, 2004). In this study my students were given an every-day object, the phonebook, and asked to create something new with it. Changing, manipulating, this common object to create new meaning is an experience that allows students to represent their own ideas while learning about a material that they may not have had much experience with before (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006). My classroom action research has strengthened me as a constructivist thinker and classroom teacher. The elements of the open-ended phonebook project were enjoyable and engaging for my fourth-grade students. Constructivism's social and collaborative aspects were also evident throughout the open-ended phonebook project. Social interaction was a motivating factor that may have increased student learning.

Metacognition or meta-learning is a concept concerned with the development of an awareness of oneself as a learner and the application of this knowledge toward becoming a more effective learner (Winters, 2011). The self-reflective rubric enabled students to think about their own art-making decisions. The rubric served as a catalyst for the students' self-reflection. The open-ended questions helped students reflect more deeply and think about how they might make changes in their work during future projects. These tools helped students begin a metacognitive process that will help them

learn more about their own learning (Winters, 2011). Evidence found in students' written comments and my teacher notes indicated that students were thinking about their learning. Teaching and learning in the art classroom is about students and finding their way as a creative individual. Colleges and employers seek the quality of creativity in students. I see my job as a supporter of students in their learning to become innovative and original thinkers. Learning about learning, meta-learning, can be used to make content area topics and characteristics and expectations more explicit to students. The reflective process associated with meta-learning helps students to build more sophisticated conceptions of a subject which in turn, may help students develop more advanced conceptions of learning. Meta-learning helps students make conscious changes in their methods of learning and help them become more productive and independent learners (Winters, 2011). The next step for me as an art teacher would be to encourage more meta-learning and explicitly teach students how to make improvements in their learning and the importance of being a thoughtful, reflective learner.

Future Research

The natural question to ask next would be what patterns might be found in the perceptions of fourth-grade students relating to other types of art projects that do not involve as much choice? I would wonder if different or more students would be successful if fewer choices were allowed. Knowing what effect goal setting may have on the learning and achievement of students in the art classroom would be valuable. For instance, students would evaluate their performance of an art assignment or project and then based on that evaluation make goals for the next assignment. At the end of the second assignment, students would evaluate both their work during the completed

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assignment and how well they met their goals for the current assignment. Based on the reflective nature of many of the students' comments, students are ready for instruction in meta-learning (Winters, 2011). Would goal setting in the elementary art classroom increase student learning and achievement? Could the art classroom be a place for students to learn about their learning process and practice improving a reflective and goal setting process that would improve their learning throughout all academic areas?

Conclusion

My work throughout this study has been both rewarding and invigorating as I finish one school year and begin preparations for the next. I now know what my students' and my own perceptions are about open-ended art; I have considered the implications of these perceptions for my future classroom practice. Student choice, social learning opportunities, recycling and repurposing materials, and student success were most important to fourth-grade students during the successful phonebook project. I will consider each of these themes moving forward with my curricular development for the coming school year. Learning my own perceptions was telling as well. I learned that a lack of time was an issue for me as I wanted students to have the opportunity to do their best work. I also learned that I valued student work ethic and that I might have to be more explicit concerning this in my teaching. It was also affirming to see that the data showed that my perceptions of students' work were very closely related to how students perceived their own success during the open-ended art project. I look forward to learning more about my students' perceptions in the future and will encourage other educators to do the same as learning about my perceptions and those of my students has been a very enlightening experience.

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APPENDIX A: HSIRB APPROVAL

Memorandum

TO: Amanda Swanson

  School of Education, Leadership and Public Service

CC: Christi Edge

  School of Education, Leadership and Public Service

FROM: Dr. Brian Cherry

  Assistant Provost/IRB Administrator

DATE: May 27, 2014

SUBJECT: **IRB Proposal HS14-600**

"Perceptions of Open Ended Art by Fourth-grade Students and Their Teacher"

  IRB Approval Dates: 5/27/2014-5/27/2015**

  Proposed Project Dates: 5/27/2014-6/11/2014

Your proposal "Perceptions of Open Ended Art by Fourth-grade Students and Their Teacher" has been approved under the administrative review process.   Please include your proposal number (HS14-600) on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to implementation.

**If you do not complete your project within 12 months from the date of your approval notification, you must submit a Project Renewal Form for Research Involving Human Subjects. You may apply for a one-year project renewal up to four times.

All forms can be found at the NMU Grants and Research website: http://www.nmu.edu/grantsandresearch/node/102

APPENDIX B: PARENT PERMISSION LETTER

Dear Parents,

      As your child's art and technology teacher I am always striving to learn more, improve my teaching practice, and find new ways to engage young learners. Currently, I am working on my final class before earning a Master's degree in Education. As a learner myself, I seek to inform my teaching practice and learn how I can best support student learning. I have elected to write a thesis and complete an action research study within my art classroom. I will be looking at the perceptions of open-ended art by my fourth-grade students and myself as their teacher. I am interested in how student choice and problem based projects impact student engagement and motivation. By taking part in this study, your child would be helping me become a better teacher for all learners.

      Your child will experience nothing out of the ordinary as a result of taking part in this 1-day study. My method of data collection lies within the constraints of my regular teaching practice. Students will be reflecting on and evaluating their artwork as they have done throughout the school year. Please be assured that the wellbeing of your child is a prime concern of mine and I anticipate no risk to your child by taking part in this study.

The method of study in this project:

- Students will evaluate their work after completing the phonebook art project using a rubric chart
- I will evaluate students' work using the same rubric chart
- I will compare the two rubric charts and look for any patterns

      The information I gather about your child will be kept <u>strictly confidential</u>. I will use no identifying information about your child in either my written report or oral presentation. I will not include student names or photographs and any charts/graphs that are included in my report and will refer to students by a randomized number.

      Allowing me to analyze data from your child's rubric chart is voluntary; you may withdraw your permission for your child at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. Should you withdraw; the data gathered from your child will be eliminated from the study. If you have questions, please contact me at the e-mail address listed below.

Sincerely,

Amanda Swanson

aswanson@mapsnet.org

Please return this form to school as soon as possible. Thanks!
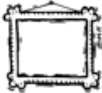
Student Name _____ Parent Signature _____

The data collected from my child can be included in the action research project.

YES _____   NO _____

Artwork Rubric Kindergarten-4th Grade

	4=Mastered	3=Proficient	2=Beginning	1=Struggling
Understanding of Art Concepts (Nat. Standard 2)	*I put details in my work that make it easy to tell what my art is about. *I followed all directions.	*I put details in my work that mostly show what my art is about. *I followed most of the directions	*Some details are not related to the artwork. *It is hard to tell what my artwork is about. *I followed some directions.	*I did not use many details. *My work is not about anything. *I followed few directions.
Developing Craft (Nat. Standard 1)	*I took good care of my art materials. *I controlled the materials carefully. *I made my work neat with no mistakes.	*I took care of the art tools. *I had good control of the materials. *My work is neat with only a few mistakes.	*I cleaned up most but not all of my materials. *I did not control the materials in most of my work. *Some of my work is sloppy.	*I did not clean up. *Most of my work is sloppy and does not look like it was done carefully
Envisioning (Nat. Standard 3)	*I came up with more than one idea and picked the one that was most unique and new.	*I came up with one idea that was original to me but not something unique and new.	*I came up with an idea with help but it wasn't an original one.	*I picked an idea that I had seen or made before and didn't try anything new.
Engage & Persist	*I worked on my piece until it was complete. Every part of my art is meant to be there. *I worked as hard as I could	* I worked hard but not as hard as I could	*My piece is still just in the beginning phase	*My piece is not complete and needs much more work
Stretch & Explore	*I tried something that was hard for me.	*I made something that was a little hard for me.	*I made something that was not hard for me.	*I made something that was very easy for me.

What did you like about the Phonebook Project?

What did you do well during the Phonebook Project?

What would you do differently the next time?

What were the best parts about the Phonebook Project? Circle all that are true for you.

a. Open-ended, I could make what I wanted
b. I liked the picture examples presented on the screen (inspiration)
c. I liked using/creating with a phonebook
d. I was able to work with a friend if I wanted to
e. I could use the materials that I wanted to or needed to
f. I was reusing/recycling something (a phonebook)
g. I was solving a problem
h. Other

_____

_____