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Relationships between visual and written narratives in student engagement

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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VISUAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES IN
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

by
Nicole Marie Beckley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Arts degree in Teaching and Learning (Art Education)
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisors: Visiting Assistant Professor Clara M. Baldus
Associate Professor Rachel M. Williams

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Nicole Marie Beckley

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts
degree in Teaching and Learning (Art Education) at the May 2014 graduation.

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To my parents and husband for their endless support

When children's stories are driven by rich images, their writing is transformed in many powerful ways.

Beth Olshansky

Picture This: An Arts-Based Literacy Program

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationships between visual and written narratives, as well as the quality of engagement in art and writing processes. The study focuses on the work of second grade students in the art education classroom at a small rural elementary school. Data collection included: direct observation of the students, teacher notes, rubrics, student surveys, and student projects. The aim was to collect information on the ways in which students prefer to create and share their narratives. Results show that by providing students with choices in their learning, they are more engaged in the narrative process. It also demonstrates that by providing a variety of narrative methods, particularly the inclusion of image making, students will produce stories that are richer, more elaborate, and engaging.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose and Research Questions	2
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Visual and Written Narratives	5
Art Making as Inspiration	6
The Creative Thinking Process	8
Peer Interactions	11
Engagement	12
Choice-Based Opportunities	14
Learning Communities	15
SUMMARY	18
METHODOLOGY	20
Design	20
Setting	20
Sample	22
Sample Characteristics	23
Data Collection Procedures	23
Instruments	24
Observation, Survey, and Note Taking	24
Observation and Note Taking	24
Survey and Note Taking	26
Rubrics	28
Engagement Rubric	28
Unit Rubrics	29
Task 1: Paint Exploration	29
Task 2: Image Collection	30
Task 3: Visual/Written Narrative Creation	31
Task 4: Story Publishing	32
Data Analysis	33
RESULTS	35
Observation Overview of Unit Tasks	35
Task 1: Paint Exploration	35
Class A	35
Class B	36
Class C	36
Task 2: Image Collection	37
Class A	37
Class B	38

Class C.....	39
Task 3: Story Creation.....	40
Class A.....	40
Class B.....	41
Class C.....	44
Task 4: Story Publishing.....	44
Class A.....	44
Class B.....	46
Class C.....	47
Final Performance.....	48
Class A.....	48
Class B.....	49
Class C.....	50
ANALYSIS.....	52
Student Preference in Visual and Written Narratives.....	52
Analysis with Observation and Rubric.....	52
Analysis with Survey.....	54
Student Choice Influence on Engagement.....	55
Analysis with Observation and Rubric.....	55
Analysis with Survey.....	57
DISCUSSION.....	59
Relationship Between Visual and Written Narratives.....	59
Creative Expression.....	59
Student Engagement.....	61
Summary.....	62
Limitations.....	63
Implications for Future Research.....	64
Implications for Art Education.....	65
CONCLUSION.....	67
REFERENCES.....	68

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Stories Survey	27
2. Measuring Student Daily Engagement Rubric	28
3. Paint Exploration: Creativity/Exploration Rubric	29
4. Image Collection: Creativity/Originality Rubric	30
5. Visual/Written Narrative Creation: Creativity/Originality Rubric	31
6. Visual/Written Narrative Creation: Sequencing/Technical Writing Rubric	32
7. Story Publishing: Creativity/Elaboration Rubric	33
8. Comparison of Student Narrative Choice	53
9. Survey of Student Preferences in Story Creation	54
10. Survey of Student Views Towards Writing	58

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Paint exploration	37
2. Students helping each other find imagery in their paintings.....	39
3. Visual story sequencing by Danny	41
4. Written narrative with graphic organizer.....	42
5. Visual narrative with graphic organizer.....	42
6. Andy's best first Creeper	43
7. New art making inspired changes in narrative development.....	45
8. Image of Danny's narrative progression into puppetry	46
9. Collaborative narrative with puppetry	49

INTRODUCTION

To tell a story is to share a bit of one's self to the world. We tell stories to entertain, teach, explain, and discover. These social interactions are inherent to our human existence and our ability to learn from one another. Telling stories can be used as a method of sharing knowledge, as thousands of years of oral traditions have demonstrated. It's in these stories that others can experience real or imaginary events and glean understanding from them.

Language is essential to a child's development and cultural activities such as reading and writing are tools for their growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, it isn't surprising that one of the first things infants must learn is to do is to communicate with their parents. Children must communicate their needs and their parents must teach skills essential to survival. As children grow older, language becomes a mode of discovery and understanding. As Gallas (1992) explains, children use storytelling to make sense of what they are experiencing and "form personal narratives, that explain and order their world" (p. 173). These narratives allow the developing mind to construct meaning out of new knowledge.

Learning to write is essential in the 21st century, and educators must prepare young students to have a myriad of writing skills. Although writing is only one way to tell a story, as students get older, it is usually the go-to method for teachers. This can be detrimental to a young creative storyteller who may have narrative prowess but is not adept at handwriting. As researchers have demonstrated, creativity in general is manifested and developed in a multitude of ways (John-Steiner, 1985; Newland, 2013; Olshansky, 1995; Olson, 1992).

I began to consider the creative processes of young artists and storytellers a year prior to this case study. I was looking more generally in my classroom at student engagement and freedom of choice in visual narratives. I hypothesized that they would

just “enjoy” the writing process more if they made their artwork before writing. It was not definitively determined, in this pilot study, if they enjoyed writing more or less by making artwork first. However, I did realize I was looking too narrowly in scope. I had made the assumption that students would prefer to make art to tell their stories rather than write, but I gave them little freedom in the story creation itself. They were guided in narrative creation inspired from art and then instructed to systematically write their stories as per the grade-appropriate learning targets. As for the sharing of their stories, I left this section of the lesson very open with little suggestion from myself. The number of students who jumped on the opportunity to make personal choices didn’t surprise me, but I was intrigued by the dedication the students put into the plays, puppet shows, and live readings. At the end of this pilot study it was clear I needed to focus more on the creative thinking processes during the creation of the narratives, not only the end results.

Purpose and Research Questions

I am particularly interested in how students prefer to construct and share their narratives. Especially, looking at story creation in the context of an art education environment. I hope to find a clear relationship between visual and written narratives in terms of student choice and engagement. Specifically, I will answer these two questions:

1. How do students prefer to create and express their narratives?
2. Does student choice in the narrative process result in higher engagement?

To answer these questions, regarding student choice and engagement in the visual and written narrative processes, I conducted a case study with my second grade students. I observed these students during their regularly scheduled art class at Roundy Elementary in the Columbus Community School District, during the 2013-2014 school year. The second grade consists of three class sections each containing 18 or 19 students, totaling 55 participants in all. The students receive art education from a certified art instructor for 40 minutes every three days. Columbus Community Schools is a district primarily

consisting of English language learners. The district has adopted the S.I.O.P. model (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol), a system of teaching instruction geared towards maximizing a language learner's ability to comprehend class material. This is of interest in the context of this study due to the number of students who are below grade level proficiency in English language arts. It is encouraged and embraced in the art program to include as many interdisciplinary learning activities as possible.

The intent of the art education program at Columbus Community Schools is to develop visual thinkers and to encourage creative problem solving on all levels of instruction. The art curriculum is designed to develop mental capabilities that foster flexible, divergent, original, fluent, and imaginative thinking by using the Visual Arts Iowa Core and Universal Constructs in the design. The program uses a balance of discipline-based and choice-based instruction. The art classroom environment is one focused on personal discovery, expression, and growth. It's a learning environment that celebrates mistakes. Therefore, the art classroom is an ideal environment for students to engage in creative thinking visually and in other domains such as writing.

In the next section, I review literature on visual and written narratives in regard to art making, creative thinking processes, and peer interactions. I next review literature regarding student engagement in terms of choice-based learning opportunities and learning communities in general. There is quite a lot of literature out there concerning these topics. I will bring in various researchers in the section ahead, but focus primarily on certain professionals. Strong literature exists that encourages using art curriculum that encompasses interdisciplinary connections and a marriage of art making and writing in the creative process (Newland, 2013; Olshansky, 1995; Olson, 1992). One review will be on the study John-Steiner (1985) conducted on the various ways scientists, artists, dancers, musicians, and writers go through the creative process. Her work is important because she demonstrated the similarities in thinking processes across these domains. I will also talk about the importance of peer interaction and learning communities in the

creative process as mutually beneficial for students and teachers (Freedman, K., Heijnen, E., Kallio-Tavin, M., Kárpáti, A., & Papp, L. (2013); Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, I will examine how providing choice-based opportunities within the context of an art classroom impacts student engagement (Douglas, 2009; Gude, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review, I examine what research says about the relationships between visual and written narratives and student engagement. It is separated into two sections: visual and written narratives, and engagement. The first part is divided into three sub-sections: art making as inspiration, the creative thinking process, and peer interactions. I begin by looking carefully at how art making can inspire and drive creative writing for students. Next, I look at what research says about how the creative process works across domains. The last sub-section, regarding visual and written narrative relationships, focuses on peer interactions during the creative process. The second major section regarding engagement is divided into two sub-sections: choice-based opportunities and learning communities. I describe what a choice-based learning environment looks like and its impact on student engagement. I then examine how learning communities, in general, influence a student's commitment to the creative process.

Visual and Written Narratives

For the purposes of this study, when speaking of narratives, I am referring to storytelling in the context of an elementary art room environment. The students' narratives are primarily fiction in nature, although no such restrictions were placed on the participants. When considering visual versus written narratives, I am referring to the balance of words to visuals. I am labeling written narratives as stories that utilize mainly written words in the entirety of the story, from the story construction to its publication. Whereas a story that is visual, consists primarily of visual media to create and tell the story.

It's important for educators to be aware of how the creative process works differently for each individual, so that teaching methods can be differentiated accordingly. It isn't unusual in the regular classroom for teachers to incorporate image

making into the writing process. However, as Olson (1992) suggests, educators often view these activities as a waste of time and perhaps they are, if not done meaningfully. As Olson goes on to emphasize, the art making should be integral to the writing process and teachers should recognize and identify the visual competencies of their students. Those teachers “need to actively encourage, facilitate, and integrate the visual and the verbal modes of expression and meaning into all areas of the writing curriculum” (p. 74). Indeed the varying modes of expression are important to consider. John-Steiner (1985) conducted a large study by interviewing scientists, artists, musicians, and writers. She found that the ways in which they organized, revised, and analyzed their own creative ideas were similar in many ways. Many made use of both visual and verbal (or written) methods in their processes. She made particular note of the visualization of ideas that many of the individuals spoke of.

Art Making as Inspiration

In Newland’s (2013) article, “Engaging Students Through Image and Word”, she discusses her views on interdisciplinary curriculum and how she utilized it in her own classroom. She emphasizes the arts’ ability to improve student achievement across subject areas, but also acknowledges the concern that if art educators begin focusing on interdisciplinary instruction, other stakeholders may lose sight of the value of art education itself. She refers to Eisner (1998), who worried that if the art educator’s focus is on improving achievement in other subject areas, the arts will be pushed aside as soon as another content area can do it better. Newland disagrees, to a point, because she found in her curriculum that the interdisciplinary approach supported the arts-based outcomes just as much as the art curriculum supported the ancillary outcomes.

Newland’s (2013) research is influenced by Olshansky (1995), who works as the Director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire. Olshansky observes the benefits to her students’ writing when they

created artwork first rather than after the writing. Olshansky (1995) argues that including image making during the entire writing process allowed diverse learners to have concrete tools for thinking. She references a two-year study conducted on 400 students in their Laboratory for Interactive Learning. It shows that students who engaged in image making through the writing process had:

- Writing topics that were more varied and imaginative
- Story plots that were more fully developed
- Stories that had a strong sense of beginning, middle, and end
- Stories that were better crafted and often had more literary qualities
- Rich descriptive language that was prevalent (p. 46)

Indeed Olson (1992) recognizes that “a visual approach to writing translates more effectively the untapped reservoir of visual experience and understanding into words” (p. 47). She went on to suggest that it improved the writing skills of reluctant writers who were visual learners. Likewise, Dunn, Scattergood, and Closson (2010) show that basic writing skills came more easily to some children than to others, and found that “by first generating story ideas (e.g., by using art materials or noting words in a story grammar), students had a reference for what they wanted to write, which helped them appropriately structure their text” (p. 105).

There is, however, dispute in the assertion that art making in general improves skills in other domains. Such researchers as Catterall (2002) have discussed the lack of recent research in the transfer of learning skills from one subject to another. Certainly, it was clear in my literary research, that I could find little authoritative data on how the visual arts have improved learning in other disciplines. For the purposes of this study, I found it of little consequence, and as Newland (2013) discusses too, perhaps the focus should instead be on how the different domains support each other. Speaking to creative writing specifically, one study conducted by Barbot, Tan, Randi, Santa-Donato, and Grigorenko (2012), gathered perspectives from professionals regarding the “key

ingredients” for creative writing development. They discuss how creative writing is becoming a somewhat unexpected focus in art education programs. This change is something professionals such as Newland (2013) and Olshansky (1995) embrace and Eisner (1998) fear. Barbot et al. (2012) contended that their study “contributed to a better understanding of the importance of the several “key ingredients” (in particular, observation, intrinsic motivation, imagination, description) for the development of creative writing” (p. 220). Certainly, if there are many key ingredients in the development of creative writing and educators need to meet the diverse needs of their learners, one must consider the importance of image making during the creative writing process.

The Creative Thinking Process

John-Steiner’s (1985) book, *Notebooks of the Mind*, is emphasized in this section. Her work is quite important regarding the creative process, due to the involved study she conducted. In her book, she collected interviews of artists, scientists, musicians, and dancers. She asked these individuals to discuss the creative processes in their given domains. She found that similarly across all areas, visualization was key in some way. All of the participants had invisible mental notebooks, where they collected and analyzed their thoughts. For many, this began at a young age. She explained that it would be careless to dismiss the early curious and creative behaviors that these scientists and artists reported. She also went on to explain that through these interviews, it was clear that “the dominance of visual, verbal, or movement-linked thinking varies from person to person” (p. 87).

Educators are aware they need to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. However, identifying what those learning needs are can prove difficult, especially when it pertains to the visual arts. John-Steiner (1985) describes the development of the visual language as a gradual process. Visual learners crave these

communication skills and feel liberated once able to use them. As McKim (1980) describes in his book, *Thinking Visually: A Strategy Manual for Problem Solving*, the word “idea” derives from the Greek “idein”, *to see*. He explains that even though visual thinking occurs mainly in the context of seeing or imagining, proficient visual thinkers flexibly use all three kinds of imagery:

1. The kind that we see
2. The kind that we imagine in our mind’s eye, as when we dream
3. The kind that we draw, doodle, sketch, or paint (p. 7)

Indeed, John-Steiner describes the visualization of ideas in the creative process as the “pulling together of ideas, images, disarrayed facts and fragments of experience, which have previously been apprehended by them as separated in time and space, into an integrated work” (p. 77). She was most concerned with the synthesizing of these thoughts, which should be most concerning for educators as well.

Olson (1992), a strong advocate for arts educators and English language arts educators working together, explained that children are both visual and verbal learners. She feels we should resist the widely held belief by teachers that visual and verbal expressions are separate. She argues that both images and words should never be separated since both are compatible tools for communication. Olson implemented a “visual-narrative method of writing” in the 1979-1980 school year and found that the students were divided mainly into four basic groups who had:

- a) High visual and high verbal skills
- b) High visual and low verbal skills
- c) Low visual and high verbal skills
- d) Low visual and low verbal skills (p. 43)

As she explains, teachers should not only include image making in the narrative process, but should also talk with their students as they are thinking through the visual narratives.

Learning to make connections between their images, writing, and thoughts will help

students learn how to move between the modes of thinking, and this will, in turn, enhance and inform the other (Olson, 1992). Certainly John-Steiner (1985) would add to the importance in teaching children to make these connections. She found that when creative individuals were visualizing their writing, they would “frequently see the next few sentences of their on-going work, projected (in their minds eye) upon a mental screen” (p. 33).

Of particular importance in the study of the creative thinking process, is its relevance across domains. John-Steiner (1985) explains that “the way communicated thought is expressed varies across domains; writing requires a carefully organized sequence of ideas, while painting is characterized by a weaving of patterns into a simultaneous form” (p. 218). She goes on to explain that while the differences in the languages of mind are most obvious in their outputs, they share some very critical common attributes in how they are generated. Here she is referencing “notebooks of the mind”, or how creative individuals collect and organize ideas. She makes it clear that not all visual learners are artists, but also writers, scientists, and mathematicians. John-Steiner (1985) describes the creative processes of these individuals as demanding, requiring the individual to apply prior experience and no short amount of intensity to the task.

A significant aspect of the creative thinking process is the revision process. It can be described as a “dialogue between the artist and his or her product” (John-Steiner, 1985 p. 75). Artist, in this context, can refer to any creative thinker, writer, scientist or otherwise. In John-Steiner’s interview with author Judy Blume, who wrote books such as *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret*, Judy explained her style of revision as saving bits of ideas and writing “that you aren’t quite ready to use” (p. 76). John-Steiner went to argue that this method of writing “illustrates once more that the human mind is multi-channeled, not only in the way in which we record experience...but also in the way in which writers, poets, and composers think while engaged in a new work” (p. 76). Indeed

Blume's process of revision greatly reflects the way in which many artists collect and organize their creative bodies of artwork.

Peer Interactions

The creative process is heavily influenced by the interactions an individual has with his or her peers. The importance of the relationship between teacher and student, in regard to the transfer of knowledge, isn't being questioned as less important than the relationship a student has with their peers. Rather the importance of the peer interactions during learning activities is being emphasized as relevant in its own right. Learning while in cooperation with one's peers triggers developmental processes that students can later learn to utilize independently (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, students learn how to learn alongside their peers and guide each other through the zone of proximal development.

Storch (2005) conducted a study about collaborative writing with adult ESL students. He found that collaborative writing in the classroom allows for students to get instant feedback, something they wouldn't receive if they were working alone. While this study was focused on adults learning a new language, certainly parallels can be made in an elementary educational setting. Even if students aren't learning a second language, they are still learning and developing their first language. Therefore, the assistance they can give and receive from peers in the writing process is invaluable.

These peer interactions can take many forms in a creative learning environment. Students could begin by working independently and then recruit peer advice or assistance. Students could pool ideas together to construct new meaning in their creative endeavor. Perhaps they are collaborating from the start and generating all ideas together. Either way, this type of learning is an important developmental experience because "it is through joint engagement that ideas are argued over, contested, borrowed and shared as our (the student's) understanding is advanced" (Rojas-Drummond, Albarran, & Littleton,

2008 p. 177). These are essential communication skills children must experience and then utilize as adults.

One can hardly imagine not needing the ability to suggest, defend and negotiate ideas in a work environment. Mercer (2004) describes this type of dialogue as “exploratory talk.” He refers to these collaborative conversations as opportunities for students to engage critically and constructively with each other’s ideas (p. 140). This exploratory talk is a key component for children learning to collaborate during the creative process, as Rojas-Drummond et al. (2008) found in their study about children’s collaboration in creative writing projects. They found that students used collective memories, joint considerations, and learned to borrow ideas.

Classroom management is a concern for educators, and rightly so, because if the learning environment isn’t structured correctly, these collaborative dialogues simply couldn’t take place. One might be worried about students arguing with each other and feel the need to step in and stop any disagreements in the fear they might be harmful. Vass, Littleton, Miell & Jones (2008) would argue against stopping these arguments. Their research looked specifically at shared creative text composition in the classroom environment. Vass et al., (2008) agreed with Mercer (2004) that exploratory talk was important to the students’ critical thinking development. They found that what might look like interruptions and negative interactions were mainly intense sharing sessions that had a joint focus. The students were influenced by each other’s ideas and mutually inspired by them (p. 200) as they worked towards a shared vision, and thus were highly engaged in their learning.

Engagement

Merriam-Webster (2014) defines engagement as an “emotional involvement or commitment”. Educators are highly concerned about student engagement in their learning. If students are not involved or committed to their learning, educators cannot

expect retention. Each new generation brings new challenges for educators, as they need to adjust and tweak their teaching practices and pedagogies. Some teaching strategies that worked 20, or even 10 years ago may not be the most effective for today's students (Riddle, 2009).

Johanna Riddle, a library media specialist and National Board Certified Teacher with 25 years of teach experience, wrote a compelling book titled *Engaging the Eye Generation: Visual Literacy Strategies for the K-5 Classroom*. In her book, Riddle addresses the challenge of an ever-changing world and changes in the way students learn. Her book discusses ways to engage students so they may absorb and retain information in the ways they are used to. For example, she explains that due to the way social media and Internet pages are laid out, students are accustomed to reading in an "E" or "F" pattern (Riddle, 2009). Children (and adults) are used to making swift left to right movements in this pattern, starting at the top and middle of a web page to determine if it is worth reading. This style of reading certainly doesn't match up with the plethora of outdated textbooks most educators are provided.

Today's literacy is complex because it includes a variety of ways to exchange information. Students must not only learn how to understand the multitude of ways information is given, but also how to communicate in turn. It is especially important to have skills in "Visual Literacy", the ability to "interpret, use, and create visual media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning" (Riddle, 2009 p. 3), due to the massive amount of visual media in today's culture. Students must navigate the endless stream of information that is now available at the touch of a screen. They must interpret the influx of videos, graphics, and fonts to determine what is valuable and dismiss what it is not. Likewise, they need to learn how to share information in a way that will also be valued and understood. If learners are accustomed to visual means of communication and need to learn visual language, then it feels imperative to provide learning opportunities accordingly and adjust our teaching

strategies. Indeed, “learner engagement surfaces and grows through opportunities to connect students’ work to their unique lives” (Douglas, & Jaquith, 2009).

Choice-Based Opportunities

Douglas and Jaquith (2009) are co-founders (with John Crowe and Pauline Joseph) of Teaching for Artistic Behavior, Inc., an educational organization that supports teachers who practice choice-based art education (p. 112). They discuss how the creative processes are different for each student, as it comes from their individual experiences, knowledge, ability, and point of view. They go on to define artistic behaviors as “activities that inform and sustain (the) creative process” (p. 2). They argue that by providing students autonomy and a multitude of choice-based art making experiences, you allow room for their artistic behaviors to develop and thus they will be engaged in the creative process.

Educators must identify the artistic or creative behaviors necessary for the development of creative processes (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; John-Steiner, 1985). They include things such as risk taking, play, flexibility, critical thinking, multi-tasking, and a commitment to one’s task. Douglas and Jaquith (2009) contend that this is best accomplished in a purely choice-based environment. They argue that in traditional art education settings, students are limited by the structured lessons that focus on specific artists, movements, skills, and techniques. They explain that this style of art instruction limits students’ discovery of their own artistic ability. Specifically, they believe that choice-based art education enables “students to discover what it means to be an artist through the *authentic* creation of artwork” (p. 3).

As Gude (2013) also argues in her article “New School Art Styles: The Project of Art Education”, typical “school art styles” limit the possibilities for free expression. What is referred to here is the pressure some art educators face with making sure there is ‘display worthy’ artwork produced for every lesson. More specifically, ‘display worthy’

means artwork that non-art educators see as quality and worthy of hanging in the hallways. Art educators are faced with defending the artistic process being more important than the artistic product.

Certainly, not all art education classrooms are either completely choice-based or completely teacher directed. Walker (2006) argues for using “big ideas” in contemporary art and culture as the center for student art learning projects. Having a central “big idea” allows for flexibility and accommodates many pedagogical possibilities (p. 192). He emphasized making connections to contemporary culture as the key to student engagement, something Riddle (2009) would agree with. Using “big ideas” in art education instruction is a balance between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching.

Some researchers would argue that it’s still not enough autonomy for students and still limits their own artistic development (Douglas & Jacquith, 2009; Walker, 2006). In either case, a student having some degree of independence and control of their own learning, directly impacts his or her engagement. A classroom that is engaging and fosters creative thinking and processes must be conducive to a collective learning, one in which students and teachers support and celebrate each other’s successes and failures.

Learning Communities

As discussed in an earlier section, peer interactions are an integral component to the creative thinking process. Creative thinkers can thrive off of the problem solving dialogues they have with their peers and discover what their own capabilities and limitations are. There are different environments that facilitate productive peer interactions and promote collective learning. A study regarding informal art groups found that formal education rarely achieves the atmosphere that visual culture communities attain (Freedman et al., 2013). The study focused on informal art groups, such as online communities, as forums for developing artists to share their ideas and

work towards common goals. They are creative environments without the limitations set out by formal instructors. Instead, the members of the group generate the rules governing participation and artistic creation. Whether the rules are formally written down, or just collectively agreed upon, the focus is on the sharing of the creative process. I believe many art educators wish they could create such an environment within their classrooms. Indeed, Douglas and Jaquith (2009) would argue that choice-based environments could create such an atmosphere.

In Gallas's (1992) study of her own primary students during their story sharing time, she found that over the course of the year they had developed their own learning community within their classroom. Gallas explained it took great effort, as the teacher, to take a step back and let the students take center stage during their sharing time and spoke about how she regrets the few times she intervened with her adult preconceptions of what a story should be and interrupted their creative process. She felt like she had broken the collective community's rules when she made an assertion that one of the stories "shouldn't be made up", for example. Her students, when left to their own devices, created an atmosphere where they celebrated and took great joy in each other's improvised or planned stories. They became active participants in each other's narratives and were ready to give and receive criticism. She emphasized, "when each member of the classroom community strives to affirm the importance of all voices, the benefit of every child is much greater" (p. 181).

These informal student-centered learning communities are difficult to achieve in a classroom environment, as students are often uncertain what to do when given freedom to lead the way. It is important that the teacher creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and actively celebrates everyone's learning and creative discovery. Just as Mercer (2004) described "exploratory talk" as a mode of social thinking and creative problem solving in the classroom, these learning communities are wonderful environments for students to

work through the creative process collaboratively. It should be an aim of art educators to maximize the potential of these learning communities within their own classrooms.

SUMMARY

In the literature review, I first described studies on the relationships of visual and written narratives. Such observations, regarding these relationships, included art making as inspiration, the creative thinking processes, and peer interactions that can be seen in classroom environments that foster such activities. Both Newland (2013) and Olshansky's (1985) studies demonstrated how integrating art and writing had positive outcomes in students' writing. Specifically, Olshansky found in her study that the students in the Laboratory for Interactive Learning who engaged in art while writing, had more imaginative topics, more developed plots, better sense of sequence, and more descriptive language.

John-Steiner's (1985) research also emphasized the importance of visual thinking tools in the creative process. In her study, she interviewed a variety of creative thinkers across domains that demonstrated how they similarly utilized visualization tools during the creative thinking process. Her study is significant for educators because it validates the need for cross-disciplinary teaching strategies in all content areas. Additionally, Mercer's (2004) research emphasized the importance of "exploratory talk" and interactive dialogue between students during the creative processes. Likewise, Rojas-Drummond et al. (2008) found this type of talk to be very important to collaborative writing for the students they studied. Peer interactions provided immediate feedback, opportunities to defend ideas, and joint brainstorming sessions.

The next section of the literature review illustrated studies on student engagement, looking specifically at choice-based opportunities and learning communities. In Riddle's (2009) study, she emphasized the change in the way students today receive and share information. Educators can't be blind to the relevance of visual media literacy and its importance to the lives of our students. They will need skills in visual literacy as they proceed into adulthood. Certainly, as Douglas and Jaquith's (2009) study showed, to

engage students in their learning, educators must connect the learning to the students' lives. Their study showed the best way to do this was by providing students with autonomy and choices in their learning. Moreover, Freedman et al. (2013) and Gallas (1992) showed in their studies how student autonomy, within the context of a learning community, was the key to their engagement and creative development. They demonstrated how creative thinkers flourish in environments where they can share and collaborate with their peers, unhindered by a formal education teacher.

My research was based on the existing literature of Newland (2013) and Olshansky (1985) and their findings on the relationships between visual and written narratives. My case study was conducted on second grade students in my regular art education classroom. The art classroom environment and structure mirrors some of the attributes of choice-based learning and learning communities that the literature suggests as key to student engagement (Douglas and Jaquith, 2009; Freedman et al., 2013; Gallas, 1992). Therefore, it is an ideal environment for studying the creative process of students' visual and written narratives.

METHODOLOGY

Design

I used a qualitative research design using a case study method (Hamel et al., 1993). I chose to use a case study because the research began with an initial theory that student writing would be positively influenced by image making during the writing process. I felt that a case study would allow an in-depth look at the connections between visual and written narratives and student engagement over a longer period of time. This was the best method because it provided a means for me, as the observer, to narrate the students' experiences as well as to collect data in a variety of methods.

I collected data in four ways. My data and the description of the narrative learning unit was gathered through observation of the students, my notes and rubrics, student surveys, and analysis of the students' projects. I collected data by observing students during class and made note of the interactions students had with me and with their peers. I took videos of most class periods so I could refer back to them for more in-depth note taking. I measured students' daily engagement with a rating scale and utilized a student survey before and after the unit to have an additional measure of student perceptions. I also analyzed student creativity, proficiency, and effort at different points in their projects. I was looking for common themes amongst the students in regard to student engagement and choice in the narrative process. These methods are discussed in greater detail below.

Setting

My observations took place over a two and half month period during the regularly scheduled second grade art class at Columbus Community School District. The observations lasted approximately from December 2013 to February 2014. Due to unforeseen illness, inclement weather, and the flexible nature of an elementary school, many class periods were interrupted or postponed. For the most part, however, students

were engaged in the process once every three school days for forty minutes in the regularly scheduled art classroom. Over that timespan, they spent on average ten actual class periods working on the unit.

I am the primary art instructor for the elementary school. All students, kindergarten through sixth grade, receive 40 minutes of art every three days. The elementary art program is housed in its own space with adequate facilities and supplies to run a rigorous program. The curriculum is aligned to state and national standards and utilizes a balance of choice-based (Douglas and Jaquith, 2009) and discipline based art instruction. Students are encouraged on a daily basis to make personal choices and take risks in their creative processes.

This unit was nothing out of the ordinary in their regular curriculum. It was a regularly planned lesson that I took a step further so as to become more aware of the connections between the visual and written narrative process. Every class period began with students following directions projected up on the board. Students are encouraged daily to be independent and autonomous in the classroom and are in charge of most of their own supplies, folders, and classroom procedures. Depending on the given day, some lessons included demonstrations from me in painting techniques or methods of narrative exploration. Every class period included the review of the unit objectives, as well as the daily lesson objectives to help students stay on target. All throughout the project students had the option of working collaboratively or individually.

We began by first exploring different painting techniques. Students were encouraged just to play with the different ways paint could be applied and manipulated on paper and thus they created non-objective works of art (meaning no planned subject matter). The second day, students were encouraged to find hidden imagery within the paintings. These images served as a springboard for their narratives, if they chose to use them (Newland, 2013). On days three to five, students spent time actually constructing their own narratives. Emphasis was placed on students' personal choices. While

students were supported in the narrative process, there were no strict guidelines. We reviewed, as a class, what components successful stories include, such as sequencing, plot, characters, and a setting. They were provided a few choices of graphic organizers that they could utilize if they wished. Two of the graphic organizers were for writing out their ideas and one was for drawing out their ideas. The goal was to observe what they would choose to do when given the opportunity. Days six to ten were for publication and performance. Students were given choices of creating monologues, videos, puppet performances, or anything they could think of. Again, the emphasis was on student choice. They could combine their narratives with peers or perform solo. They could choose not to share their story as well.

Students were provided an opportunity to create a narrative in the means of their choosing, without pressure of success or failure. My aim was to observe how the students' narratives evolved over time when given room for student choice and the opportunity to interact with their peers. I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of their creative process and determine what relationships, if any, existed between their visual and written narratives.

Sample

The purpose of the research was to gain a better understanding of student engagement in the narrative process (Olshansky, 1995) compared to my own preconceived notions. All second graders who attend art class participated in this unit. In the second grade there were 54 students total. The grade level is separated into three class sections each containing between 18 to 19 students. My actual sample ended up being 53 students, as I only saw one of the students once during the entire two and half month unit. Of the 53 participants, 27 are female and 26 are male. For the purposes of this study, I am considering the results of the participants as a whole and looking at the generalized commonalities and differences. I will make references occasionally to

observations I've made with individual students, but I will use pseudonyms that don't reveal the student's identity.

Sample Characteristics

For a sample of students so large, I will not give character descriptions of each student. I will, however, describe in general terms the characteristics of each class section, hereby referred to as Class A, B, and C. Class A is a highly energetic and enthusiastic class as a whole. They seem to be a very empathetic group that is highly concerned about the welfare of their classmates and eager to help each other as needed. This class always has very high attendance on art class days and there are usually little to no behavior disruptions. They appear to be thriving and developing their own learning community (Gallas, 1992) that they carry with them outside their regular classroom.

Class B is also a highly engaged group with very few behavior concerns. In contrast to Class A, this group does not appear to have as much of a collective learning community mentality. Most class periods consist of multiple tattling episodes with my role as mediator, as they learn to work through social issues. Most students in this class prefer to work alone and are happy to do so. However, there are a few small groups within the class that work well together and look for opportunities to do so.

Class C is very different from the other two classes. This group has difficulty staying on task and seems to be very distracted by each other. Quite a few of the students in Class C appear to be in competition with one another. I often need to rearrange seats and make behavior modification plans for students. For this unit, they were much further behind the other two classes and seemed to get half the work done in twice the amount of time. They did not get nearly as far in their narrative projects as the other two classes.

Data Collection Procedures

I spoke with the administration of my building to see if it would be an issue to conduct a study on my class. After determining that I would not be revealing the identity

of the students, I proceeded with the process of human subjects research approval. After the human subjects office gave an exemption of IRB for this research, I proceeded with my study. Because this study is taking place in my regular classroom, with my regular curriculum, and am I doing nothing beyond what the district and parents would expect, they granted the IRB exemption and therefore from needing parental permission. To protect the identity of the students, pseudonyms were used and there was no identifying information from my observation notes or in the photos of the student projects.

Instruments

For the study I used two types of instruments to collect data: (1) systematic observation that included surveys, videos, and daily note taking and (2) rubrics to evaluate student daily engagement, effort, proficiency in sequencing, and creativity in regard to exploration, originality, and elaboration. My role in the research was also as a participant (as the teacher and facilitator of the unit), therefore I had to be careful to not influence student choice or push students in the direction I was expecting. I also had to make use of videos to look back at the lessons, since it was impossible for me to observe everything all of the time. I selectively took notes on student engagement, peer interactions, and student choice in the creative process.

Observation, Survey, and Note Taking

Observation and Note Taking

Observations included; watching how students utilized their image making into the narrative process, how they worked through the creative process, and how they interacted with their peers. I looked specifically at student preference in the narrative construction. I was curious what methods students would prefer to use to create their stories when given autonomy and choice. I also wanted to know, when left to their own devices, the depth of their story creations and how engaged in the process they would be.

In other words, I was looking for some of the key ingredients of creating writing: intrinsic motivation, imagination, and description (Barbot et al., 2012). This was with the understanding that they had limited background knowledge in creative writing and story structure. I also kept in mind my own bias on what I judged as “good writing”, and was careful to balance my role as teacher and observer while the students worked through their creative process (Nauman, Stirling, and Borthwick, 2011). I also observed how the choice-based learning environment affected their engagement and the learning community. I was curious how the open learning environment would foster a feeling of collective creativity.

For my observation of **art making as inspiration**, I observed how the students utilized their initial paintings into the narrative process. As Newland (2013) and Olshansky (1995) have demonstrated, it is possible for children’s stories to be enriched by the art-making process. I was curious how the process of finding inspiration in their non-objective paintings would engage them in the narrative process. As part of this observation process I made sure the students saved all work in a folder and bag, to be referred to and reworked as the unit went on. I was also interested to see how the students might return to these initial artworks for later use in the unit.

For observation of the **creative thinking process**, I noted on how students were working through their narratives. I looked for signs of visualization of ideas, collection of ideas for later use, and varied methods of revision (John-Steiner, 1985). It was of particular interest to me how students incorporated art making through the entire narrative process. I was looking for the transfer of ideas from one medium to another. I made a point, as the teacher, to have active dialogues with the students about their narrative process (Olson, 1992), to help bridge the connection between the visual and the verbal. However, as the observer and researcher, I was careful to simply give guidance and assistance where students appeared to be in need or were ready.

For the observation of **peer interactions**, I looked specifically at how students utilized their peers in the creative process. I was curious how they helped guide each other (Vygotsky, 1978) through their narrative creations and at what times did they choose to work collaboratively versus independently. I listened carefully for evidence of “exploratory talk” and made note of how the students worked through creative ideas together (Mercer, 2004). I wanted to know in what ways were students influenced by their peers in the creative process and how engaged they were in their peers narratives.

Survey and Note Taking

My initial theory, which brought about this study, was that students would prefer to begin their narratives by first engaging in the art-making process, rather than illustrating their stories afterward, a practice I assumed most students are accustomed to in the regular education classroom. I soon realized, when I started my research as a pilot study a year prior, that I was not considering the multiple domains of learning within the classroom. I had pre-conceived notions and assumed that *all* of the students would be better inspired by the art making. I conducted a similar survey with the students that year, and found they were balanced in their preferences. The survey asked questions about the students’ feelings towards writing stories, generating ideas, if they preferred to draw or write, and their preferences for story sharing. For this study I decided I would get a better perspective if I conducted the survey before the start of the unit and at the close of the unit. I was interested if there would be any significant changes in the students’ preferences or views. The surveys were executed anonymously so that students could answer truthfully without concern for teacher opinion. The survey was made using a rating scale that used graphics and words to accommodate the varying levels of reading ability. As the teacher and researcher I gave the survey and read each question and all answer choices out loud to students. For reliability I took time to clarify all vocabulary and made sure students understood the directions before proceeding.

Table 1. Stories Survey

Do you like to write stories? Circle the answer you agree with the most!					
4 ☺!! I REALLY like to write stories!	3 ☺ I like to write stories!	2 ☺ I sometimes like to write stories.	1 ☹ I don't like to write stories.		
How about thinking of ideas for your stories? Circle the answer you agree with the most!					
4 ☺!! It's REALLY easy to think of ideas to write about!	3 ☺ Usually it's easy to think of ideas to write about and sometimes it's hard.	2 ☺ Usually it's hard to think of ideas, but sometimes it's easy.	1 ☹ It's always hard to think of ideas.		
How do you like to write your stories? Circle the answer you agree with the most!					
4 I like to write my story first and then draw a picture.	3 I like to draw my picture first and then write the story.	2 I only like writing the story. I don't like drawing the picture.	1 I only like drawing the picture. I don't like writing the story.		
What about telling your stories? Circle the answers you agree with the most! (You can pick more than one!) How do you like sharing your stories when they are finished?!					
I like to read my story out loud to an audience.	I like someone else to read my story.	I like doing a performance to go with my story.	I like having music to go with my story.	I like having artwork to help tell my story.	I don't really like sharing my stories.

Rubrics

Engagement Rubric

For measuring student engagement, I utilized a standardized rubric that rated the students' involvement in any given task. As the teacher and observer, I used my daily observations and referenced back to videos to determine each child's attentiveness and engagement in the project every day. For my records as a teacher and for the purpose of curriculum assessment I have kept specific data on each student. However, for the purposes of this study and to protect student identity, I will analyze student engagement data by classes and as a whole. For this study I made judgments on engagement by visible behavior and productivity for that class period. I realize the limitations of this analysis because a lot of engagement could be occurring inside the child's mind as they are working through these creative processes (John-Steiner, 1985), even if they don't seem externally to be on task. Therefore, I had to make use of my best professional judgment and my knowledge of these students as individuals to rate their engagement.

Table 2. Measuring Student Daily Engagement Rubric

Measure 1: Engagement

- 0 Student does not engage in task
 - 1 Student engaged briefly before moving on to another task
 - 2 Student engaged some of the time on task
 - 3 Student engaged most of the time on task
 - 4 Student engaged entire work time and/or needed more time due to high involvement
-

Unit Rubrics

For analysis of the student projects, I had specific measures for each step of the unit. I looked specifically at their involvement in the task, their creativity and originality, and the overall structure of their narratives. I measured the tasks of paint exploration, image collection, narrative creativity, narrative technical, elaboration of stories, and final story components.

Task 1: Paint Exploration

For this task, students were asked to engage in hands-on art making, learning different ways of applying paint to paper. They learned processes such as wet on wet and wet on dry painting techniques. They were asked to keep it non-objective and to focus on exploring different things they could do with the paint, tools, and paper. They were unaware that these paintings would be used for story creation later. I wanted the art making to be authentic and didn't want the students begin their story creations at this time. This is because of the nature of the next task and the value of the image collecting.

Table 3. Paint Exploration: Creativity/Exploration Rubric

Task 1: Paint Exploration	
Measure 2: Creativity/Exploration (exploration of painting techniques)	
0	Student made no attempt to experiment with paint/tools
1	1 new technique attempted
2	2 new techniques attempted
3	3 new techniques attempted
4	4 new techniques attempted, clear the student was experimenting creatively

Task 2: Image Collection

For this task, students used their non-objective paintings for image collection. I demonstrated an improvisational character collection. We started as a whole group as I showed how one could use their imagination to see images within the shapes, textures, and lines in their paintings. We then moved to a collective brainstorming session, as a group, to find more inspiring images with my demonstration painting. From there, I allowed the class to generate a possible story plot out of the imagery we found together. This was to help bridge them from this task to the narrative creation task. Students were encouraged to utilize their peers for help in this task if they so wanted.

For measurement of this task I was looking specifically at their engagement in the image collection as well as evidence that the images themselves were developed further. I referred back to videos to get an understanding of overall class engagement in the task, but mainly looked at their paintings afterward to see how many images they collected and how much imagery they added to the paintings, thus elaborating on their ideas.

Table 4. Image Collection: Creativity/Originality Rubric

Task 2: Image Collection	
Measure 3: Creativity/Originality. (Image Collection)	
0	Student does not engage in task
1	Student engaged in task briefly before moving on to another task
2	Student engaged some of the time on task
3	Student engaged most of the time on task
4	Student engaged entire work time and/or needed more time due to high involvement

Task 3: Visual/Written Narrative Creation

For this task, students were allowed multiple days to construct their narratives. I had two separate measures for their narrative creation. One focused on creativity and originality, and the other on sequencing and technical writing. The instruction was open ended and students were provided with graphic organizers to assist in the narrative construction. They were allowed to proceed in the creation either through visuals or through written words. Students were encouraged to utilize either method depending on their individual needs. We discussed as a group the elements of good story structure and students were asked to remember and check if their stories had a beginning, middle, and end. This was a learning target connection to their regular classroom. I wanted to measure not only the uniqueness of their stories but also if they were utilizing knowledge of technical writing they had learned previously.

Table 5. Visual/Written Narrative Creation: Creativity/Originality Rubric

Task 3: Visual/Written Narrative Creation	
Measure 4: Creativity/Originality (story writing)	
0	Student does not attempt to create a story
1	Student uses copies of examples, stereotypes, or small variations of other stories
2	Student adapts other ideas/stories by making slight changes to other stories
3	Student uses complex adaptation or elaboration of other story ideas
4	Student's story utilizes mostly original ideas and complex adaptations of other ideas

Table 6. Visual/Written Narrative Creation: Sequencing/Technical Writing Rubric

Task 3: Visual/Written Narrative Creation**Measure 5: Sequencing/Technical Writing (story writing)**

-
- 0 Student makes no attempt to narrate a sequential story
 - 1 Student creates a narrative but their understanding of story sequencing is unclear
 - 2 Student demonstrates an emerging understanding of story sequencing
 - 3 Student demonstrates an understanding of story sequencing
 - 4 Student demonstrates a very clear understanding of developed story sequencing
-

Task 4: Story Publishing

For this task, students were asked to “publish” their stories in the method of their choice. For the purposes of this study, and for the elementary art room, publish meant to prepare for sharing. Like Task 3, I used two measures for Task 4. I looked at the creativity and elaboration of ideas, as well as the ratio of visuals to written words in their final creations. Time, materials, and imagination were the only limitations for students. I tried to make available anything they requested and helped them acquire what they needed. I made some suggestions, such as nicely written drafts for reading, puppet shows, plays, graphic novels, and additional artwork. I measured students’ dedication to the publishing process and whether or not they took advantage of the variety of methods and publishing choices. I also looked at whether their choices enhanced the story narrative and helped them to refine their ideas. I was particularly interested in how many students utilized mainly visuals or mainly written words in their stories, or if they used a balance of the two methods.

Table 7. Story Publishing: Creativity/Elaboration Rubric

Task 4: Story Publishing**Measure 6: Creativity/Elaboration (final draft)**

-
- 0 Student makes no effort to publish story
 - 1 Student doesn't take advantage of publishing choices nor elaborates on ideas
 - 2 Student made some refinements and published story in media of choice
 - 3 Student refined ideas and publishing choices enhanced story
 - 4 Student demonstrated excellent refinement of ideas and clear critical thinking
-

Data Analysis

I analyzed the daily data from observations, videos, field notes, and rubrics. I used grounded theory and the rubrics for analyzing each of the measures. I looked for common themes in the data and notes, in regard to student engagement and choice in the narrative process. Also carefully considered, were commonalities in terms of art making as inspiration, the creative thinking process, and peer interaction. My research questions guided the analysis of my data and notes. For Question 1, I looked for high engagement in students when they were given choices in their learning. I looked carefully at my observation notes, the videos, rubrics, and student surveys. My assessment on student engagement was primarily based on whether participants were actively engaged in each unit task. I also considered the development and elaboration of narratives as key indicators that students were engaged and dedicated to the creative process. Students' initial responses in the survey and their views on narrative writing were also compared to their views following the unit. I analyzed any changes in student views towards the

narrative process and considered if the choice-based method resulted in more positive views and higher engagement (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009).

For Question 2, regarding student preference in the creation and sharing of narratives, I again looked carefully at the observation notes, videos, rubrics, and surveys. I analyzed how students responded to the survey before and after the unit and considered what percentage of students answered for each the story creation and sharing categories. I looked carefully at how peer interactions influenced their choices in the narrative process (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2008) and how students utilized the visual and written processes (John-Steiner, 1985).

For observations, I attempted to take notes during the classes. Due to the fact that I was also the teacher, my ability to take thorough notes was limited as I also had the priority of teaching and assisting students. Therefore, the videos of the lessons were immensely valuable to refer back to for note taking. Later, I watched the videos and made careful notes of what I was seeing regarding my research questions. For the daily engagement, I made a point to record each student's daily rating score. On days where this was impossible, I referred back to the videos to enter their scores. And lastly, for the unit rubric measures, I looked at each student's final project and portfolio of unit artifacts for analysis. For consistency, I used a rating scale to score the unit measures. In some cases, rubric measures were assigned a number value, but this number did not necessarily indicate that one outcome was better than another. Some of the numbers were utilized simply for ease of data collection and analysis.

RESULTS

Observation Overview of Unit Tasks

For this next section, I will summarize observations I made while reviewing the video of the tasks and field notes collected during the lessons. I looked carefully for art making as inspiration, the creative thinking process, and peer interaction. I used these themes to guide my observation notes. I will organize this overview into five sections, separated by the unit tasks and then the final performance: Task 1: Paint Exploration, Task 2: Image Collection, Task 3: Visual/Written Narrative Creation, Task 4: Story Publishing, and Final Performance. I will then separate each section into sub-sections, referring to each of the second grade classes: Class A, Class B and Class C. I hope to gain a broader perspective by organizing the results in this manner and therefore able to make connections between the tasks and class sections.

Task 1: Paint Exploration

Class A

When most students entered the art room, their faces were full of anticipation. Today was no different, because as soon as they saw me in my apron, they knew it meant something messy and that can only mean good things. The students were highly engaged during the paint exploration process. In fact, their daily engagement score resulted in 100% of the class highly engaged in the task. I observed students exploring the possibilities of paint application individually, but many students were verbally sharing their discoveries, while their eyes were still focused on their own work. There were many outbursts of, “Ooooooh!” and “Awesome, oh!” This was evidence of peer interaction at some level and an important factor in their exploration. They wanted their peers to be aware of their discoveries and pleasure. Mercer (2004) described this talk as

a mode of social thinking and creative problem solving. I witnessed this in nearly every class period.

Some students still required some reassurance that they could indeed explore freely. One student asked me, “Can we move the paint around?” at the start of the lesson; even after we had already discussed the explorative free nature of the activity. Part way through the paint exploration I heard one student proclaim, “Oh! It’s just like a marker airbrush!” I believe this student was referring to the way he was manipulating the paint by blowing on it through a straw. He was making connections to materials he had at home and delighted in sharing this with his peers (Douglas & Jacquith, 2009). The lesson continued with many more comments such as, “Hey, look!”, “Wow!”, and “This is fun!”

Class B

Just like Class A, this group was highly engaged in paint exploration. They also had 100% high engagement for the students in attendance. Like Class A, they were individually engaged in paint exploration and verbally shared their excitement with many outbursts of joy. However, I witnessed more desire to interact with one another in this group. I heard many students asking the other to, “Look it!” or “Look!” as well as heard invitations to share knowledge. I witnessed a number of students repeatedly informing each other, “Did you know white and red make pink?!” They appeared highly involved in a collective learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Class C

Although it’s speculation, I had to wonder if this group was in such high anticipation because of what they had heard from the students from the other sections. The class started with some behavior disruptions and rowdiness. Therefore, we had to spend some valuable time going over class expectations. They looked at me with huge grins and said, “We’re just excited!” Once the group got underway, I observed the same

exploration and collective learning I witnessed with the other two groups. Likewise, they had to share about “making pink” with one another. When one student said, “I made pink!” another replied, “red and white? Oh yeah!” and then ripples through the room of “red and pink...red and white...pink!”. This group was highly engaged in communicating with one another through the entire process. It was frustrating that the noise level was high and it seemed disruptive, but it also appeared to be a valuable “exploratory talk” experience for the students (Mercer, 2004).



Figure 1. Paint exploration

Task 2: Image Collection

Class A

As I began explaining how the image collection process would work and how we would create stories inspired by our artwork, a student interrupted me, hereby referred to as Hunter, who blurted, “I don’t get that!” Throughout the rest of the teacher lead discussion, Hunter proceeded to blurt responses to all of my questions and statements. The student’s interruptions weren’t necessarily disruptive, as he appeared to just be

talking to himself, and perhaps his neighbor. It was clear it was part of his thinking process. He didn't seem concerned about anyone answering or paying attention to his outbursts. Hunter blurted such things as, "Awesome!" and "No, no!" in response to the suggestion they could use the computer to record their story, followed by a "Yeah!!" in response to making a video.

As a class, we brainstormed how to collect images from our paintings and how to let them inspire narratives. Another student asked, "What if you can't draw anything?" They were referring to not being able to find inspiring shapes in the painting. Hunter piped in, "You could draw new things on top of it." This was of particular note because just a moment ago Hunter was unsure about the image collecting and narrative process himself and now he was giving advice to his peers. This demonstrated to me that his outbursts were helping him process the information he was receiving. In his way, verbally processing his information is like his creative processing "note book" (John-Steiner, 1985). The students continued as a group to feed off of each other's ideas and suggestions as we collectively demonstrated the process.

The students broke out to work individually or in groups. I saw many students working in pairs or small groups and thoughtfully helping each other as needed. I witnessed many patient individuals, somewhat hesitantly, pull themselves away from their own work to help a peer. I could hear indistinct conversations of students finding imagery and creating narratives. Hunter, who was struggling with an image, handed the painting to a neighbor, Danny. Danny picked up Hunter's painting, turned it in different directions and said, "Look!" The two put their heads together and the rest of the creative thinking was out of my earshot.

Class B

Like Class A, this class began in the same way. This group had some excited and free-spirited individuals who seemed to be thriving in this choice-based learning

experience and couldn't wait to get started. They seemed to have a hard time listening to my opening statements and directions. While demonstrating image collection they also engaged in collective brainstorming with ease. They appeared to be feeding off of each other's ideas and building on them with joy. They began to have trouble taking turns and some started yelling out to get their ideas heard. Another actually acted out his ideas with his body, much to everyone's enjoyment. This is another excellent example of "exploratory talk" and an instance of students arguing and defending their ideas (Mercer, 2004; Vass et al., 2008). Students quickly got together in their groups to work or settled in individually at their desks, to engage in the process. I heard indistinct conversations such as, "Oh, that's a monkey!" and "Oh, you're right! This could be...."



Figure 2. Students helping each other find imagery in their paintings

Class C

Section C began the same and soon we were all engaged in image collecting as a group. Rather than feeding on each other's ideas, however, most seemed in competition for the group to like their individual suggestions. There were many great imaginative ideas brought to the group. However, students seemed resistant to brainstorm together.

We broke out so students could work on their own paintings. Some students paired up, but many seemed to have trouble finding a partner or group even though they would have liked one. I spent some time helping students find a peer to collaborate with. Most students worked independently on their image collection, but were still very aware of and concerned with their peers. The atmosphere didn't feel like the same "exploratory talk" I witnessed in the other class sections but I remained an observer, and watched how their creative processes progressed. While their interactions appeared more argumentative, I kept in mind that these sometimes emotionally charged conversations were opportunities for students to argue over and borrow ideas (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2008).

Task 3: Story Creation

Class A

Story creation took place over a couple class periods. Each day we read through the unit and day's objectives to help students stay on target. Some students seemed unsure or nervous about creating a narrative and I was immediately posed with the question, "What do we do when we're done?" The students were not sure what to expect with the freedom of the narrative process and were immediately resisting the idea of "writing" their stories. We practiced looking back to our paintings and considered how we could use these, now full of images, to inspire our stories. As soon as the students began working I could hear conversations of, "There's a vampire...", "Ooohh! Haha" and "There's a knife..." to which I jumped in to say, "Try to avoid too much violence! You'll get me into trouble!" All I got in return was a big mischievous grin. Indeed, these images provided tools for creative thinking and were inspiring rich narrative possibilities (Olshanksy, 1995).

Most students worked well on their image collection, but others needed some guidance. Freedom of choice seemed to make Danny unsure. He kept returning to me for reassurance that his story was on the right track. He asked many questions about

process and became very excited once he realized, and believed me, that he could draw his story out instead of writing it. I could tell for Danny, the visualization of ideas was key to his creative process (John-Steiner, 1985). However, he didn't seem confident in his own ideas and needed consistent and frequent reassurance. After many mini meetings, Danny finally appeared confident and relaxed to pursue his narrative in the way he wished.

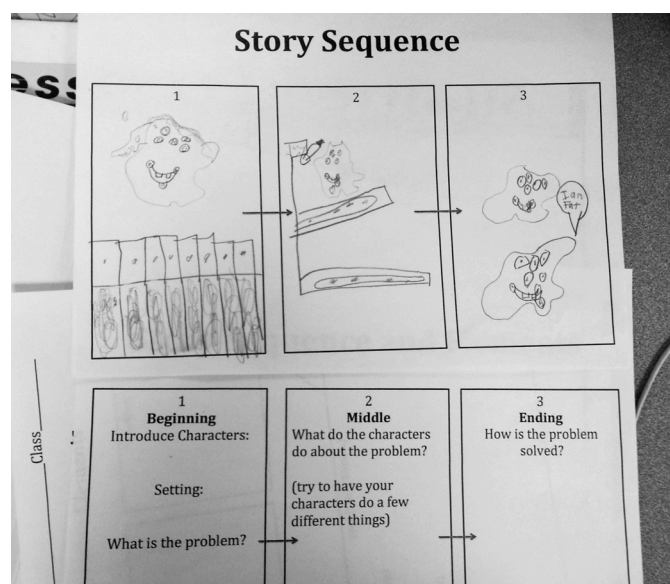


Figure 3. Visual story sequencing by Danny

Many other students needed guidance and reassurance that they didn't have to "write" everything. Although, I did encourage them to write down notes for themselves so they wouldn't forget their ideas. I also encouraged them to fill out a narrative sheet to help them think of characters, a setting, and a sequence of events. These graphic organizers seemed to be a valuable tool for the students to put their ideas together.

Class B

Class B's story creation looked much the same as Class A. Over the course of a couple days, students were actively engaged in the creative process in a variety of ways.

Some continued with image creation, some worked solely on writing, and others began acting out their stories. Like the other class, the graphic organizers were very helpful for most students. There seemed to be more students engaged in lengthy writing in this section than the other. This didn't surprise me, but rather interested me as John-Steiner (1985) explained that the creative process looks different for everyone.

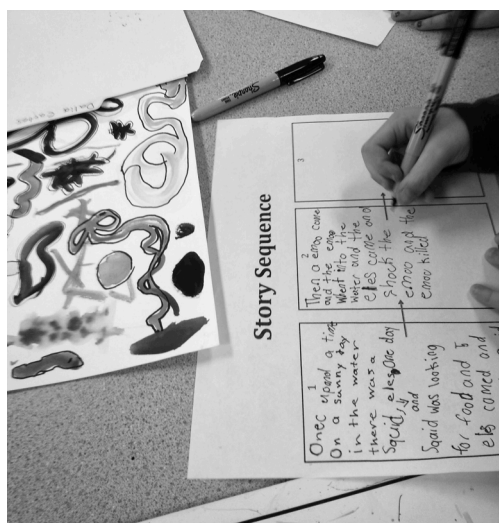


Figure 4. Written narrative with graphic organizer

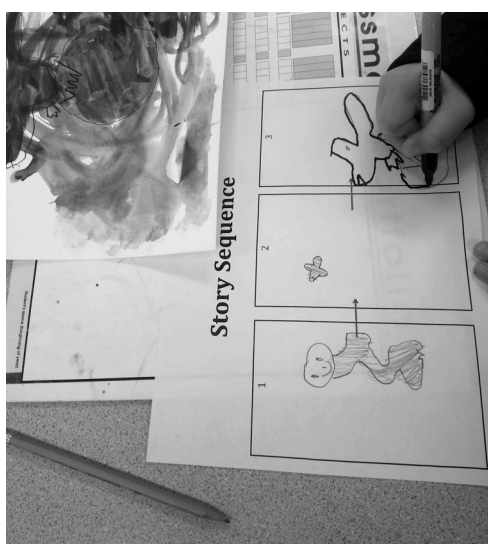


Figure 5. Visual narrative with graphic organizer

Another student, Andy, needed more time to work on character development and wanted to do some computer research for a character. He wished to draw a Creeper, from the video game Minecraft, but wasn't satisfied with his drawings from memory. I set him up by at my computer, which also happened to be my video camera. I was able to capture his entire self-dialogue as he worked through the creative process. While working at the computer he was speaking to himself unconcerned if anyone was listening:

“I don't think he looks like a Creeper,” said Andy with a tilt of his head.

“I'll just draw what I want,” he said with a shrug.

Suddenly Andy said, “Oh yeah!! This one...wait!”

He intently looked back and forth from the screen and his paper and suddenly said to himself while pointing to his head, “I'm a genius!”

“Three Creepers,” he went on to say.

At this point I interrupted the entire class to give directions, he respectfully raised his hand and stopped drawing, but was anxiously looking at his paper and dying to get back to work. When I released everyone, with only a minute left of class, he hurriedly finished his details and then came running to me proclaiming, “My best first Creeper!”



Figure 6. Andy's best first Creeper

Class C

Just like the other two classes, Class C came in eager to get to work. However, on this day they seemed attentive but not highly engaged. Indeed, I only calculated between 50-60% engagement for this portion of the unit. Many, throughout the part of this task, seemed to waste a lot of time. They were highly concerned in social affairs with classmates and it was a struggle to engage them in the story creation process. One student asked about only using pictures to tell his story. We brainstormed together how to do a graphic novel of sorts. He proceeded to draw three to four “slides” for different parts of the narrative that would later be projected up on the overhead while he orally told his story.

Task 4: Story Publishing

Class A

Publishing of the stories seemed to be the most highly anticipated part of the project. Students were provided with a variety of materials, but most seemed excited about puppets, regardless of whatever ideas they previously had. They appeared to be influenced by each other, and a collective excitement about “making their characters” spread across the group. I witnessed one student who was so excited to make puppets that she forgot what they was supposed to be making and made brand new characters. This student cleverly incorporated these new characters into her original story. It appeared the process of art making inspired new ideas, which in turn influenced the narrative process (Olson, 1992).

All throughout the publishing process, I witnessed students practicing and playing with their characters. It quickly became evident that their stories were evolving, as their characters had an opportunity to interact with other characters and as students had opportunities to explore new materials. Some students soon realized that the fact that

they hadn't written anything down yet was hindering their story development. These students quickly revisited their graphic organizers and utilized their peers for help.

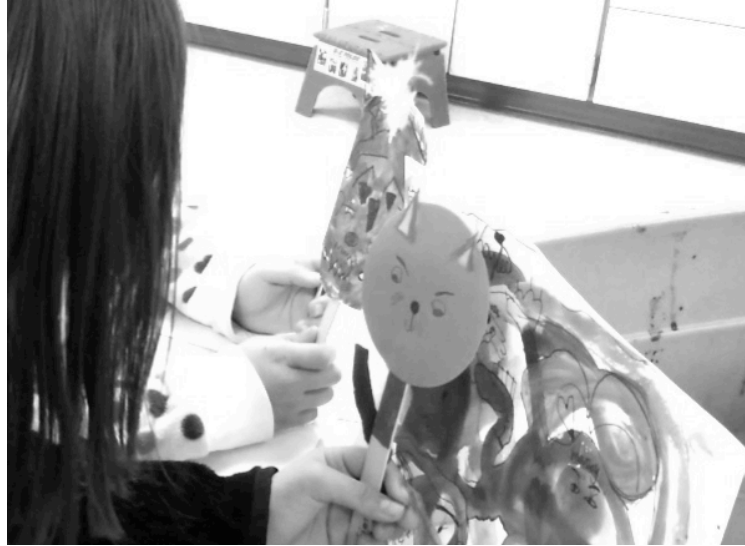


Figure 7. New art making inspired changes in narrative development

A couple of students approached me nervously to say they were finished. They appeared to be worried that I would tell them they had to do more work. I asked them to explain their stories so far and they seemed surprised when I told them if they were done to go find a quiet corner and practice telling each other their stories. It wasn't too long before one of those students, Leo, proclaimed he didn't need to practice anymore and that he was ready for the show. I said, "Okay! But let's do a practice recording."

After setting him up in the hallway, with camera and puppet stage, we recorded his story. He fumbled through his narrative, not having written much down, and had difficulty with fluency on what he did have written. Leo also soon realized he was having difficulty juggling his puppets and looking at his paper at the same time. When he was finished, we listened to his recording. He was surprised to find out that the camera didn't pick up his voice at all. He decided he needed to go practice more. This

was a good example of a student learning about the revision process for creative thinking (John-Steiner, 1985).

Danny was consistently transferring his creative ideas from one mode of expression to another. Each visual resembled the previous one and I could see a pattern emerging in his work. There were repeated elements in character design. While the characters weren't appearing to evolve, they appeared to solidify in their development.

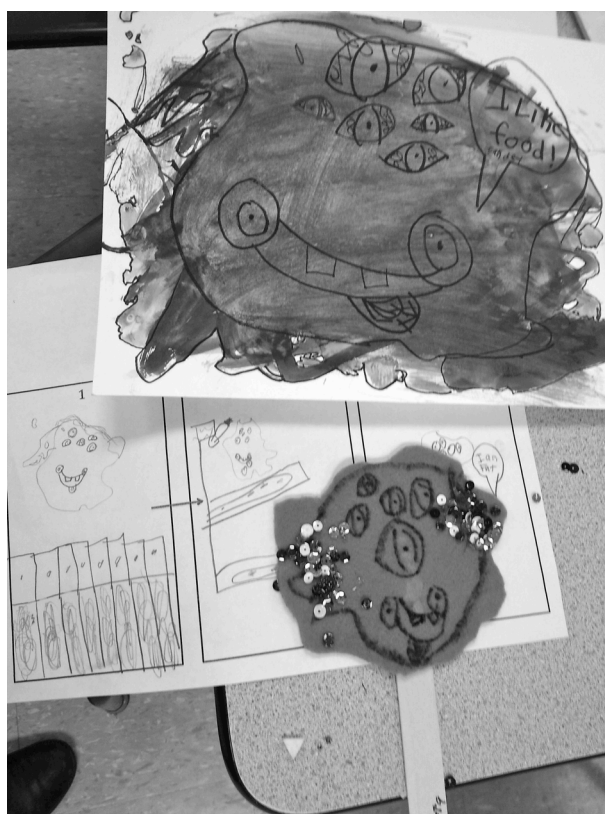


Figure 8. Image of Danny's narrative progression into puppetry

Class B

During the publishing portion of the unit, students appeared to have trouble getting started. However, it became clear to me later, that only a small number of students were having trouble. This was because the few students with difficulties were repeatedly coming up to me seeking help with solving disputes. Therefore, I was missing

all of the collaboration other students were engaged in. In one of the video observations, I witnessed three students playing with their puppets in an interactive story development (Mercer, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time they were trying to tweak and improve their puppets.

Student 1: Playing with puppets alone and having the characters interact.

Student 2 to Student 3: “Hey Andy! Hey Andy!” In a new puppet voice, “*Hey Andy!*”

S3: Bends down to join play. “*Beep, beep, beep, beep.*”

S1: Runs over with puppets to join.

S2: “*Wow! Wow!*”

S2: “*What’s up skeleton?*”

S3: Walks away to adjust puppet.

S1: (in puppet voice) “*What’s up?*”

S2: In normal voice, “No, you gotta...” *indistinct dialogue*. S2 goes over to speak to S3. The three quietly converse while adjusting their puppets, and then run off to another part of the room together.

What these three students demonstrated was an excellent use of play as discovery, as well as exploratory talk, for working through their creative process. They weren’t just playing with their puppets, but determining how their characters should interact with other, setting ground rules for the narrative, and making adjustments as needed.

Class C

Class C struggled a bit at the start of publishing. Students were required to have some idea for their narrative before they began creating puppets or other publishing media. I placed this requirement on this group because so few of them had accomplished much in their narratives yet. It certainly wasn’t everyone, but many of the students who had behavior disruptions were behind. However, some students did engage in puppet

making, and some made more imagery to enhance their stories. I was, however, faced with many students who wanted more time for publishing and I had to sadly tell them we had no more time. It was a valuable lesson about staying on task.

Final Performance

Class A

For the final performance, we set up a puppet stage when needed, moved it aside for plays, and utilized the reader's chair as well. Students also made use of the document camera to project artwork and any imagery they wished. The first student to go hadn't written much down, nor had much narrative planned, but seemed to flourish in the limelight. He set the stage for the next performances to come. He began with confidence, which the other students took to heart and improvised most of his story with a lot of character interaction.

The next group was a collaboration of three students. It was immensely detailed and elaborate. These three had carefully combined their characters and stories into one large story in which I could see evidence of some of the key ingredients to creative writing development (Barbot et al., 2012). They not only had planned and scripted the entire thing, but also were in non-stop communication during the performance. They fed off of the audience's enjoyment and enjoyed the approval they were getting so much I could tell they didn't want the performance to end. They made the story last longer than planned with many elaborations, sound effects, and additions. I was impressed with their ability to improvise simultaneously. They were engaged in quiet "exploratory talk" that was argumentative behind the curtain. It appeared to be a positive interaction where they were learning to compromise and work collaboratively. After this highly engaging performance, every performance to follow had elements influenced by this group. That

showed me the students were definitely inspired by their peer interactions and were learning effective story telling from each other.

Not all students wanted to share their stories, and it was within their right not to do so. For this project, we discussed how some authors and artists want to be anonymous. One student requested to do a private recording later for students to watch, but not know who the author was. Later, however, this same student decided he wanted to share his story when the project was over. I, of course, obliged. Most students in this class utilized more visuals than written word in their narrative creation, with 55.5% using mostly visuals and some words. Only 11.1% were written, with only some visuals.



Figure 9. Collaborative narrative with puppetry

Class B

Class B's final performance gave me some surprises. I missed some of their collaborative work in class because of mediating a few disputes, but it became evident they had been planning and working outside of class as well. This was the only section of the three to write full plays. Not only did they write theirs into plays, but also they had recruited many class members as actors and actresses. I had to wonder if they didn't

practice this at recess, because the students all seemed to know their part and had no problem being stage directed in the middle of the performance. When the first of these was finished, the playwright asked if he could introduce all of the players. I said, “But of course!” and they proceeded to introduce all the players with character names. After much bowing and cheering, it set the stage for the rest of the class. Every performance now necessitated the acknowledgment of the players and I couldn’t help but think, “Why hadn’t I thought of that?”

I was pleased to see one student, who the week before had informed me didn’t want to read his story, and wanted me to do it for him, change his mind. On the actual performance day, this student read his story on his own and with confidence while his peers collaboratively improvised the puppet play portion. There were a variety of narrative methods used in this class. Only 11.1% used mainly written narrative with only some visuals. The rest of the students were distributed between using all visuals and no words, mostly visuals and some words, and a balance of visual and narrative methods.

Class C

Class C was very eager to perform, but many students still didn’t feel ready. They were feeling sad that they hadn’t used all of their time in class well. I didn’t want any students to feel as though they had to perform, certainly not if they weren’t ready, but explained that today was the day. A few students went out into the hall to quickly rehearse and came back in later, confident and ready to go. Another student improvised a prop with something she had in her pocket since there wasn’t time to make anything more. I thought this was clever and resourceful. I observed that the students thoroughly enjoyed being the performer, but most of the audience was disengaged during other performances. I believe this is because most of it was hard to hear and this class appeared less interested in their peers’ stories. However, I did observe on a couple of

occasions, students who said they didn't make a story were invited into someone else's. They seemed to improvise their part and to take great joy in the collaborative process.

Class C didn't have any students to only use visuals. Most of the students, 47.1%, used a balance of visual and written methods. In contrast to the other two sections, Class C had 29.4% of students who used mostly written words and only some visuals. I believe the time mismanagement in the middle of the project may have resulted in fewer visuals being used by some students.

ANALYSIS

Student Preference in Visual and Written Narratives

Analysis with Observation and Rubric

For analysis of student preference, I looked carefully at my unit scoring rubrics and observations to determine connections between the students' visual and written narratives. I also considered student survey results in regard to their narrative preferences. Each section was slightly different in their preferences. I believe this is, in large part, due to peer interaction and influence. Each section's unique class dynamics encouraged different methods of narration and resulted in that particular group being more collectively engaged in particular methods.

In Class A, 55.5% of students created narratives that used mostly visuals and some written words. Of the remaining students, 33.3% used all visuals and 11.1% used a balance of visual and written methods. Based on my observations, these results seemed accurate. Collectively as a group, they were most engaged with puppet making. Nearly every story included puppets in some way. Of all of the puppet shows, most of the students had at least a little bit of a narrative written down, even if only in their planning rubrics. A small number of students in the class wrote at least a few paragraphs of their stories and a number of students used all visuals and improvised their stories. Though it appeared as improvisation, it was evident that it was improvisation based on other experienced play. They were utilizing ideas that they had previously tried out in our publishing class periods.

In Class B, the ratio of story methods was somewhat more balanced. Similar to Class A, a smaller number of students, 11.1%, utilized mostly written words and few visuals in their narratives. The highest percentage of students, at 33.3%, used mostly visuals in their narratives. The remaining students were split, both at 27.7%, between using all visuals or using a balance of visual and written methods. These results also

reflected my observations. In this section, students were highly engaged in acting out their stories, as well as doing puppet performances. Students created many visuals whether they were puppets, props, or costumes. However, writing was important to many of their stories, with some students and groups writing out fairly elaborate details.

In Class C, narrative choices were slightly different than the other two sections. There were no students who only used visuals in their narratives. Instead, it was split between 23.5% of students who used mostly visuals and some written, 47% who used a balance of written and visual methods, and 29.5% who used mostly written methods and only some visuals. As the teacher and observer I wonder if this class, given the amount of disruption and off task behavior, was fully aware of their narrative choices. Towards the end of the unit, many of them reflected back and wanted to do more visuals or wished they had written more.

Table 8. Comparison of Student Narrative Choice

Class	Mostly Visuals/ Some Written	All Visuals	Mostly Written/ Some Visuals	Balance of Visual and Written
A	55.5%	33.3%	0%	11.1%
B	33.3%	27.7%	11.1%	27.7%
C	23.5%	0%	29.5%	47.1%

In my analysis I could see a clear connection between the visual and written narratives. For most students, image-making in the narrative process directly impacted the richness of their story telling (Olshansky, 1995) and the level of critical thinking (John-Steiner, 1985). It was clear students used a variety of methods to develop their ideas and allow their stories to evolve.

Analysis with Survey

For survey analysis, I compared their responses before and after the unit.

Although I asked a few questions, I was mainly concerned with their response to how they liked to write their stories (see Table 1.) I was curious how their perceptions about story creation may have changed from the start of the unit to the conclusion. My results were inconclusive and ended with more questions than answers. Again, I wonder if how their perceptions regarding narratives impacted how they understood the questions. I question whether the wording of my survey allowed for reliability. My questioning used limited words regarding “writing” and “drawing”, when in reality the actual unit encompassed many more forms of expression and creative thinking such as dramatic play and puppetry (see Table 1).

Table 9. Survey of Student Preferences in Story Creation

		How do you like to write your stories?			
		4 (I like to write my story first and then draw the picture.)	3 (I like to draw my picture first and then write the story.)	2 (I only like writing the story. I don't like drawing the picture.)	1 (I only like drawing the picture. I don't like writing the story.)
Before Unit	Total n	28	10	1	11
	Total %	56%	20%	2%	22%
	n of students	50			
After Unit	Total n	18	13	5	15
	Total %	35.2%	25.5%	9.8%	29.4%
	n of students	51			

Analyzing these results is a bit difficult because it isn't altogether clear what may have impacted these changes. The increase in the number of students who like to include at least some drawing in the narrative process, may have felt a boost of confidence in their artwork after this unit. The increase in preference for art making first and then writing could simply reflect the positive experience they had just had. The increase in students, who reported that they only liked writing and not doing the drawing, perhaps indicates a limitation they felt by the art making during the narrative process. It is difficult to say without further questioning and interviewing of students.

Student Choice Influence on Engagement

For my first research question, I carefully observed and collected data on students' daily engagement throughout the unit. I utilized a scoring rubric (see Table 2.) and rated their engagement on the daily tasks. I primarily based the scoring off of their physical behavior, and took into account my personal knowledge of the students and their unique learning styles. It was to my advantage that I have been teaching most of these students for three years. This is advantageous because it is difficult to assess engagement purely by observing on-task behavior. Some students need to mentally process ideas longer than others, and some need to move about to release energy. Keeping this in mind, I realize the limitations of these results and will consider them objectively.

I found that throughout the unit, more students, on average, had higher engagement on daily tasks that provided more choices. In Class A, on average 87.9% of students were engaged for the entire work time throughout the unit. Class B had on average of 90.7% students engaged for the entire work time, whereas, Class C had 71.5% of students engaged for the entire work time.

Analysis with Observation and Rubric

Throughout the entire unit, I observed varying levels of student engagement. Most of the observational evidence showed very high percentages of class engagement

for all three classes during parts of the unit that allowed for student choice. During the paint exploration, image collection, and story publishing, every class had between 74-100% engagement. Each section showed slightly varied results.

Class A had a range of 83-100% engagement for high choice-based learning days. The lowest engagement for this group appeared at the end of publishing when a couple of students seemed exhausted from the project and were beginning to become disinterested in their own story. Class B had an engagement range during the choice-based days of 88-100%. Their engagement also seemed to dip a bit at the end, as students were finishing up at different times. Class C had an engagement range of 74-94%, with the highest levels of engagement at the very beginning of the unit, during the paint exploration.

The lowest level of engagement for all students was in the middle of the project when they were creating their narratives, Task 3. Task 3 showed a range of 47-94% engagement. The lowest levels of engagement belonged to Class C with an average of 53% engagement for the two class periods designated for that task. Class A had an average engagement of 91% during the narrative creation and Class B had an average engagement of 85.5%.

These results were interesting to me because Task 3 was, from my point of view, extremely choice-based. Students were not limited in the ways in which they narrated their stories. They had a variety of tools to assist them and guidance as needed, but emphasis was placed using their preferred methods of narration. Looking carefully at the results, however, it is evident that there were still very high levels of engagement during this time. I must take into consideration the difference in class climate and the impact that peer interactions and learning community had on the students level of engagement (Freedman et al., 2013; Mercer, 2004, Rojas-Drummon et al., 2008). Class A and B had high instances of positive peer interaction with minimal social disputes. Class C had less of a learning community atmosphere with many of the students in constant competition

with each other. I believe this drastically affected the students' abilities to concentrate and engage in the learning task at hand.

I observed high levels of engagement and deep critical thinking during the image collection and publishing stages. Perhaps the highest levels were during the publishing portion, due to the fact the students were actively engaged in the creation, experimentation, and revision process of their narratives. I observed an explosion of "exploratory talk" during the last stages of publication, as the students collaborated on their puppet shows, plays, and literary dramas. Students like Danny, who enjoyed making a story but wanted to keep it private showed increased engagement after the realization that they didn't *have* to write or share. Although, as mentioned earlier, perhaps because of peer influence he, and others, decided later to share after all.

Analysis with Survey

For analysis of the survey, I looked at the survey results prior to the unit compared to the results collected at the close of the unit. Out of 53 total participants, I had 50 respond to the first survey and 51 respond to the second survey. The survey asked questions in regard to their views towards writing stories and their preferences in story sharing (see Table 1). Looking specifically in terms of student choice affecting engagement, the results of the survey can supply some implications. When students first answered the survey, 14% responded that they "don't like to write stories". After this unit, that number decreased to 5.8%. This suggests that their perception of story narration, being limited to just writing, may have changed. However, in the first survey, 52% reported that they "really liked to write stories" and decreased to 39% in the second survey. The next highest result was the number of students who reported "sometimes" liking to write stories. It increased from 18% in the first survey to 39% in the second survey. It's difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these results. As the teacher and facilitator I believe the change in responses is mostly due to the change in their

perceptions of what it means to write a story. Perhaps the increase in “sometimes” reflects the students’ feelings toward writing in terms of how much choice they get in the process.

Table 10. Survey of Student Views Towards Writing

		Do you like to write stories?			
		4 (I REALLY like to write stories)	3 (I like to write stories)	2 (I sometimes like to write stories)	1 (I don't like to write stories)
Before Unit	Total n	26	8	9	7
	Total %	52%	16%	18%	14%
	n Of Respondents	50			
After Unit	Total n	20	8	20	3
	Total %	39%	16%	39%	5.8%
	n Of Respondents	51			

DISCUSSION

Relationship Between Visual and Written Narratives

Although the methodology used does not demonstrate a definitive improvement in student engagement when given choices, the results do show that students were highly engaged during the portions of the unit when provided more choice-making opportunities. While the results indicate a general preference of students towards utilizing visuals in the narrative process, it cannot be conclusively determined that these results are generalizable to another population. However, due to my observations of high levels of student engagement, I believe that image making during the writing process has a positive impact on the development of their narratives (Olshansky, 1995).

Creative Expression

For my first research question, I asked, “How do students prefer to create and express their narratives?” To look at creative expression, I assessed students’ narrative choices and their answers to the survey questions (see Table 8). Through my observations and the survey, I believe that the majority of the students chose to utilize visuals in the narrative process in some way. Few students used only visuals or only written means of narration. For students, like Danny, who used only visuals they appeared to choose visual expression due to their low confidence in writing ability. That makes me also wonder if the reverse could be true for students who used few visuals. Perhaps they had ideas they wanted to try, but were hesitant because of other variables.

It is interesting to see the differences between class sections and how the peer interactions influenced their choices throughout the creative process (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2008). Results show that each class section worked through the creative process differently, but in all cases, peer interaction was a large indicator of student engagement and success. I observed students thriving in a choice-based environment where they could develop their narratives, in a variety of methods. Many students took their initial

imagery and elaborated those ideas tremendously through experimentation, play, and exploratory dialogues (Mercer, 2004). I observed narratives that evolved from images, to puppetry, to plays. I also observed students utilizing a variety of ways to visually collect their ideas for later use (John-Steiner, 1985).

Therefore, results about student choice in expressing their narratives suggested that most students preferred to explore their ideas in a variety of methods, both in visual and written. Indeed, research has shown that students do best in an environment that encourages collaboration with peers, a multitude of choices, an integral use of both image and word in the narrative process and teacher support while learning to utilizing creative thinking tools (Douglas-Jaquith, 2009; John-Steiner, 1985; Mercer, 2004; Olson, 1992).

The relationship between the students' visual and written narratives was most evident in how they worked through the creative writing process. As John-Steiner's (1985) research demonstrated, the way thought is expressed varies across domains, but the use of visualization of ideas remains very similar. Her description of the creative process included intensity to one's task. I observed this behavior with many students. For example, Andy, who worked hard to perfect his "best first Creeper" (see Figure 6). This intensity was relevant to Andy's creative development and dedication to the creative vision he wished to accomplish. Although he had first signs of giving up, he persevered, and in the end felt the rewards of hard work and was proud of his results. For him, visually creating this character was important to his narrative process and the communication of his ideas.

As Olson explained in her research, students will have a variety of levels of verbal skills (Olson, 1992). For this reason, students find opportunities to work through their ideas visually helpful in expressing their narratives. Looking at the students who relaxed once they realized they could do their stories with all visuals or could secretly share their creations, it is evident that teachers must provide a multitude of ways for students to work through the creative process.

Student Engagement

My second question asked, “Does student choice result in higher engagement?” I measured student engagement by observing student behavior and using my knowledge of the students as their teacher. I collected regular engagement scores and utilized a scoring rubric. My results suggest that student engagement was highly impacted by having choices in their learning. That data shows that the highest levels of engagement occurred at the point of the unit where students had more freedom of choice in that day’s activity. Students appeared highly engaged in the narrative process when allowed to construct their narratives in the methods of their own choosing. However, not all students were highly engaged. A couple of students seemed to tire of the unit long before the other students. These were students who weren’t as interested in the visual art-making portion. Class C was not as engaged during the narrative construction portion, possibly due to separate variables regarding class dynamics and differences in learning communities. In my observations I became more aware of the differences in positive or negative class dynamics of each section. Class A and B appear to have more students who work together and are supportive of each other. In contrast, Class C appears to have more students who have difficulty working together or alongside each other. It is interesting to notice these comparisons and consider how these dynamics may affect a student’s ability to engage in learning.

Research has shown that peer interaction directly impacts student engagement. I directly observed that the sections with positive peer interactions that resembled “exploratory talk” (Mercer, 2004; Vass et al., 2008) were more engaged in the process. I also observed that the classes that had developed a learning community mentality, (Freedman et al., 2013) as the ones who had established ground rules for creative sharing. Through the learning community, they worked through ideas, which resulted in more elaborate and richer narratives. This was evident in Class B, with the collaborative plays orchestrated by the young playwrights. The value of peer interaction in engagement was

also powerfully demonstrated in the many instances of classmates jumping in to assist their peers with their performance when it often required them to improvise. This was of particular interest because it required intuition, incredible listening skills, flexibility, and collaboration in the process.

It's curious to me, as the teacher, what made their engagement level drop during the narrative creation process, even if only slightly, for two of the sections. I wonder if it was perhaps in my instruction and if students were maybe confused about their creative choices. Perhaps I gave them too many choices and they would have benefited from more direction and a list of options to choose from.

While the survey showed that the number students who "really like to write stories" dropped, the number who reported as not liking to write also dropped (see Table 9). This could suggest that students had a positive reaction to the choice-based opportunities this narrative writing unit offered. Perhaps their views of "writing" have changed. Douglas and Jaquith would support this suggestion, as their research has shown that students, who are involved in learning that is highly choice-based, are highly engaged in their learning (2009).

Summary

My findings indicate when students are given choice in the narrative writing process they prefer to use a variety of methods of story creation and are more highly engaged. The results show that each of the class sections demonstrated high levels of engagement during the portions of the lesson with the most opportunities for choice making. Evidence shows that most students chose to utilize visuals in some way in the narrative creation and sharing. However, the results do show that some students preferred not to use any visuals, and perhaps too many choices were overwhelming for them. It appears that most students flourished in the choice-based learning activity. Not only were they highly enthusiastic about the narratives, but also their narratives exhibited

high levels of critical thinking. The results suggest that students' perception of "writing" may have changed but the survey results are not completely clear as to how the project may have impacted these perceptions.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, due to the fact that I am their teacher and didn't want any student to miss out on a meaningful activity, I didn't use one of the sections as a control group. I considered having one class section do this unit with little to no choice in the narrative process so that I could have better idea of how the choice making directly impacted student engagement. It would be valuable to conduct a study like that and if there was time perhaps I could do both in the future.

Secondly, my role as teacher and observer also created limitations. I had to make use of video to collect many of my observation notes since students needed my attention throughout the lesson. Therefore, there were few opportunities to sit back and truly observe during the lesson. The video itself also created limitations because it only picked up audio of the students who were closest. It would have been advantageous if I could have employed some observers to objectively observe and take notes.

A third limitation had to do with choices available to students. I felt that even with all the visual choices I provided, the number of choices students had, in their narratives, were still limited. Some students would have liked to utilize music, or more technology. Due to time, funding and facilitates I was unable to provide all of the narrative ideas students would have flourished using. Having more options, which directly connected to their unique lives, could have directly impacted some of the students' engagement (Douglas-Jaquith, 2009).

The fourth limitation was the infrequency in which I saw the students. This unit was spread out over two and half months. I question if whether the students lower engagement in the middle was due to the gaps between class periods. Due to illness,

inclement weather, and the flexibility of an elementary school, these gaps between class periods were unavoidable. There was also the issue of student attendance. In cases where a student missed one class period with me it meant missing a large portion of the narrative creation process. I had a few students who missed a few class periods and were therefore disengaged because they were so far behind their peers. Additionally, missing a lot of school directly impacted their place in the learning community and their experiences interacting with their peers (Gallas, 1992; Mercer, 2004).

Finally, a fifth limitation was the duration of time for each class period. Students get 40 minutes with me when they come to art. On early-dismissal days, it is only 35 minutes. Often times, it only means about 25 minutes of actual hands-on creative processing, because time is inevitably required for set-up, directions, and clean up. As a creative thinker myself, it almost seems unfair to require them to tap back into their creative flow based on a schedule, and to turn it off because time is up and then expect them to be able to jump back in after three days.

These limitations are all related to the nature of an elementary school environment. Most are variables out of my control both as a teacher and as a researcher. Perhaps with better planning and collaboration with my colleagues I could find ways to provide more choices in the narrative process and make the learning even richer for students.

Implications for Future Research

My results provide evidence about image making in the narrative process as a valuable teaching method that results in higher student engagement. I would suggest further research with a larger and more diverse sample. I would also recommend a study that utilizes control groups. It would be advantageous to look at different age levels and writing abilities of students to compare those variables in regard to student preference and engagement. A study that looked specifically at how a student's writing ability

impacted their choice of visual methods would give more definitive data about the relationship between a student's choice in visual and written narratives. A look at *why* they choose to use visuals would give better insight and a broader picture. Is it because they aren't confident in their writing? Or is it because visuals are the best way to express an idea (John-Steiner, 1985)?

Secondly, a future study could look at how peer interaction impacts student engagement. In my research I could see a direct connection between the interactions of students with their peers and their level of engagement to the task. What is unclear is how these interactions impacted their engagement and in what ways as a teacher I could have had an influence on these interactions. Specifically, a study looking at a direct connection between "exploratory talk" (Mercer, 2004) and a student's willingness to engage in an activity would be advantageous to teachers in any content area.

A third implication for future research concerns how the creative process develops in all domains. In John-Steiner's (1985) research she shows that visualization is a key factor from an early age in all of the participants she interviewed. It would be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study on a group of individuals as they grow and develop their creative thinking processes. A study that follows individuals through elementary and into high school, or even adulthood, would give greater insight into what events throughout their lives impacted the ways in which they process creative ideas. Additionally, it would provide information as to any factors in their education that may have hindered this development as well.

Implications for Art Education

The first implication has to do with the art educator being responsible for teaching other curricular content. As Eisner (1998) has suggested, art educators are fearful that if they incorporate too much interdisciplinary learning into their curriculum, stakeholders will start seeing less value in art education itself. If we look at it from the perspective of

Newland (2013), arts educators could instead jump on the opportunity to enrich the development of their students' creative processes. I get the feeling sometimes, from my own experience, that public school art educators label themselves purely as *visual* art educators, whether or not that is their job title. However, my teaching license is stated more broadly as *art education*. To me, this means I am in a unique position to provide students with enriched learning experiences that can tap into the many creative means of expression. I don't believe the term "visual" should mean that no other forms of creative expression could be utilized. Indeed, as John-Steiner (1985) has demonstrated, the many domains of creative thinking resemble each other in their process. This fact alone implies that arts educators have a duty to help students develop the skills that will enable them to bridge from one domain to another.

A second implication for art educators is that while some classroom teachers may be equally neglecting their students need to visualize their ideas, art educators may not be addressing their students needs to utilize non-visual means of expression in their creative processes. This implication could be negatively received by some arts teachers, but embraced by others. For myself, while I know some students do better writing out their ideas, I don't make nearly enough use of journaling and planning sheets. This is often due to the fact that we have limited time as it is, and it often feels like that time should be used for hands-on art making instead.

CONCLUSION

My results, in regard to the relationship between visual and written narratives, were consistent with the studies by Newland (2013) and Olshansky (1995). The choice-based learning environment (Douglas-Jaquith, 2009) and careful consideration of the diversity of creative processing (John-Steiner, 1985) provided an engaging and rich atmosphere suitable for student success and engagement. All three of the class sections demonstrated above average levels of engagement when given the opportunities to freely create their narratives. They were inspired by the image-making process and thrived in the collective learning and exploration that took place (Mercer, 2004). It was evident in the results that most of the students benefited from the opportunity to utilize visuals in the narrative process and demonstrated their dedication to the creative thinking process when given the space to do so.

In conclusion, providing students the opportunities to create narratives in the manner of their choice, both utilizing visuals and written word, may have impacted their engagement to the task. While a direct impact cannot be definitively concluded from this study, it was clearly evident that students had a positive experience engaging in this unit. This is seen most clearly in the rich, elaborate, and engaging narratives that the students created independently and collaboratively. Finally, it is important to consider how this unit may have impacted the students' perceptions regarding the narrative process in general. It isn't clear exactly what elements of this unit may have changed students' views towards narrative writing. Survey results do, however, suggest an increase in positive feelings towards the narrative process at the close of the unit (see Table 9.)

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