FINDING MY WAY BACK TO THE PROMISED LAND OF CHOICE

By

ALEXA RAE GARCIA

A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

This capstone project was intended to record the events surrounding and effects on children’s problem solving and creativity of choice based art education in a non-profit setting. I conducted research and observations in the classroom in order to transform an art classroom into a functioning art studio complete with demonstrations for new materials and ideas. I transformed and organized the classroom for easy access to all materials. The goal was to create a truly creative environment where children attending the non-profit could have more control in their personal art endeavors and learn to problem solve. To reflect on and document the transition I created a blog that can be accessed at http://choicebasedartafterschool.blogspot.com/. During the time period of the project, life changes brought a new teaching position for me that came with a completely pre-written curriculum that was designed to meet state art learning standards and benchmarks. This change to a more prescriptive art curriculum caused intense reflection on curriculum styles and teaching approaches. The
following paper addresses my findings and reflections on transforming a classroom into a choice-based art studio, the mixed emotions of returning to a teaching environment with a prewritten curriculum and how I hope to return to the Promised Land of a Choice Based Art Learning Environment.
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Copies to Choices

As an art educator you model ideas, information and techniques for your children hoping that they will take a creative route naturally, expand on the lesson and present you with artwork of their personal ideas. In my short time as an art educator I have noticed one thing is certain, if I make an example of the project I will end up with 25 copies of my example. This used to be one of the most frustrating moments when walking around the classroom to see the progress made on a project. After noticing this common occurrence I decided there had to be a better way to teach and to allow my children to develop more creative solutions during the art making process.

Through trial and error and research I found a way to make this moment of frustration cease to exist. I transitioned to a choice-based approach to teaching art and let my children make more of their own decisions about their art making. In this style of art education, children are treated like real artists and make many, if not all, of the decisions about their personal artwork. (Douglas, 2012) My classroom became their art studio. It became the creative environment I strived to establish earlier in my career. Each center I created was its own small studio with a variety of materials for drawing, sculpture, printing and stamping, ink and collage. I created all of the menus, signs and resources for each center. These resources would help to inspire the students, give them ways to use the materials and keep the center organized. Every week a new center would be introduced and the children were taught how to use it, maintain it and keep it organized.

In this capstone paper I will detail my research on choice-based art education and my evolving understanding of this instructional approach, and then I will narrate the effects a transition to a choice-based setting had to my classroom environment, teaching
practices and the change I saw in my children. The product of my research project is a complete transformation of the learning environment and a reflective blog about my experience facilitating a choice-based art-learning environment.

The evolution in my teaching practices allowed me to give up control, see the creativity in my children and to hold them accountable as artists. Maintaining a choice-based learning environment was hard work for the children and myself but the results were very close to what I had hoped for in my student outcomes and my classroom structure. I felt like I reached the promised land of art education, with only a few issues in the process.

Only a few short weeks after my journey in adopting this teaching model known as choice based art education, I accepted a full time art teaching position in my school district. At the new hire meeting I met the Fine Arts Coordinator of the county and she handed over a stack of curriculum maps. I cringed—feeling unsure of what I had just walked into. I had just seen the amazing outcome of teaching in a choice-based environment and now I was back to a curriculum of “cookie cutter” projects. When I finally arrived at my classroom I was handed a curriculum plan book for each grade that took the thinking out of creating and the craft away from professional teaching. I thought it would be a nightmare. With every lesson I read I tried to modify the lesson plan and allow some creative freedom in the art making process, but it just didn’t compare to art created under the choice-based model.

**Statement of the Problem**

I have frequently encountered children that believe there is one correct answer to everything they do in school. These children often follow this expectation in art class by
interpreting the teacher’s example as the one correct response, so they attempt to produce the same result. After this occurred several times in my art room, I asked my children why they made their work exactly like mine. Their response was simple, “we want to be right and yours is right.” There began my fascination with wanting to really motivate children to make original work that expressed their own ideas based on their personal interests. My children’s response also further fueled my dislike for standardized art education practices that require little to no critical or creative thinking from children. Without critical thinking it becomes hard to problem solve. In the curriculum guides that were provided in my classroom every moment of class was dictated for me. The conversations and prompts were laid out, timed and even provided examples of expected responses from the children. This made me feel as if all the creative thought the discussions that occur naturally had been removed from the art making process.

*Choice-Based Art Education* is a classroom studio and delivery method approach that encourages children to be artists and create art based on their own fascinations while giving them choices about how they make their ideas come to life (Douglas, 2004; Hathaway, 2008). I found that a Choice-Based approach improved artist motivation, stimulated critical thinking and creativity, and improved problem-solving skills because the children were genuinely interested in their work. What if children were able to make their own choices about subject matter, art materials and techniques, and even the length of time they spent on their work? I asked myself if changing the delivery method to a choice-based art education approach could really work in my classes? Now that I knew all of the wonderful results and possibilities of choice-based art education, how could I
adapt this model to a classroom run by learning standards and benchmarks set forth by the state?

There is a need for current and future generations to be creative problem solvers, and creativity is considered a 21st century skill (Robinson, 2006). With an increasingly innovative society and demand for these skills there needs to be a elevated level of critical and higher order thinking skills that are developed from a young age. Art education provides a platform for learning critical and higher order thinking skills as well as problem solving skills. I feel that a choice-based approach promote these skills through educational experiences that facilitate a self-directed learning environment. This type of environment has the potential to provide children with choices in every aspect of the creation process, which create natural problem-solving situations. With the teacher as a facilitator in a choice-based learning environment, the child artist can receive guidance when necessary and work independently or in groups for the remainder of the time.

My study is relevant to other art educators looking to make a transition to a learner-directed or choice-based approach in their classroom. The product of my resources and reflections I have documented on my blog can serve as a model for other educators looking to prepare their classroom for choice-based learning centers. I share the research and my personal reflections through a blog at www.choicebasedart afterschool.blogspot.com.

**Purpose and Goals of the Study**

After working in a non-profit after school setting for three years I decided that the ways I was teaching my children art wasn’t always successful. My research project helped to improve my curriculum development and delivery methods by providing my
children with more choices and opportunities to develop their problem solving skills through art making. In order to develop children’s problem solving skills and cultivate their creativity I conducted research on existing literature about the choice-based approach, analyzed the findings from prior studies, and drew conclusions from those studies. Using the materials and insights I gathered, I developed my own choice based art-learning environment. I created centers in my art room that contained instructions about the art materials and methods provided in each center, resources about artists, ideas for projects, and cleanup expectations. Creating these centers was a part of changing the classroom atmosphere and structure to a more student centered environment.

The goal of the research project was to study the effects of implementing choice based learning on children’s problem solving skills in a non-profit setting through the use of a choice-based learning environment which provided the students with more creative freedom in their artmaking. The goal has since been modified to better understand the benefits of choice based learning and to be able to apply them in a more formal public school art room setting that requires targeting certain learning standards and benchmarks. My ultimate goal is to find a happy medium to encourage creative problem solving in students while addressing state art learning standards.

**Research Questions**

The main focus of this capstone project began with the question “How do art educators encourage creativity and improve problem-solving in children?” This question inspired me to look for different approaches in the classroom that would target these abilities. Due to the change in my teaching settings I have also reflected on ways to modify a prewritten art curriculum. Below are questions that guided my capstone project:
1. What are the best practices of choice-based art learning?
2. How does choice-based art learning encourage problem solving?
3. What happens when I implement a choice-based approach during my art classes?
4. How do art teachers inspire creative thought and problem solving when teaching a prewritten art curriculum?

**Rationale and Significance**

This study is important because of our need to shift the way we provide art education to children. We must shift from a limited choice of answers and replications of teacher art examples to encouraging the expression of children’s own ideas with materials of their own choice. When children are personally invested in their artwork it is generally of higher quality. As children create artwork based on their own interests and desires they also explore, experiment and solve their problems as they arise. This is the type of thinking, I believe, is required by the next generation.

**Assumptions of the Study**

In conducting this study I assumed that the choice based delivery approach and classroom structure would be beneficial to my children. I also assumed that children would be motivated enough to embrace choice-based method of instruction and still be productive in the art making process. Finally, I assume that a choice-based type of approach could work in any educational setting and that a prewritten art curriculum that encourages “cookie cutter” projects can be modified to inspire creative thought and problem solving.
Definition of Terms

Creativity is “the process of having original ideas that have value.” (Robinson, 2006) Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines creativity in psychology as the production of ideas or actions that have value.

Problem Solving is a “form of decision making through spontaneous investigation, exploration and experimentation” (Pitri, 2013, p. 42). Britz and Richard (1992) (as cited in Pitri, 2013) believe it means to pursue understanding, look for answers, try out a few possibilities and finding out whether the work or not.

Choice-Based Art Education is a classroom studio and delivery method approach that encourages students to be the artists and create art based on their own fascinations while giving them choices about how they make their ideas come to life (Douglas, 2004; Hathaway, 2008).

Study Limitations

The focus of the research is on my delivery method and transformation of an art classroom and what students do as a result. My original study was limited to the middle school children who attended classes in a nonprofit organization during an eight-week summer program. Since the change of my teaching setting, I no longer have contact with the students who learned under this delivery method. As a result, my study became limited to the observations I have made in the short time working for the school district with only the beginning implementation of the curriculum guide.
Literature Review

Introduction and Defining Terms

At a certain point in children’s life, schools tell them it is time to start learning and stop playing (Robinson, 2006). The lack of opportunities for play while in school hinders students’ creative thinking and in turn deteriorates their problem-solving skills because children are no longer encouraged to explore their world (Pitri, 2001). In order to teach these valuable skills there needs to be a change in the way our students are educated. Freedman (2010), Perkins and Carter (2011), and Pitri (2013) call for a change in arts curriculum that would encourage exploration and foster the development of problem solving skills. Bronson and Merryman (2010) express their concern with the perceived decline of creativity in America because they feel children are spending too much time in front of the TV and playing videogames instead of involved in creative activities. I believe that play and creativity are related, and that creativity requires play. The main focus of my literature review is development of creativity through play that can occur in a choice-based learning environment. I also believe that creativity and play have the potential to foster problem-solving skills in art classes.

Creativity is a topic that is rooted in a wealth of research that spans all subjects from the arts to psychology. This investigation presents information from well-known authors such as Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Freedman (2010), Hennessey and Amabile (2010), Pitri (2001; 2013), and Robinson (2006). These authors agree that creativity is the generation of ideas that are novel and of value, but beyond value there is little consensus on a definition for creativity (Hennessey and Amabile, 2010). My literature review will explore differing theories on creativity, consider the benefits and strategies of play, and
look at choice-based learning and its interconnectedness with improving problem-solving and divergent thinking skills.

Creativity

Creativity is a topic that is a mile deep and ten miles wide but even with so much information available on the subject, there seems to be little unanimity on a definition, what it actually is, who has it, and if it can be taught. Hennessey and Amabile (2010) present their own review of literature and studies conducted on differing theories of creativity ranging from the creative person/personality trait, situational creativity, affect, cognition and training to possible mental illness. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) breaks down the same creativity theories into simpler terms and describes the process of creative thought. He describes, in stages, the process of creativity or having an idea as preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation and elaboration. He defines creativity in psychology as the production of ideas or actions that have value. One factor that can be agreed upon by Csikszentmihalyi (1996), Hennessey and Amabile (2010), and Drevdahl (1956) is the way we have measured creativity. Creativity in the 50s and 60s was measured by examining traits of fluency, flexibility and originality in people (Roland, 1991). Fluency, flexibility and originality are evidenced by the number of ideas generated by individuals engaged in various tasks, how novel they are, and the ability to change the ideas to satisfy certain needs or situations. The ability to generate various solutions to problems is a valuable life skill. Currently creativity is recognized as being much more complex than those four traits. Through choice-based art lessons and projects that encourage problem solving we can begin to build the bank of information and increase fluency, flexibility and originality (Pitri, 2013). Other traits that have been observed in
creative persons are perseverance, willingness to work through problems, and the desire to work on something personally motivating. (Roland, 1991)

While the field of inquiry about creativity is large it must be narrowed down to what is specifically important to my own research, which is the enhancement of creativity through different types of educational approaches and classroom structures. Basadur (2002) argued (as cited in Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), that training for divergent thinking skills involved a large number of sessions. If this is true it would be appropriate to build a choice based arts curriculum to foster creativity and divergent thinking skills. Freedman (2010) lays out steps to modify arts curriculum to teach creativity. Freedman believes that such an approach includes critical reflection based on student interests and that creativity is a learning process (and not a set of traits). Freedman (2010) and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) agree that creativity is based on personal desire, so it follows that in an art curriculum there has to be a student personal interest component if one wants to facilitate creativity. In other words, children are more likely to be creative when they are personally invested.

Proponents of choice-based approaches also agree that projects and lessons must incorporate critical reflection as well. Perkins and Carter (2011) present a relevant approach curriculum delivery called “the choice, voice, and challenge model for Creative Instruction (CVC).” In such an approach, students must have a choice in materials and solutions, a voice in which students express their thoughts, and a challenge that is developmentally appropriate (Perkins and Carter, 2011). This type of instruction calls for students to actively explore their environments and engage in open-ended thinking activities. Through the use of open-ended and diverse questions and opportunities
students can develop problem-solving skills. As noted by Perkins and Carter, these skills can also be fostered through the challenge portion of the CVC method because of its opened-ended nature. Along with these approaches and instructional strategies, play is another component that fosters creativity and exploration.

**Play and Problem Solving**

Children learn largely by playing for several years before they begin formal schooling (Robinson, 2006). Before they are students in a school setting, children learn to communicate and become mobile without ever stepping foot in a classroom (Pitri, 2001). In this sense we are not discussing play as a game or as something frivolous (Burnett, 2004) but as Schiller (as cited in Burnett, 2004) argues, play is uniting sense and reason. Athey (1988) describes (as cited in Pitri, 2001) the ability of play to contribute to all types of learning including social, physical and emotional. As Perkins and Carter (2001) agree with Burnett that we must give students a choice in their learning, Burnett explains that we must also allow for free play to occur in the form of exploring and gathering knowledge about an environment. As discussed earlier, Freedman (2010) views creativity as based on an interest just as play is motivated intrinsically (Pitri, 2001). Pitri further describes what educational play looks like, using examples laid out by Sponseller (1978), calling play a “medium,” and discussing its functions of meaning making and active expression. When children are concerned with playing they are more concerned with the process than the product and they come up with their own rules (Sponseller, 1978). Many times play occurs with materials that are familiar. Other times children explore materials that are unfamiliar. Through play children are creating their own meaning for their world (Pitri, 2001). Play and art making also require inquiry, which is the basis for problem
solving and critical reflection. The fact that children have a choice in what they are doing will allow them to add this to their knowledge bank, retain it, and to refer to it at another time, therefore building their supply of ideas and solutions (Pitri, 2001).

To encourage problem solving through play there must be an environment that inspires exploration and manipulation (Bullock, 1988). With a choice of things to manipulate, children will explore according to their own interests, which as observed by Freedman (2010) and Perkins and Carter (2011) is a factor of importance in creativity and developing problem solving skills. Bullock (1988) further suggests that time is an important factor in the development of these skills because children need time to solve problems and explore their possibilities. Time also allows for children to try again after a failed attempt. In this context, on aspect of play is a form of trial and error learning, and in order to give the learner the time needed to develop creativity and problem solving skills we must also explore a shift in the style of curriculum delivery and scheduling of learning experiences provided in school. I believe that an instructional approach involving more choice for an extended period of time with multiple meeting sessions could be used to enhance these creative skills and dispositions being discussed in this literature review.

According to Pitri (2013), “Problem solving is form of decision making through spontaneous investigation, exploration and experimentation” (p. 42). Providing an environment in which children are allowed play and explore encourages the development of problem solving because they can begin to form their own opinions of their world through direct observation and inquiry. Torrance (as cited in Pitri, 2013) explains that problem solving includes both rational and irrational thought that starts as fantasy and
play but can then be transformed into logical thinking and analysis of a situation. So if we want to encourage our young people to become creative problem solvers we must encourage their natural desire to play and explore while acting as a facilitator and not a dictator.

**Choice-Based Learning**

A choice-based art environment bustles with the sounds of making as students work on projects they have selected to make, with materials they have chosen and explored along the way. The classroom is set up with various centers with an array of available materials (Hathaway, 2008). Students are encouraged to make art they enjoy and are personally invested in; they act as the artists (Douglas, 2004). This is what a student-centered approach looks like. Students decide what they make and along the way are presented with information and choices to decide what is best for their project. A choice-based approach to art education allows for the student to create art according to their own interest, which as Freedman (2010) and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) agree is a motivating factor in creativity and the production of art. This approach allows for the student to be involved in their own learning process through the exploration of a multitude of materials at their own pace (Douglas, 2004, 2012; Hathaway, 2008). While the students explore the centers during production time they also become peer coaches and teachers where they pass on information they have learned from playing, experimenting and creating.
Conclusion

After a review of the literature it has become clear that in order to increase students’ creative ability to generate new ideas and solutions we must provide them with a different form of curriculum structure and delivery than the more prescribed curricular structures commonly employed in many schools today. The world is thriving on innovation, and unless we educate a generation of young people to solve the problems through innovation there will be a decline in our ability to keep up with other countries. The ideas of creativity and play are not new ideas but we must be creative ourselves and develop new ways to employ play in the art curriculum in order to enhance the development of problem solving skills and divergent thinking. A choice-based approach may foster the kinds of thinking skills required for successful integration into society. I hope that with various types of choice-based learning strategies and styles we can begin a shift to personalizing education. The choice-based approach creates a learning environment that encourages risk-taking and problem solving through the production of student-generated artwork as opposed to the common teacher-centered models.

Methodology

In order to conduct my inquiry-based research I used a mixed methods approach that included action research (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle 2006) and curriculum development with some program evaluation methods. (Stake and Munson, 2008; Zorahbi, 2012) Action research is designed to enhance and improve current practice within a specific classroom, school, or district (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle 2006). Action research allowed me to answer my research questions concerning best practices of choice-based art education. My action research approach included curriculum
development, in which I implemented my research and analyzed the data collected in relation to my instructional goals. Stake and Munson (2008) discuss program evaluation and state the reason we assess programs is because we are curious, care about the program and want to understand it. I wanted to shift the way my classroom functioned to a more learner-directed environment and these methods assisted in gathering information to make a successful transition.

The transition from a teacher-directed to choice-based learning environment required a complete overhaul of the classroom set up in my non-profit setting. I used the 6 tables already in the room and went around the building to look for to use in various ways. The classroom was redesigned to encompass five centers. Each center required a variety of signs, menus, pictures and supplies were all labeled and organized prior to the implementation of choice-based. The classroom furniture was organized for easy flow around the classroom and had to sit a maximum of thirty-six children at one time. In order to plan this I created several drawings of the classroom for visuals before actually moving all of the furniture. See Figure 1 for final classroom design.

Figure 1: Classroom Center Layout
Site and Description

The subject and area of focus of part of my research project was the study of choice-based art education in a non-profit organization. This study focused on the strategies I implemented in a choice-based art setting and the set up of materials into different centers or stations. This transformation took place in the Art Lab of a local branch of a national non-profit afterschool program. The classroom transformation when all of the furniture was moved took place during the two-week break in between regular after school programming before the eight week summer program. I created all of the center menus, signs and resources in a four weeks span, two weeks before the end of the school year term and the two week break before the beginning of summer programming. During this time period, I decided to do a dry run of choice based art education to better understand this style of teaching. This worked in my favor and became part of my regular classroom routine.

Shortly after the summer program ended I was presented with an opportunity to teach within my local school district. This opportunity came with a prewritten art curriculum and was the complete opposite of how I just spent my entire summer teaching. It presented a wonderful opportunity for comparison and reflection.

Subjects

Every middle school child that was scheduled for art class participated in the choice based learning environment at the non-profit facility. The choice based approach became part of my regular classroom practice. The children that participated in this program attended Title 1 schools and come from low-income homes. Many of the students are 1st or 2nd generation Haitian American. These children ranged in ages from
11-15. This demographic is in complete contrast with the students I currently teach. Currently the students I work with are come from a more privileged economic status. These are the students that are normally taught under the prewritten curriculum provided by the school district but with the added choices that I encourage during class.

**Data Collection Procedures**

I collected data in journals, kept notes of observations and recorded occurrences in the classroom. These methods are consistent to those utilized in action research. Action research is meant to improve practices in the classroom. McKernan (1987) describes action research as a method of reflecting on practices to better understand an educational setting. Data regarding observations at the afterschool program were kept in my journal to be used for reflection. To document the transformation I took photographs of the centers while in production to record the progress, use and organization of the materials. I read several books on choice-based learning from well-known researchers in the field such as Jaquith and Douglas (2009). The data that I analyzed came from preexisting data such as books, journals, articles related to choice-based learning, and observation notes. I had approximately 4 weeks prior to implementation to create all the menus and resources for implementing a full choice based learning environment. See figure 2 for an example of a center resource.

![Figure 2: College center resources](image)
Data Analysis Procedures

After I collected data I reviewed and reflected upon it to find relationships and understand the best practices of choice-based learning. Schutt (2011) suggests breaking the collected data down into concepts and connecting them to find relationships. I looked for similarities and differences in the classroom discourse and field notes. I was looking for commonalities in student motivation, engagement and problem solving situations helped me better understand what types of approaches worked best with my students. I also posted to the blog to record and reflect on classroom happenings.

Limitations

Later studies may present the opportunity to study the impact of transitioning to a choice-based approach to art education. Time was not an issue in this study as the art program ran 5 days a week, six periods that lasted an hour and a half hour each. A possible limitation to this study was that it was only conducted on middle school students and the students I currently teach are elementary school aged. Another limitation could be irregular attendance of the children attending the summer program at the non-profit setting. Lastly, a limitation to the study could be the limited time span, only eight weeks, of full choice-based implementation in the classroom.

Findings

The goal of this research study was to transform an art lab in a national non-profit organization to operate under the structure of Choice Based Art Education approach. The shift in delivery methods and approach to art making was originally expected to demonstrate improvements in the students’ level of creativity and problem solving skills. The findings that will be presented are the best practices of choice based art education
and their effect on student creativity and problem solving, the children’s attitude during classes taught using a choice based model as well as the possible changes to be made to a prewritten curriculum that can be aligned to the choice based learning model. I hoped that a new approach and environment would encourage and inspire students to make artwork that they enjoy and work in which they are personally invested. Currently the challenge is to create the same choice-based environment in a different setting where there is a prescribed curriculum and there are state art benchmarks that must be met by the end of the school year.

**Finding 1: Best Practices in Choice Based Learning**

One of the major research questions of this study required delving deeply into the literature of choice based learning. To better understand choice-based learning I read books by well known choice-based proponents like Kathy Douglas (2012), Diane Jaquith (2009) and Nan Hathaway (2013) as well as participated in discussion forums on the Yahoo *Teaching for Artistic Behavior* website. During my research, I discovered that some of the most important practices of the choice based model are routine, structure, organization and providing creative freedom. A set routine is important for the classroom to effectively run as a studio. Children are more likely to create when they know the routine and feel comfortable with the way the studio time will precede. I found that a consistent routine with both verbal and nonverbal cues help the children manage their creative making time better and know what is expected of them. Routine and structure go together, the studio time and routine must be structured to allow children the most amount of art making time possible.
An organized studio makes for more confident students and also more autonomy. When students know the place of things they can be more independent. This also provides a certain amount of comfort to the budding artists. The classroom is their studio and they are also responsible for keeping it organized. This helps students be accountable and a good clean up routine can assist in helping the classroom structure. An example of the extreme organization required would be the pictures of how every mini studio should look at the beginning and at the end. See figure 3. These visual aids almost guarantee that materials will go back to their homes.

![Figure 3: Collage center material organization](image)

Lastly, the ultimate best practice is providing students with creative freedom with room to explore, experiment and play. Without this encouragement students can feel unsure of what they are allowed to do and what I found is that this trait is something that needs to be explicitly expressed. I found that many times children were worried about getting in trouble for playing but this is such a vital part of learning and exploring new materials. Children need to know that it is ok to make mistakes and that they have the creative freedom to make something they are interested in, even if it took them more than
one try. Children are naturally curious and when their interest is piqued they continue to explore and try new things. This was evident in students returning to studios multiple times; these students showed an interest and worked at improving their skill through multiple experiments with the same material.

**Finding 2: How Choice Based Learning Encourages Problem Solving Skills and Creativity**

One of the core goals to this research study was to discover how to encourage students to improve their creative flow of ideas in creating artwork and to problem solve throughout the process. I found that implementing a choice based approach to art making seemed to improve students’ problem solving skills, their persistence and had a positive impact on peer relationships. This finding was evidenced through their willingness to work and respect for each other that developed through the time spent discusses their projects during share time. Children that were on task, creating their own work were more likely to persevere through obstacles on their personal projects than they ever did during a teacher-directed lesson. Their perseverance through obstacles was noted during observations and informal conversations. It was noted that there were fewer behavior disturbances during the choice-based approach implementation. Children also showed enthusiasm and excitement when they were able to overcome a possible “mistakes.” This was evidenced through share times at the end of a class period. As students spent time in different centers they began to explore new avenues of making and this lead to furthered exploration of materials and ideas. This excitement was shared during talk times at the end of class times and noted as part of a reflective entry in the blog. Students not only worked through their own problems but also helped each other more than they ever had.
The amount positive peer relationships and interactions increased and students that normally didn’t interact were discussing problem-solving methods and approaches. This classroom structure seemed to not only foster problem solving and creativity but it also fostered peer relationships that may not have ever occurred in another classroom structure. See figure 4.

![Image of children collaborating on structure](Image)

**Figure 4: Children collaborating on structure**

**Finding 3: Inspiring Student Interest, Creative Thought and Problem Solving by Introducing Choice in a Prewritten Art Curriculum**

Upon beginning working in my new classroom in the local school district where I reside I was presented with curriculum maps and in my classroom I found the large curriculum books to go with the maps. Upon further searching I found worksheet books that went along with each unit. The curriculum appears to be written in a Discipline Based Art Education approach. There are six units in each curriculum book, each unit has 6 lessons complete with art resources, an activity and a multiple-choice review test at the end of every unit. After spending time teaching using a choice based approach this felt like my biggest nightmare. Reading some of the lessons heightened this nightmare. Many
of the projects didn’t require any creative thought; they were based solely on technique and no opportunities for personal expression.

I could not see myself teaching straight from the book. Since I started at the new school the students have done projects based on famous artists with their own personal spin. From the beginning of teaching in my new school, I made it clear that art was not about making copies, if I wanted a copy I’d take it to the copy machine. I wanted my students to put their own ideas on paper while still learning about important art history and artwork that they could find interesting. I wanted to make sure that they met all the benchmarks for the years so I have tweaked many of the projects to be able to address those learning standards.

At first, many of the students were confused when I told them they had the choice to make their artwork different. Many still ask if their project is right or if that is how I wanted it. Now I respond with a question and I require them to dig deeper into their art making intentions. I’m finding that many students are responding positively but there will always those few children that do the bare minimum to get by. Some of the students are uncomfortable with how I press them for answers about their artwork because I don’t think that they have ever been asked to talk about their work. When I feel they are getting unsure or uncomfortable I remind them that there really isn’t a way for them to go wrong as long as they have put honest thought. I don’t know if the previous art teacher asked the students to discuss their work or making process. The best answer I have gotten so far in my public school setting when asked why a student placed a piece of pattern paper on each side of his tree was “I created this type of border because I felt that the best part of the tree was the middle and I wanted everyone who saw it to focus on the part I felt was
the best and most interesting.” (Garcia, anecdotal note, October 16, 2013) This child created an area of emphasis and didn’t need the definition; he was naturally evaluating and reflecting the process in his head.

Overall it seems that student interest is high in my new classroom and students are responding positively to the ability to have some creative freedom in their artwork. It is clear that many are timid and unsure but are gradually becoming more used to making crucial choices about their artwork.

**Summary Across All Findings**

The findings of this capstone project help to answer the research questions of the validity of choice based learning and its ability to improve creativity and problem solving skills. The children’s motivation and attitude appeared directly related to the shift in teaching approaches. The project’s original goal was to transform a classroom into a choice based learning environment to record its effects on problem solving skills, creativity and this objective was accomplished, but my attention as a public school art teacher has now shifted to expanding my creative energies to introducing choice in a prewritten art curriculum that address the learning standards required by my school district. The first finding is related to choice-based art education and its best practices to complete a successful transition. Across the final two findings it became clear through observations that a choice-based approach appears to improve and students exhibit more problem solving skills and creativity. Students that are usually determined to be ‘right’ in their art making have become more confident in their ideas and learning to discuss their art. As long as the best practices of choice base art education are implemented in the studio students can find their inner artists and express their personal voice. A personal
voice in their artwork speaks greater volumes than a one size fits all ‘in the style of’ project. I hope that in time it is possible to make changes to the prewritten art curriculum I now work with and allow each of my students to find their voice.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Originally the goals of this research were to transform a classroom into a functioning art studio teaching using the choice based art education approach to see the effects on creativity and problem solving skills. This project has become much more than that due to a change in my teaching situation. Learning about choice based art education helped me see the *Promised Land* and strive to get back to that style of art education. The time I spent teaching in choice based model made me appreciate the personal voice of students and allowed them to build confidence in their skills. The goal has shifted to finding a way back to this *Promised Land* in my current setting that meets all the standards and benchmarks set forth by the prewritten curriculum in my current art teaching position in the school district. “Choice based art education provides for the development of artistic behaviors be enabling students to discover what it means to be an artist through authentic creation of artwork” (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009, p.3). In learning about the best practices of choice-based art education, transforming my classroom and implementing this structure, I have been able to see authentic creations that have amazed me more than a “cookie cutter” project ever did. To transform my classroom was not enough, during the time I implemented this approach I spent much of my time monitoring, observing, and learning along with my students, while making notes about their work. The many conversations that were spurred by student art creations were more inspiring than seeing them regurgitate a project from a teacher-directed art lesson.
In the following sections I will discuss several implications and my personal reflections from my findings and attempt to make sense of data collected during the project. I will elaborate on the best practices and what worked and didn’t in my own classroom studio as well discuss the importance of teaching in this approach and the effect it had on my students’ attitudes. Lastly I will discuss some possible recommendations for inserting a choice based art education into a prewritten school/county curriculum.

**Discussion and Interpretation of Finding**

After reading a significant amount of literature on choice-based art education it was clear that the best practices of the approach in general may not be possible for all classroom studio settings. As I mentioned earlier in the paper, the routine, structure, organization and allowance of creative freedom through play and exploration is crucial to the success of this approach. Students have to know that their personal voice and creativity is accepted, encouraged and appreciated. To foster this personal investment from students, the first thing I did to structure my previous classroom by arranging the space in a way that created small art studio areas that functioned differently for each media. See figure 5.
After this was complete I created menus, resources, helpful tips and tricks as well as a
clean up routine for each space. The signage also helped with organization of the supplies
at each center. One thing that I didn’t do right away was to add pictures of how each
center should look when organized properly. I added these quickly which greatly
improved student organization of the studio areas. The studio routine was followed in
every class to ensure that students knew what was next and assisted with the proper
management of time for everyone.

One of the things I had to tweak the most was the tracking method I used to see
students progress and daily creations. This proved to be difficult for me and I saw the
need to have student also take responsibility/ownership with monitoring their progress
and growth. Instead I created a chart that was glued to each of their portfolios. After
every class period students had to write down which studio they had used and what they
had created or were working on at that moment. At any time after that I could check their
portfolio and this method proved more reliable. I would even make notes on students’
portfolios telling them to move on to a new center or suggest an idea to further their
making in a center.

While implementing the choice-based approach in the non-profit setting, most of
the students were intrinsically motivated to create art based on personal interests. This
was evidenced in their artmaking endeavors. I observed that many of the students came in
with ideas and ready to create art in their chosen media or in the medium I introduced
through the daily demonstration. Student attitudes during the class I taught at the non-
profit organization during the summer improved and many children would stop me in the
halls to share their interests or plans about making something. During each class time, the
children and I would discuss how this way of making art was different than what they had previous experienced. Their overall opinion was that this way of learning and creating art allowed them to be more free and creative. At the end of the summer program at the non-profit I had the children reflect on their likes and dislikes of the classroom environment. All of the reflections were posted on the final entry to the blog, which can be accessed at choicebasedart afterschool.blogspot.com. During this interaction the children expressed how this style of classroom structure allowed them to be artists and be independent.

These findings address the positive changes in most of the students’ attitudes during participating in a choice based learning environment. Students that were normally not interested in creating art or following along became more interested in process, technique and expression. This was evidenced in the artwork they created while participating in the choice-based art environment. Only a few students showed little to no interest in this classroom structure and routine but it is important to know that these are the same students who normally have no interest in creating. After working for the non-profit for three years and seeing many of the same children each summer I knew which children would put forth their best effort no matter what the classroom approach.

While teaching under a prewritten art curriculum, students are not as motivated to think independently as during a choice-based classroom. This could be the case because they have always just followed the instructions that were given during a teacher-directed lesson. In the public school setting students are more eager to hear the instructions and follow along for the sake of being correct. The behavior currently exhibited by my public school students is the type of focus I wish I had gotten from my students at the nonprofit when I taught under the teacher-directed method but it is not producing the same creative
artmaking responses as I had seen with choice-based art education. The students are eager to create but are terrified of being “wrong” and this is the type of attitude and disposition that I want to avoid in an art class.

**Significance, Implications and Recommendations**

This study was created as a way to cultivate children’s creativity and problem solving skills, what resulted was a genuine look into the creative minds of young people through a choice-based art teaching approach. As Hathaway (2013) states, we are doing a disservice to students by taking away the creative aspect of art and producing “cookie cutter” products in the name of art. If we want students to thrive creatively to thrive and prosper in art classes we must nurture creativity by allowing children to be artists, not copy machines. The most important aspect of this entire project that stands out for me is the idea of individual creations by children based on their personal interests. Children are more than copiers; they are *paintbrushes* loaded and ready to put their ideas on paper when encouraged, motivated to create and given choices. See figure 6.

![Figure 6: Child artist working on personally developed collage](image)

This study and a choice-based approach may help any art educator looking to see the individual light each student holds within them. I would hope that other art educators
see the value of personal expression as many art educators were artists first and found the joy that it is to create when you are intrinsically motivated.

Currently I would like to recommend to my school’s administration that they allow me to implement a modified choice-based approach and see the difference it makes in students’ thought process and thinking. It is important that as art educators we can help others see the significant role art education can play in a students’ lives, development and thinking process.

If presented with the opportunity to transform my current art classroom I would take the following steps:

• Articulate all of the unit topics presented in the prewritten curriculum
• Create a layout for teaching techniques and subject matter so that all of the standards could be addressed and all the benchmarks met by the end of the each school year for each grade.
• Create demonstrations that model the necessary skills and ask students to employ these skills in their artwork.
• Structure the class as a studio similar to the layout of the non-profit classroom setting.

I think that it would be interesting to find out what happens when students who are used to following directions and are eager to please create under this teacher directed approach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transforming my art classroom into a functioning choice based art studio has been one of the greatest experiences I have had to date as an art educator. I created exactly what I had hoped for—a safe, creative atmosphere that encouraged personal voice—with little resistance from students who turned out to be much happier
creating artwork. My blog, Art with Ms. Alexa can be found at 
www.choicebasedart afterschool.blogspot.com. This blog details how I transformed by 
classroom and implemented a choice-based approach. This research opened my eyes and 
gave me high hopes for the future of art education and the students I am privileged to 
work with. Choice based art education requires a balance of routine, structure, 
organization and freedom. This style of teaching takes practice from the teacher and the 
students but it is so worth every moment seeing the ideas of young people come to life. 
Not only did I learn a lot about myself as an art educator but also about my students and 
their dreams in life. I loved teaching a choice-based approach and I look forward to the 
challenge of doing it all over again and improving on what I have learned through this 
project.
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Author Biography

Alexa Rae Garcia currently teaches art for the Collier County School District in Naples, FL, a position she accepted in August 2013. She was previously the Fine Arts Coordinator for the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County for 3 years. In her time in the classroom she has implemented various styles of curriculum for second grade through high school aged members. She currently teaches elementary art for more than 700 students a week. Alexa graduated from Florida Gulf Coast University in May of 2010 and began working at The Club shortly after in July. During her time at The Club she has been evolving as an educator and even more so since being accepted to the University of Florida Masters of Art Education program for the Spring 2012 semester. In her time at The Club she lead the art program to win Boys & Girls Club of America’s National Fine Arts Exhibit 2012 Best Group Project for their 24’ x 4’ Peter Max mural. She is currently striving to find a way back to the Choice Based Promised Land where students make art based on their personal interests and are intrinsically motivated.