

Art Educational Practices: Fostering Self-control and Improving Focus for  
Students Coping with Anxiety.

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MA in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations

August 2013

## Abstract

### Art Educational Practices: Fostering Self-control and Improving Focus for Students Coping with Anxiety.

This action research study served to help students suffering from anxiety or anxiety related issues by using Art as a means of improving focus and fostering self control. The student participants in this study were a group of 25 sophomore and junior high school students, both male and female, ranging between the ages of 15-17. The participants attend a Catholic Diocesan high school in southern New Jersey. Out of this study group, six individuals were officially classified, while five showed signs of struggle and required additional support. I met with this group for 43 minutes every day for 40 days. The findings presented in this study confirmed that art practices, specifically curriculum, instructional strategies and the environment, played a vital role in reducing stress by building students' focus and developed more self control. Throughout the duration of this research, the high school student participants increased their self confidence, were able to creatively problem solve, developed an independent work ethic and utilized instruction strategies to assist them in the production of their assignments. This study holds substantial evidence that educators should utilize art making as a tool in reducing anxiety for students suffering from severe stress or depressive like symptoms.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Paul VI High School is a Catholic Diocesan school located in southern New Jersey. The school currently employs over 70 faculty and staff members, who educate over 1100 students. Demographically, the high school is diverse, particularly in the racial makeup. The school is a mix of White, Hispanic, African American, Asian, other nationalities, and has a small percentage of foreign exchange students. Because there are varied cultural and economic backgrounds, the faculty at Paul VI High School is often presented with multiple challenges from students inside the classroom. The school's primary mission is to call students to open their minds and hearts to the truth, to be enlightened and transformed by it, and to proclaim it through word and deed in an ever-changing world. Paul VI High School seeks to provide an education that motivates students to actualize their potential through participation in a broad, balanced and relevant educational experience.

Unlike public schools, where teacher aids or other special education instructors are available inside classrooms for additional support, particularly for students with needs, Paul VI High School has only a few aides who solely work in a selection of English and Math classes. As a result, the majority of teachers have a complicated task of attending to the needs of all students, including learners who are mentally, emotionally or physically shut down due to their own individual crises. The average class size is approximately between 25-30 students. With this amount of learners in one room, the

teacher's task is to maintain control of the classroom atmosphere, as well as provide an engaging instruction that will build upon the students' education.

When I first began teaching at this school, I was one of two art teachers and taught the freshmen and sophomore core art classes, as well as the two art electives. Currently, I am the only art teacher and am now responsible for all art levels, freshmen through seniors. I meet with my 6 classes everyday during our 6 day teaching cycle for 43 minutes. Of my 105 students, 9 students are classified with a range of disabilities or needs. Although these 9 individuals have IEPs specifying their accommodations, I also have 34 undiagnosed students who show signs of learning disabilities and other anxiety related issues. I have noticed over the past three years that the impact of these undiagnosed problems on the individual causes a number of problems inside my classroom. I have seen firsthand how students mentally shut down because of their struggles in regular academic classes or with other teachers. This situation causes students to come to my class upset and unable to work, which often affects their grades and participation. Problems at home or outside of my classroom also play a huge role in the stress levels of these young adolescents, particularly with socialization.

### **Problem Statement and Research Questions**

Bektas and Ozturk's (2008), as well as Paul Amato's (1994) articles are two of many examples of how anxiety affects children. If not treated properly, anxiety can cripple a person's ability to function normally. Living in the current American culture, competition and expectations are at their highest. High stress factors, such as self-esteem

issues, economic hardships, family dysfunction, and socialization, can place pressure on young people that it often impacts their social and academic success in school. Private and Parochial schools do not have the same evaluation and assessment criteria that public schools are required to follow. Therefore, not all students at Paul VI High School are evaluated or supplied with the proper accommodations.

The purpose of this study is to help students dealing with anxiety or anxiety related issues gain better confidence and tools necessary for educational success. I will conduct this in my classroom using different art practices as my framework for structuring this project. I will use art as more of a therapeutic outlet in which students will problem solve, develop and exercise behavioral control, and learn how to transfer these skills in other classrooms. Through this research, I hope to find improved beneficial instructional practices that will assist teachers in better managing and administering educational material to their students. I want to find solutions through art-based projects, instruction and creative environment that will help students overcome their struggles, which will allow for individual growth both academically and personally. The core research question in this analysis is: *How can the curriculum, instructional strategies, and learning environment in Art Education foster self-control and improve focus for students coping with anxiety?* To properly answer this question, additional sub questions are needed:

What factors contribute to a student's anxiety? (Where does anxiety come from?)

How does anxiety affect a student's self-control and focus in the learning environment?

Can specific skills and strategies learned in an art classroom help students develop better behavior skills as well as maintain focus?

In what ways do these skills and strategies lessen a student's anxiety?

What instructional strategies are more advantageous for students with anxiety?

How does the art environment affect students coping with anxiety?

How might these art practices (curriculum, instruction, and environment) help students in other aspects of their education/life?

### **Significance to Education**

The foundation of my research is to help students lessen their anxiety by using art practices. By having purposeful educational tactics set up within the classroom, studies show that students' development has dramatically increased. Eccles and Roeser (2011) support this idea by explaining that the content of academic work can affect the student personally, by enabling them to learn more about his/herself and his/her family, as well as increasing students' attention by exciting their interests in the material. Two key aspects in educational advancements are: 1) the content of curriculum (Nodding, 2005), and 2) the design of instruction, which helps to cultivate interest, meaningfulness, and challenge students to think on a deeper cognitive level (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Research also shows that instructional strategies help to increase student motivation, engagement and learning, particularly in adolescents (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Fredricks et al., 2004; Hattie, 2009; Eccles & Roesner, 2011).

Aside from curriculum and instructional planning, the classroom environment contributes tremendously to the development of students. DeWit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain (2011) claim, “Emotional support from classmates and teachers is a powerful protective factor in averting or reducing student mental health problems” (p. 556). Having an environment in the classroom in which students can creatively problem-solve with each other and work on assignments while still maintaining good working habits, provides a structure of comfort and growth. Students feel open to exploring new ideas, can socialize with classmates and in return gain new perspectives on ideas and cultures, and develop better self-control on completing tasks (DeWit et al., 2011).

Curriculum development, instructional planning and the classroom environment help to promote motivation and self-regulation, as well as enable students to maintain focus on completing tasks. This is particularly helpful for students with disabilities. Fulk, Brigham, & Lohman (1998) state, “students with disabilities are among those subgroups of the student population who are most at risk for school noncompletion” (p. 300). Currently, the numbers of students in classrooms, as well as students with disabilities are increasing. It is imperative for teachers to meet each student’s educational needs. By restructuring gaps in education, such as developing strong curriculum, administering planned instructional strategies and utilizing the classroom environment as a tool for helping students, teachers can find creative ways to help engage and build students’ confidence. This can be particularly helpful to students who suffer from anxiety by helping them find alternative ways to break down barriers that they previously struggled with in school.

## Literature Review

### *Types of Anxiety*

According to the fourth edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) written by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000), anxiety is defined as a “condition of nervous unrest, common to most people in some degree, but at times reaching the proportions of a psychiatric disorder” (p. 427). Anxiety is a reaction to stress related situations and can be defined and classified in numerous categories. This stress typically takes on a more concrete form, known as a panic attack, which the DSM-IV (2000) defines as “a discrete period in which there is the sudden onset of intense apprehension, fearfulness, or terror, often associated with feelings of impending doom” (p. 429). Criteria for a panic attack includes palpitations, sweating, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, fear of losing control, paresthesias, depersonalization, nausea, and chills or hot flushes (APA, 2000; Caldwell, 2005). Depending on the severity, people diagnosed with anxiety and/ or anxiety related conditions can experience a variety of ailments. Researchers have identified six main types of anxiety, each having their own causes and effects (APA, 2000; Root, 2000; Caldwell, 2005; [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)).

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is persistently, excessively and over agonizing of everyday things for more than a period of at least 6 months (APA, 2000; [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). People who experience this are often unable to let go of worrying, particularly about things that have not happened or would possibly happen. GAD affects 6.1 million adults every year, and women are twice as likely to suffer from GAD than



men (Caldwell, 2005; APA, 2000; [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). There is evidence that suggests GAD has a connection to biological factors, family backgrounds, and life experiences, specifically situations that have caused extreme stress ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). Persons with GAD also experience physical symptoms associated to their mental worrying. Examples of these physical patterns include increased muscle tension, restlessness, exhaustion or fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, and sleep disturbance (Caldwell, 2005; Root, 2000).

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is classified as a disorder in which people suffer from unwanted and disturbing thoughts that they cannot eradicate from their mind ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). The APA (2000) terms this disorder as a person who has obsessions, which causes anxiety or distress, and/ or by compulsions, which are intended to pacify anxiety. Caldwell (2005) further explains that obsessions are anxiety-producing thoughts that are usually preceded by a trigger. These thoughts that intrude into the affected person's mind are unwanted and upsetting. Obsessions frequently occur, often in the same form or shape, and continue for an extended period of time. These thoughts typically produce more of an emotional response and cannot be dismissed easily (Caldwell, 2005; APA, 2000). Compulsions are anxiety-reducing actions; majority of the time, they are purposeful and repetitive activities. Compulsions tend to be complicated and intricate (Caldwell, 2005). This often results in ritualistic performances, and most of the time interferes with normal, routine activity, such as work, school, family and social lives ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)).

Panic Disorder is defined as the recurrent unexpected panic attacks about which there is persistent concern (APA, 2000). Agoraphobia, which is an abnormal fear of being in crowds, public places, or open areas that often leads to anxiety attacks, affects 6 million people (www.adaa.org; APA, 2000). These disorders cause significant impairments to individuals and are highly responsive to different types of treatments (www.adaa.org). Panic disorder usually does not have any recognizable causes or triggers, and is far more intense and overpowering than the typical, normal panic that most people experience. Signs and symptoms of individuals experiencing panic include increased heart rate, sweating, increased blood pressure and rate of breathing, diarrhea and fainting (Caldwell, 2005). Agoraphobia occurs within the context of Panic Disorder. This type of anxiety usually leads towards an avoidance of a number of situations that include being in public, home alone, traveling, and being on a bridge or elevator (Caldwell, 2005). People experiencing Agoraphobia often find themselves in life altering predicaments because they become confined to specific geographical areas or routines due to intense stress and discomfort. About 95% of persons suffering with Agoraphobia have a history of panic disorder; however, there are cases of individuals who have Agoraphobia that show it can exist independently (Root, 2000).

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an acute and often crippling condition that develops in people who have experienced a distressing situation, such as a natural disaster, sudden death of a loved one, war, life-threatening accident, terrorist attacks or other life changing events (www.adaa.org). Examples of criteria for a PTSD diagnosis include exposure to trauma, trauma repeated through disturbing images, flashbacks,

nightmares or dreams, avoidance of associated stimuli, overall numbing of emotions and symptoms of agitation and arousal, including angry outbursts, irritability and lack of concentration (Caldwell, 2005). Similar to GAD, women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than men. It is often associated with depression, substance and alcohol abuse, and other anxiety disorders. Most people can recover from PTSD; however, they sometimes continue to experience depressive and anxiety ridden symptoms for months to years after the initial traumatic event(s) ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)).

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is defined as an extreme fear of being analyzed and critiqued by surrounding social groups, whether it is in social or performance based situations. This is also known as social phobia and it is drastically different from shyness (APA, 2000; Caldwell, 2005; [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). People who experience Social Anxiety Disorder cannot function normally and often times end up alone because they have few social or romantic relationships. These individuals fear constant humiliation or embarrassment, which affects their daily routines by prohibiting them to move past their anxiety driven concerns. SAD begins in childhood and adolescence. Some effects of SAD are clinging behavior, tantrums, diarrhea, and mutism. 20% of Social Anxiety Disorder cases have ties to alcohol abuse and/ or dependence ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). These symptoms reinforce the extreme, panic driven fears of embarrassment, and incompetence that individuals diagnosed with SAD battle with on a daily basis (Caldwell, 2005). Adults and mature adolescents are able to recognize these signs of discomfort and understand that the fear is excessive; however, children do not have the same capabilities. This makes social situations extremely difficult for them to handle (APA, 2000).

Depression is the most common diagnosis and many people experience this at some point in their lives. The individual frequently feels sad, hopeless, discouraged, unmotivated, or disinterested in life. People who encounter depression on a daily basis do not function normally and find trouble maintaining routines ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)). There are three subsections within depression. The first, Major Depression, is classified as having five reoccurring symptoms within a two week period. This will hinder normal routines, such as work, school, social aspects, eating and sleeping, and tends to transpire after sudden death, a romantic break up, illness or other life altering event. Dysthymia is the second type of depression. It is less severe than major depression but is typically long-term and chronic. People who suffer from Dysthymia have poor appetites or overeating, insomnia or oversleeping, and low energy. This illness tends to manifest itself as stress, petulance, and mild anhedonia, which is the failure to develop happiness or contentment from activities. The third form of depression is Bipolar Disorder, which is also known as manic-depression. The individual's mood cycles have a tendency to fluctuate to extreme highs and lows causing erratic behaviors. As a result, some effects of this disorder are abnormal or excessive euphoria, increased sexual desire and overall energy, increased conversations, decrease in sleep, irritability, and poor judgments ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)).

Aside from the above six classifications of anxiety, there are additional diagnoses that are sometimes overlooked and/ or not always considered when evaluating an individual's demeanor. These conditions are also more prominent in children and adolescents (Caldwell, 2005). Separation Anxiety Disorder is a crippling condition in

which a person suffers extreme distress while away from his/her caregiver, parents, or home. This seriously impacts people's daily routines and activities because the person becomes severely agitated, anxious or upset during separation (Caldwell, 2005; [www.massgeneral.org](http://www.massgeneral.org)). Studies have shown that this affects 2-5% of children and has strong genetic and environmental links ([www.massgeneral.org](http://www.massgeneral.org)).

Anxiety can also be found in adolescent perfectionists. There is no official classification for this; however, research proves that students, who set extremely high standards for themselves, whether due to personal goals, parental stress, or competition between siblings or peers, undergo social and personal setbacks because of their high stress personas. Gilman, Adams, & Nounopoulos (2010) describe the difference between healthy and unhealthy stress. 'Healthy', adaptive, and 'Unhealthy', maladaptive, stress is the distinction in the levels of acceptance that one permits when their desired performance does not meet their predetermined principles. They state, "researchers have extended their focus to adolescent samples over the past decade, with findings generally consistent with those reported in adults. For example, adolescents, who self-reported as maladaptive perfectionists also reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety" (p. 505). In this study, adaptive perfectionists reported higher levels of academic functioning. Gilman et al., (2010) also commented that "it may be that specific behaviors displayed by perfectionists (in general) or between perfectionism subtypes may influence how they are perceived by others", (p. 506) as well as found observations on how perfectionists were extremely critical of themselves and experienced lower social acceptance.

Other disabilities that connect to anxiety are Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Learning Disabilities, Emotional Behavioral Disabilities (EBD), eating disorders, test anxiety, and family stress. Family stress is often times overlooked, specifically with children or adolescents in a school environment. Many teachers are completely unaware of the personal tribulations students deal with at home on a daily basis. This sometimes results in students frequently getting into trouble, suffering academically, and experience tremendous mood swings (Van Oort, Verhulst, Ormel, & Huizink, 2010). Van Oort et al., (2010) explain that the studies show how family stress negatively affects the quality of parenting and/ or guardianship, as well as parent-child interactions. Because research indicates that stress is related to anxiety and depression, children often times become upset or anxious due to family drama. Family stress may be the result of poor parental mental health and lack of family structure, which can adversely affect children. Divorce and/or single parenting may also instigate family stress (Van Oort et al., 2010).

### ***Challenges Students Face When Experiencing Anxiety***

Everyday students are faced with a wide array of challenges that impede their academic success. Personal obstacles, including family stress, body imaging, socialization problems, learning disabilities, and other outside classroom factors, are a few examples of stressors that can contribute to poor scholastic achievement. These predicaments impact the classroom environment because students are unable to focus and perform designated tasks (Van Oort et al., 2010; Gerber, 2006; DeWit et al., 2011).

Gerber (2006) claims, “when general education teachers and typical students are stressed, students with special needs face even more anxiety and more potential failure” (p. 4). Puberty is another fundamental contributor to student stress, which occurs during the adolescent age. There is evidence that during the onset of puberty, adolescents are extremely vulnerable to having increases in stress related symptoms because they internalize their issues as a result of biological, cognitive, and psychological changes (Allen & Sheeber, 2009; Reardon, Leen-Feldner, & Hayward, 2009; DeWit et al., 2011). DeWit et al., (2011) suggests that these types of changes frequently occur when there is an increased emphasis on the peer group for defining feelings of individual self-worth, rather than a dependence on an adult authority for verification. This is a primary reason why females, specifically young girls, have more problems because they excessively worry about themselves or their social groupings.

According to Weber, Puskar, & Ren (2010), depressive symptoms tend to show a relationship with social peer involvement, family support, and self-esteem. Depression and psychiatric disorders are common among youth primarily because during the developmental period in a young person’s life, many different personal, social, and mental obstacles are experienced. The transition into a new school, whether due to change in academic levels or transferring to a new district, can also cause a lot of anxiety and depression. Going from middle school to the high school level is a major life adjustment, specifically with the confrontations of new cultures and structure (Knesting, Hokanson, & Waldron 2008). For a student with anxiety issues, the first weeks, and possibly months, of high school are a chaotic time. Students have trouble finding

belongings and are extremely prone to getting lost. Some have difficulty adjusting their behavior in ways that demonstrate an appreciation for others' personal space, they can't regulate schedules, and are often late getting to places (Smith, 1998/1999).

The socialization aspect in school also presents potential anxiety/ depression driven issues. Students face a huge issue of being socially accepted. When young individuals suffer because of not being accepted by their peers, results often include having trouble in school, a lack of focus, an inability to complete assignments or tasks, depression, and long term school absence in order to avoid dealing with their peers (Knesting et al., 2008; Smith, 1998/1999). The adolescent years are a critical time for developing social relationships. Socialization can impact the psychological health and well being of a child depending upon how they are or are not accepted into their social communities. Students, who are bullied, are more susceptible to emotional problems, which cause them to be at risk for other health problems, such as weight and body image issues (Farrow & Fox, 2011). Unless otherwise documented with a specific medical condition, the correlation between students' health status and the quality of their peer relationships speaks volumes. Evidence is seen when comparing chronically ill children and students who have healthy peer relations (McCarrol, Lindsey, MacKinnon-Lewis, Chambers & Frabutt, 2009). Typically, students who suffer from an extreme lack of social acceptance tend to often get sick, which leads to extended absences at school.

Students with disabilities also have difficulties. They face the same types of difficulties and adjustments that regular students encounter; however, sometimes students with disabilities have a tougher time adapting to the higher academic levels. According



to Fulk et al., (1998) “Students with disabilities are among subgroups of the student population who are most at risk for school noncompletion” (p. 300). Females with learning disabilities and/or emotional behavioral disabilities are more likely to exhibit internalized signs of academic distress than their male peers. Females who are also labeled as having emotional behavioral disorders are most at risk of dropping out of school (Fulk et al., 1998). Females who were identified with learning disabilities also exhibited higher levels of anxiety and attention deficits than did same-sex peers with low achievements. Learning disabled and emotional behavioral disabled students shared similar histories of underachievement and academic failures (LaGreca & Stone, 1990; Fulk et al., 1998).

Today, many students with disabilities are placed in inclusive classrooms. Inclusive programs are defined as those in which “students, regardless of the severity of their disability, receive appropriate specialized instruction and related services within an age-appropriate general education classroom in the school that they would attend if they did not have a disability” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002, p. 1720). According to Knesting et al., (2008), students with disabilities require an extended period of time to learn and become comfortable with new routines, such as finding their way around the school, getting to class on time, opening their lockers, and understanding rules. They also struggle with creating new friendships. These students with disabilities tend to cling to old friends they are already comfortable around and often do not ask for additional help because of embarrassment (Knesting et al., 2008). Students who attend private school do not always receive the additional support needed in order for them to

maintain their education. Private schools do not have the same available necessities and/or requirements for special education that is mandated by the state as public schools do. Therefore, students who are diagnosed with certain disabilities are not fully accommodated or provided with the proper materials and/or persons who can help them through their academic obstacles.

Family stress can contribute a great deal to students' educational problems. Van Oort et al.,'s (2010) study followed and analyzed 1,875 individuals stemming from two age groups of adolescents (10-12 and 12-14 years of age) for two years. The purpose of the research was to find ways to prevent anxiety in children and adolescents by verifying whether or not family stress was a predictor of anxiety. The study showed that family dysfunction proved to cause more anxiety versus family stress, which seemed to lead more towards depression. Based on the research, there was "a strong attenuation of the associations of family dysfunction and parenting stress on anxiety, which indicated that the effect of family variables on anxiety is mostly the result of parental mental health, or family composition-based on study" (p. 488). High family stress seemed to have more future effects on anxiety than dysfunction.

### ***Educational Strategies for Reducing Students' Anxiety***

In order for students to succeed inside and outside the classroom, particularly those who suffer from high stress and anxiety, research shows that it is important for teachers to provide extra attention to those students who struggle emotionally and socially (Knesting et al., 2008; Gerber, 2011). Literature explains that teachers need to

push, as well as encourage students to seek out the necessary help when life's obstacles come up and seem too difficult to handle on their own. Studies also show that children who do seek out assistance when needed benefit greatly from it, which in return enables them to complete their work (Knesting et al., 2008).

Another strategy that can be used to actively engage students into a subject's content is by developing an open-ended curriculum that allows an individual to have multiple options when learning. Eisner (2008) states, "how something is taught, how curricula are organized, and how schools are designed impacts what students will learn" (p. 2). Eisner (2008) further discusses how teachers can engage students in learning by using open-ended tasks assignments, one of his educational strategies. By doing this, learners are allowed to "exercise their imaginations" (p. 4), which in return permits students to place their own authenticity on their work rather than completing redundant assignments. Beverly Gerber (2011) claimed, "I could reach and teach students who had a variety of learning differences through open-ended art lessons that had no "right" or "wrong" outcome...I learned that behavior problems were easily created by closed-ended art lessons" (p. 3). This flexibility inside the classroom allows students to not only take interest in the material being presented to them, but also it gives them the control of problem solving and self-discovery.

Literature indicates that open-ended assignments are best suited for students with disabilities (Eisner, 2008; Knesting et al., 2008; Gerber, 2011). The learners discover that they have multiple options to complete class work, which helps instill more self-confidence and focus in their schooling. This also helps struggling individuals by giving

them the confidence to ask for help. Findings suggest that students with mild disabilities may require additional support and guidance for longer periods of time than general education students. Research also shows that students who found extra special educational help as necessary benefited greatly. They also developed more positive attitudes and relationships with teachers and peers, which was extremely important because it provided comfort for them as they acknowledged a sense of belonging to their educational community (Knesting et al., 2008). Flexibility in the classroom also prevented some behavioral issues. Having multiple options allows for students to engage in the activity rather than avoiding it and acting out. This is why researchers stress that it is important for teachers to be attentive to internalized behavior so that they can prevent potential problems. Designing structured projects, classroom exercises, and activities that focus on behavioral self-control help reduce student anxiety, particularly for children dealing with EBD. These types of practices also help to mentally train students over time so they learn adaptive ways of controlling their outbursts and emotions (Fulk et al., 1998).

Positive peer interactions also prove to be beneficial in decreasing anxiety prone situations. Research confirms that when peer connections are established early on, children's unease is lessened and they are able to function on a higher level than children who did not correspond well with peers (Knesting et al., 2008). It is also important to note if students suffer from family stress because this could cause anxiety (Van Oort et al., 2008). Being aware of a student's needs and utilizing preventative measures will help the child throughout the entire school environment. This can be done through

communication, specifically between teachers. Collaborations with other departments and providing awareness of students' past experiences help to control potential issues. Also, information regarding a child's successes, such as special interests, abilities, and behaviors, help other teachers in providing the necessary attention in order to positively help that particular individual. Another helpful form of communication is to stay in contact with parents. Informing parents and/ or guardians about how their child is doing in school will also aid in alleviating potential issues (Gerber, 2011).

Designing and creating a structure for the classroom is another tactic that helps to reduce anxiety and stress. Sally Smith (1998/1999) states, "teachers need to set up structure of space (where everything goes) and time (time for all things) ... this structure will help establish order and create the setting for productive learning" (p. 3). Studies show that teachers need to design curricula and present activities that will facilitate students' developing abilities, increase their focus, and foster self-control, thus allowing the individuals to mature. Having organized structure in the classroom allows students to classify and categorize different learned materials. Smith (1996/ 1997) also discusses that by having set parameters and boundaries, students will be able to organize their time, space, and environment. Organized instruction, when presented in a precise, clear fashion, also helps children better direct their attention and focus on educational responsibilities (Smith, 1996/1997; Smith, 1998/1999).

### *Reducing Anxiety through Art*

Art has been proven to be an extremely resourceful tool in coping with stress and anxiety. By engaging in the creative arts, whether being music, theater, or the fine arts, students become focused and exert all their energies into their projects. Art has been shown to help all learners because it provides an opportunity for people to create something that constitutes ownership and personal expression; individuals learn best when material is relevant. Creative art lessons encourage innovative and problem solving strategies that students need in order to tell their own stories (Gerber, 2011). Smith (1979) claims, “through the arts, a child can order his world, make sense of what he knows, relate past experiences to present, and turn muscular activity into thought and ideas into actions” (p. 130). This is particularly true for individuals who suffer from anxiety because they often second guess or question their actions (Creedon, 2011). Art is a subject in which people can formulate ideas in whatever way that best suits their needs. Since there is no right or wrong answer, children are able to develop their own solutions without anyone mandating strict rules and regulations (Gerber, 2011). By integrating arts-based instruction into teaching and learning, Creedon (2011) explains that students will begin to master the lesson’s content, as well as support their emotional and physical needs.

Children who suffer from anxiety related issues or specific anxiety disorders can use art as a form of therapy. When students work with art, they are using the part of their brain that controls emotions. Clark (2006) explains that imagery is an important tool for reducing stress. The right side of the brain corresponds with the visual, holistic, intuitive,

and nonlinear thought. By using imagery, or art, an individual can connect directly to the subconscious and the autonomic-nervous-system functions, which avoids the left side of the brain and its movement towards problem solving through rational thought processes (Clark, 2006). Some of the results that happen when art is used as a therapeutic process include confronting personal demons, learning to channel positivity, restoring one's well being back to good health through actual art construction, and by coming to terms with personal history (Eisner, 2008; Clark, 2006; Creedon, 2011). Art has also been shown to reduce stress and depression, increase problem solving and self-confidence, which are major benefactors in achieving educational success (Clark, 2006). Eisner (2008) advocates that slowing down perception is the most promising way of understanding what is being presented. He continues on to explain that the process of recognition greatly correlates with classification and labeling. Through art, a person can slow down his or her perception, which therefore enriches his or her experience with the subject matter (Eisner, 2008). Meditation is a therapeutic technique that is a centering process in which people focus their attention on one thing at a time. By controlling focus, an individual can balance his or her brain, as well as remain calm. Meditation shows that anxiety is not permanent; eventually, the unease will diminish, allowing the person to function on a more relaxed basis (Clark, 2006). Using art as a meditation practice can alleviate health problems, school failures, and youth delinquency by maintaining students' attention, developing their memory and controlling their behaviors (Creedon, 2011).

Art has also been shown to foster control in children. The artist is free to experiment by making as many mistakes as he or she stumbles upon. However, through this questionable process, the artist is then able to discover positive solutions, which permits growth in the form of learning. Through this learning model, students can fully engage in the material with no fear of failing because they know that even if they make a mistake they will survive in the end because art provides various answers (Smith, 1996/1997). Two key aspects that MacLean (2008) discusses are 1) how the arts contribute to a person's cognitive development and 2) education in the arts provides the necessary tools required for cognitive development in which the individual can make sense of his/ her own world. Art engages a person on many different levels. People connect not only through cognitive development but also through various sensory stimulants, both physical and emotional. Creative practices offer learners the opportunity to completely immerse themselves into the subject matter (MacLean, 2008). Eisner (2008) supports this idea by acknowledging that somatic experience is one of the most important indicators of someone doing a task correctly. He claims, "somatic experience is body knowledge; a sense of rightness of fit, an ability to discriminate without being able to articulate the conditions that made it possible. The body knows and forms the basis for intuition" (p.4). As a result, stress and anxiety dissipate because people begin to gain more control over their emotions and behaviors, thus leading to more directed focus and concentrated attention. During this time of maturation, it is important for teachers to remain unbiased with their opinions. The teacher's main job is to make sure he/she is supportive towards the student in need and provides the necessary encouragement/



developmental tools in which the learner can positively grow and academically succeed (MacLean, 2008).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Introduction to Methodology**

For this study, I will use action research as the method of investigation for answering my focus questions. Mills (2012) defines action research as "any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/ learning environment to gather information" (p.5). This technique is favorable for teacher researchers, like myself, who seek to collect data using a descriptive approach that allows us to ask questions, such as how students learn, how schools operate, and how well teachers present selected materials. I chose this method of research in hopes of gaining perspective on how my students are affected by anxiety, how they react to specific art curricula, teaching instruction and the overall classroom environment, as well as providing insight into how I can improve my teaching practice and other teachers' practices.

When conducting this investigation, I will play dual roles by acting as both the teacher and the researcher. Mills (2012) outlines the four-step process used by teachers conducting action research. Researchers begin by identifying an area of focus. After, data will be collected, analyzed and interpreted. When all materials have been concluded, the action researcher will then develop an action plan. I will begin my study by identifying the core inquiries regarding anxiety. I will collect proper materials/ data, analyze and

reflect on my findings. I will then develop an action plan of how I will continue my studies once the research is complete. Mills (2012) states, “All action researchers, regardless of their particular school of thought or theoretical position, are committed to a critical examination of classroom teaching principles and the effects teachers’ actions have on the children in their care” (p. 8). By performing both roles, I will have the opportunity to learn and adapt my teaching pedagogy based on my observations and data analysis. This exercise is extremely beneficial for not only myself, but also for other educators, because it provides insight on ways to improve teaching methods, allows for the development of new educational tools that can direct students towards a more prosperous learning route, and creates a pathway of constant professional growth.

### **Methods**

Throughout the duration of this research, I will be utilizing a number of different methods in order to collect my data. I will begin and end the study by administering a survey to my class, in both structured and unstructured formats. I will design my initial survey format by using a series of dichotomous questions that ask individuals to check one of two responses. Examples of this include marking whether or not the student was male or female and/ or indicating if students experience anxiety during the course of their daily routines. I would also like to include questions that are formatted using the Likert response Scale, as well as the Guttman scale, so that I can gain perspective on my participants’ previous experiences and familiarity in dealing with anxiety. Examples of these questions include choosing on a scale of 1-5 (1-strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree)

if students feel anxiety when coming to school, or by checking off statements that apply, such as do you feel anxiety in regular academic classes and do you become overwhelmed easily when placed with individuals you do not know. The final survey will ask a series of unstructured questions that focus on how the specific art practices utilized throughout the research period help or not help students in maintaining focus and self-control in and outside the classroom. These will be free response questions for students to fill out. Answers may vary depending on how the research affected each person.

I will concentrate most of my research on observations. I am looking to find how a purposefully arranged art curricula can help students to express and release negative emotions. Evidence will be found in studying student behaviors, work ethic and artifact collection. I will be able to assess how successful the curriculum is based upon the students' use of their skills and knowledge in executing the lessons' objectives and management of problem solving strategies. There will be warm up exercises planned throughout the research that build upon the lesson's objective. In addition to material content, it will be important for me to analyze how teaching instruction and the classroom environment impact students' anxiety levels. Specific areas that I will look for are how different forms of communication, such as how I present information and the reactions of my students in regards to my tone of voice and responses, and how environmental factors, like cultural differences amongst students, seating arrangements, and classroom energy, impact anxiety. I will be using an observation protocol that will distinguish between a student's personal outbursts compared to observing their response to my instruction and their peers.

By collecting artifacts, in particular journal entries capturing student feedback, sketchbooks, written class activities, self-portrait projects, Individualized Education Programs, powerpoint presentations that explain lesson objectives, written assessments and visual displays in the form of handouts or bulletin board examples, I will analyze student involvement in an arts based situation in which certain practices are being used to help eradicate anxiety. I will observe through these objects whether or not the students are developing the necessary skills needed in order to gain self-control and maintain focus based on how individuals are executing procedures, what their capabilities are, and if there is evidence of personal growth in learning and capabilities.

The last method that I will be executing during my research is critique recordings. After each project, the class will partake in a critique. During the critique, I question individuals, as well as the entire group to assess their understanding of the lesson and provide insight on each person's project. This is an informal setting because all participants will be involved. The questions and critiques stem off of one another so there is no set structure. I will guide the critique by asking questions, such as what are certain techniques/ procedures the students did well on, and students will provide the rest of the feedback by building off of previous responses.

Within my methodological structure, I designed a system of triangulation. Burgess (2012) claims, "the hallmark of being a field researcher is, therefore, flexibility in relation to the theoretical and substantive problems on hand" (p. 143). The majority of what I will be studying and the techniques I plan on using to collect this information overlap each other because of the triangulation within my data. In doing this, I am

devising a system that draws material from different angles, thus producing various forms of feedback. This cross layering of methods creates flexibility and multiplicity within the study, which in return allows the analysis process to be less biased because of more than one perspective. This use of multiple strategies, as outlined by Burgess (2012), allows the researcher to have a variety of possibilities in all aspects of the investigation process. The collected material is not only coming directly from the participants, but also from the teacher and the observer, which again is comprised of a range of perspectives.

### **Sampling**

The selection of individuals who will be participating in my research are members of my Drawing Class. This group consists of 25 students, who come from different cultural backgrounds, ages and genders, and have a wide span of learning levels. There are a total of 20 females, whose ages range from 15-17, and 5 males also between the ages of 15-17. The class is a mixture of sophomores and juniors. Out of this group of students, 6 are classified with an IEP, while 5 additional nonclassified students show signs of a struggle and require additional support. I chose to use this class for my research because 15 out of the 25 students exhibit various forms of anxiety, such as quite anxiety, GAD, family stress, OCD, and social anxiety. I am looking to get the maximum amount of results, which is why I am choosing to use maximum variation sampling. I will see these results in the different responses to the surveys, critiques and overall execution of the various projects. Each student is completely different; therefore, I will be receiving 25 perspectives that will help to broaden my findings. By examining a

collection of different characteristics and traits, such as how boys and girls react to stressful situations and how the individual's home life affects his or her schooling, I will be able to present findings that will speak to how students function in the everyday world.

### **Ethics**

I will recruit my participants by asking for their signed consent in the involvement of this study, as well as sending home a letter to ask for consent from their parents and/or guardians so that they too are aware of what will be asked of them in the study. I will explain to both my students and their parents that the purpose of this study is to find positive ways of coping with anxiety by using specific art practices in order to promote self-control and improve focus. I will stress to my participants that by agreeing to take part in this study, they will be helping themselves learn new ways of problem solving and coping skills that will help them inside the art classroom and outside the art room. Also, by accepting to partake in this study, my participants may benefit from my research by getting added individual attention and/or enrichment programming in the arts.

### **Data Analysis**

I plan on analyzing my data using a series of validation tests. Maxwell (2004) provides a checklist of the most important strategies that he feels best help the researcher rule out validity threats and increase the credibility of the conclusions. I will be using 6 out of the 8 strategies listed on Maxwell's (2004) checklist. My research will be conducted through an intensive, long-term involvement. Over this 7-week study, I will

be collecting “rich” data (Maxwell, 2004) in students’ projects, warm up activities, and artifacts. This data will allow me to observe and analyze what students learned from lessons and how they responded to the presented material. I will be collecting students’ writing exercises, assessment handouts, and surveys that will serve as my respondent validation. This information will provide me with direct contact with what students are experiencing, how they respond to classroom material, and how they are coping with outside of class situations.

Interventions will be made when students choose to share information with me. Through this strategy, I will redirect my relationship with the student(s). Depending on what the student shares with me, I will need to adjust my teaching methods, change the students’ seating in the classroom, and possibly alter my lessons. I will also be analyzing my data using triangulation. Evidence of this is shown through the other listed validation methods. This process will provide me with multiple areas of observations, a range of feedback, and a variety of perspectives. The last type of validation tactic I will use is a comparison. I will primarily analyze how students change, if at all, from the beginning of the research to the end. I will observe this through the surveys, projects, and writing assignments.

## **Limitations**

There will be limitations within the study that will cause me to not collect validity in my research. These restrictions include interventions with students, the sampling of students, control over outside of class factors, students' attention spans, openness to participation and providing feedback, the time of day at which the class meets, and my personal bias. My biggest challenges are going to be the time of day that the class meets, students' attention spans, and what experiences the students will go through during their time before they meet with me. These three factors play a prominent role in determining how and when the participants engage in lessons, writing activities, and classroom discussions. These limitations may also prevent a child from opening up about personal experiences that could potentially redirect our student-teacher relationship in a more positive direction.

My own personal bias in regards to certain people, situations, or ideas may also cause hindrances during the research. It is going to be a struggle for me to remain neutral in my role as the researcher and not interject my past experiences and relationships with students into my data analysis.



### Chapter 3: Data Collection & Findings

This section focuses on the data collection and analysis of the questions asked previously in this research. The primary focus is centered on *How can the curriculum, instructional strategies, and learning environment in Art Education foster self control and improve focus for students coping with anxiety?* Additional questions that helped to guide the research further are as follows:

What factors contribute to a student's anxiety? (Where does anxiety come from?)

How does anxiety affect a student's self control and focus in the learning environment?

Can specific skills, such as technical, cognitive and behavioral, as well as educational and motivational strategies learned in an art classroom help students develop better behavior skills as well as maintain focus?

In what ways do these skills and strategies lessen a student's anxiety?

What instructional strategies are more advantageous for students with anxiety?

How does the art environment affect students coping with anxiety?

How might these art practices (curriculum, instruction, and environment) help students in other aspects of their education/life?

Throughout this study, I use a number of methods in collecting and analyzing my research. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, all research participants' names were changed. I conducted a pre and post survey that asked both structured and unstructured questions regarding how the students feel about anxiety and stressful

situations. Most of the data is centered on my observations of the students as they worked on projects, interacted with other students, and how they reacted to my instruction and teaching strategies. I looked not only at how the curriculum and instructional strategies affect the students, particularly through their reactions to assignments, conversations with each other and responses to me as their teacher, but also in understanding how the art classroom environment plays a role in building an individual's confidence. After all work was complete, I assessed the participants' understanding of the presented objectives and used the critiques from the projects as part of my assessments and data collection.

### **Data Collection and Overview**

The participants in my study are students whom I taught the previous school year when they were freshmen; therefore, I have an in depth knowledge of who they are as individuals, how they work together as a class, what their strengths are, as well as where they struggle. I chose to conduct my study with this specific group of students because the level of stress and anxiety is relatively high in this selected group. Evidence of their anxiety shows in their negative or depressing behaviors, lack of focus during class participation or work on project, as well as isolation from myself or other students. More than half the students suffer from high stress and anxiety related issues, which on a regular basis affects the way they function throughout their day. Although I utilize a number of methods in order to calculate my findings, the central theme for my research is based on the final project, a Self Portrait of the individual.

Once students have gone through the first year of art with me, I allow them to listen to music on their iPhones, iPods, etc. In my experience, these devices help students to maintain focus while completing tasks, and also help them to relax by listening to their own selection of music. This is my rule only; it is not allowed in any other classrooms. This is a privilege that they earned with me as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of trust between myself, as the teacher, and them as students because this only happens in the art room when students are on task and focused. I have noticed and received positive feedback from my students when they listen to music because they say it helps them to relax and engage by listening to something they like.

All freshmen and sophomores are given iPads to use in school, while junior and seniors have computer tablets. In this group of participants, all the sophomores and two out of the three juniors have iPads; all students are able to use these devices for help with their projects. Because students have been with me for two years, they are well aware of how my classroom operates, where materials are located, and what to do in the beginning, middle and end of class. Students are allowed to come and work during other periods while I teach or during their free time to continue working on their projects or additional materials. On a typical day, students come into class at the beginning of the period, drop off their belongs, go to their lockers to get materials, come back to the class and set up materials, and wait for my instruction. Students are typically given an assignment in which they have specific objectives to learn. Even though I lay out a regimented guideline for the projects, students have a choice in deciding what images or content to use for their art works. The class works until I have them clean up, at which

point I end class by reestablishing the project's objectives and informing them of the next day's activities. Students then go back to their lockers to store their materials and return to my classroom to pick up their belongings before moving onto their next scheduled class.

When introducing my research, I previously mentioned to the participants the protocol of what was going to happen throughout the timeframe of the study. I informed them of what types of motivational exercises, activities and projects we would engage in, all of which builds up to the final project, a colored Self Portrait lesson plan. During this semester, the Drawing Class curriculum was constructed of lessons revolving around color theory. All the projects are designed to be a progression of skills and experiences in using a variety of media and techniques in order to understand color. Two days before I started the research, students began drawing a still life in which they learned to shade properly using colored pencils. This was the first project done in color.

I began the study by administering a survey, which asked students structured and unstructured questions as a way to receive feedback privately and honestly from the participants in regards to anxiety. Before I administered the survey, I explained verbally that this information was completely private and would only be read over by me. I asked the participants to answer honestly and expand in their writing when necessary. After reading through the surveys, my findings were rather interesting. The participants whom I had noted as having symptoms of high stress and anxiety confirmed those ideas in their responses. However, there were a handful of individuals of whom I never witnessed or encountered situations of stress and/or anxiety related issues who acknowledged they felt

their day-to-day life was highly stressful. It seems as though they were open to admitting these feelings because at this particular time, they were in a safe situation where the individuals knew the shared information on the survey was only accessible to me and would not be shared with anyone in my class or



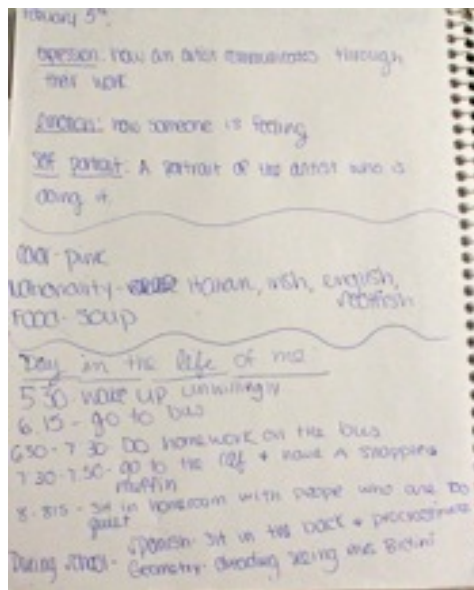
1a) Image of students listening to music while working.

outside my classroom. The questions were also specific and purposeful in providing background information on how the students feel. As a result, I challenged myself to step back as a teacher and focus primarily on acting as more of an observer so that my data collection remained unbiased.

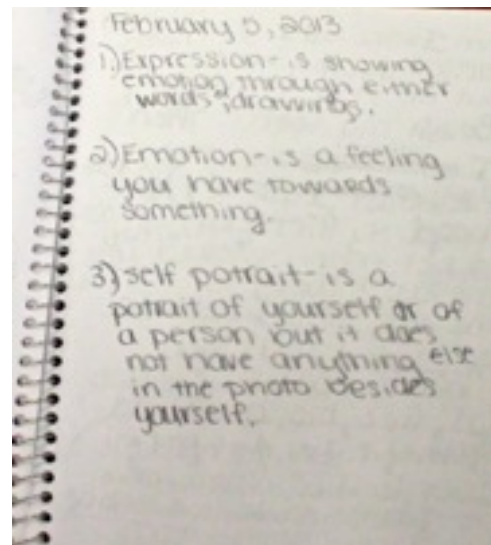
I collected data in the form of students sketchbooks and written assignments, looking primarily at their responses to the definitions for the three DO NOW terms, the ‘Day in the Life...’, and critiques feedback. The class participated in one critique, which I adapted in order to fit the time constraint. I randomly placed students in groups of three and had them walk around the room in order to critique their partners’ work. I read over each student’s response and also used these narratives as an assessment. Students also participated in other projects critiques. There were three total: one was a written response, one was a verbal conversation between students and teacher that was tape

recorded, and the third was a combination of verbal and written response that was also tape recorded and used an part of the projects assessment.

There were a handful of days in which I tape recorded the class, specifically when they experimented with the two day watercolor project. I collected and digitally documented all art works and used this material as interpretative data in understanding what my students took away from the presented assignments. I also documented students in the midst of completing assignments and while they engaged in certain strategies and warm up exercises. Students also provided insight to me through informal conversations where they would seek me out to talk, vent about their frustrations, or ask my opinions on certain matters. Almost everyday, GiMarie came to my classroom twice a day,



1b) Student response to Do Now activity, random pairing assignment, and part of their day in the life writing. Showing evidence of students understanding of material content, how to communicate in nonverbal ways and themselves by



1c) Example of student definitions from Do Now assignment. Showing evidence of understanding and engagement in lesson.

sometimes more depending on how she was

feeling, to hang out during her free period, vent to me about what was bothering her,

informing me of social issues between my students that she felt I needed to know, and

also to come in and work on her projects. There were other students, like GiMarie, who came to me outside of art class for similar reasons. Out of this group of 25 participants, 7 individuals asked me to write them a recommendation for 'Peer Leadership', which is a program at my school designed to teach and work with a select group of juniors on becoming school leaders, who are in charge of setting up different community service projects, as well as mentoring groups of younger class men.

## Lesson Plan Summaries

This semester focused heavily on color theory. All lessons and activities were structured to build on necessary fundamentals required to complete the final project, the Self Portrait. There were three mini projects conducted during the study that 1) taught students to understand shades, value and hues of color, 2) provide experience in using different media so students could chose which material was best suited for their ideas in the final project, and 3) help to foster confidence and facilitate growth in their skill levels.

### 1st Color Project Done in Colored Pencil



2a) Queen's still life drawing done in colored pencil. Evidence of color shading/ mixing, drawing in perspective using correct proportion, and fulfillment of the lesson's objectives.



2b) Karina's still life drawing done in colored pencil. Evidence of color shading/ mixing, drawing in perspective using correct proportion, and fulfillment of the lesson's objectives.



The first project was a colored pencil still life. Students were able to use different methods, such as the Sketchbook X app, verbal and visual demos, and check lists, to help them understand what and where colors needed to be placed, how to mix different colors together in order to match shades and hues, and to provide insight on what areas certain individuals needed to develop further.



2c) GiMarie working on her pastel lanscape, using the iPad to display the image and also practicing her color mixtures.

their drawings mimicked their images. They practiced color mixes on practice paper or in their sketchbooks, as well as asked for guidance from both their peers and myself. This display of student-to-student teaching gave them confidence in confiding with their community for help, support on their decisions and ease in completing the landscape drawing. Some of them also utilized technology, which allowed them to enlarge certain

### 2nd Color Project Done in Pastel

The Pastel Landscape project provided students with choices and voices. Students had control over their subject matter and were responsible for mixing the pastels together so



2d) Finished pastel drawing by GiMarie. Evidence of student learning how to properly blend and mix colors, working with a new medium, and student decision making in choosing selected composition

areas in order to see details better or by using the Sketchbook X app, which helped them take color samples of certain areas.

### 3rd Color Project in Watercolor

The class participated in a watercolor exercise in which I led a demonstration on six distinct styles of watercolor techniques: gradient wash, salt mixture, glazing, splatter painting, sponging and tape, and variegated washes. Over the span of two days, I demonstrated these six techniques and had them

replicate my actions. They had control of choice in color and execution of the work.

During this mini project, the atmosphere in the classroom was serious and focused; students were quiet and completely immersed in the painting process. I chose this exercise because I wanted to provide my pupils with innovative ways of showing texture, pattern and painting style into their final Self Portraits. Students, who typically lacked focus on most projects, were highly engaged in this practice. I watched as they relaxed



2e) Examples of students' watercolor pieces. Students painted using 6 different techniques. These examples demonstrate students' understanding and fulfillment of the lesson, creative exploration and decision making process, and control over medium.

and immersed themselves into their paintings. They weren't restricted in making decisions because there was no right or wrong answer. This assignment later proved to be extremely beneficial because a handful of students used these techniques into their portraits.

#### 4th Color Project: Self Portrait

The final project was the Self Portrait. This was the culmination of all the previous lessons this semester. Students were completely responsible for the entire portrayal of themselves. The only objectives they needed to maintain for my requirements were correct proportions, values, had to be in color, and needed to include a



2g) Javier's finished self portrait done in tempera paint and oil pastels revealing purposeful and independent decision making.



2f) Vinny's finished self portrait done in colored pencil and pastel exhibiting self expression, control and focus in project, and decision making.

background. Using all the previous learned skills and techniques, students crafted a Self Portrait. These images were to show their audiences who they were, what they stood for, and how they felt about themselves and

the world around them. They began by collecting images and resources in order to draw out a rough draft. Once the draft was complete, they selected a colored drawing medium that worked best with their ideas and transferred the drafts onto the final paper.

### **Observations and Assessments**

It was extremely important for me to step back as a teacher and become more of the observer. I needed to understand how the classroom functioned, how students interact with different projects, with other students and my instruction. I watched how they came in, how they reacted on a personal level in regards to their still life drawings, how they engaged with other students during warm up activities and how they responded to feedback through critiques. On Day 2 of the study, Effie came in crying. Over the last two years, this particular student has faced many challenges in and outside of school. The student's mood, behavior, and work ethic depend on the type of day she experiences. While I was getting the class on track with the project and walking around to make sure students were okay with the drawings, Effie was still upset and arguing with me to do her work. GiMarie, a female student who struggles with anxiety, took Effie out into the hallway while I helped another student. When the two came back into the room, I asked GiMarie where they were and she explained that Effie was upset so she wanted to let her vent in the hallway. At this moment, I realized how important the environment was in playing a crucial role for students to reduce stress. This type of student-to-student coping method happened numerous times throughout the duration of this study and proved to be

extremely beneficial in helping the struggling students gain control over his or her emotions.

I also observed Ayasa asking Patrinea for help with her drawing. Patrinea is typically very quiet and does not engage on her own with other students. I watched as Patrinea mimicked my way of demonstration with Ayasa and guided her through what needed to be fixed. This happened on multiple occasions throughout this project with these two students, as well as others. This example of students teaching other students happened multiple times throughout the color pencil project and developed into larger aspects of teaching and learning towards the end of the study. Towards the middle of the Self Portrait project, I witnessed Queen take charge in helping a student who had asked me to help him with something. I was working with another student at the time and before I could answer, Queen jumped in and said, "I can help you Mack. I am good at that" (she was referring to a certain drawing technique). I sat and watched exactly what Queen was demonstrating and communicating to the student in need; after she was done, I complimented her on the great job she did and simply told Mack that everything Queen showed him was correct. Again, this example of student based learning was one of many that occurred during the study and developed because students had confidence in what they were doing and understood the fundamental processes of different artistic techniques.

At the start of this research, there were 4-5 students who sat quietly in their desks at the end of class while the rest of the students moved themselves in order to socialize with their friends. They did not communicate or engage with anyone. Currently, I am

midway through the study and have noticed that two of those students still sit by themselves at the end of class, while the rest of students are talking and socializing with other students. These two female students are rather quiet; the one female, Jordan, has high social anxiety, which seems to be holding her back from fully engaging with other students during any part of class. There was one particular incident that occurred on Day 24 when Jordan came into class and was physically and emotionally upset. I watched as she came into the room crying and sat at her assigned desk emotionally distraught. Because this particular student is extremely sensitive and has a lot of trouble socializing with people, I did not want to draw attention to her in front of the class. I had to collect a writing assignment and decided to check each student's progress so that I could move about the room without being too obvious that I wanted to talk to her. When I reached her table, I collected Jordan's paper and asked if she was okay with the project, as I had done to everyone prior to her. Before I continued talking with the next student, I knelt down and asked if she was okay. She replied quickly saying, "Yes, I'm Okay". I told her if she needed to take a walk or go to the bathroom she had my permission to do so. After 15 minutes, Jordan seemed to settle down. A few days later, I found out from another student that during an earlier class, Jordan answered a question incorrectly during a group activity and caused her group to end their participation because of her wrong answer. This stress affected my participant's ability to work on her project, socialize adequately with other students, and emotionally shut down to the outside world because of the pressure she placed upon herself during another class. Later on in the study, students were placed into new social situations, one being the random pairing exercise. I was

surprised at how well Jordan interacted with her partner and laughed when I asked her to share the information she gathered from the exercise. This was a positive response because typically she never socializes with anyone. It appeared that even though students were paired with someone random, everyone was in the same awkward position of finding out information so it made the students much more relaxed.

This was not the only anxiety ridden struggle that took place during my observations. One aspect of the class that I noticed made a huge impact on the way students worked was their emotional status. Effie came in on multiple occasions tired, upset, or crying because of factors outside of the art classroom, majority of which I had no control over. This student is a challenge to work with because her behavior, focus and emotions fluctuate on a daily basis. She also has an inconsistent attendance record for school; therefore, she is constantly behind on assignments, which has impacted her grades for all her classes. On certain occasions, other students help to console her or allow her to vent her frustrations about her problems with people or the projects. I also made it a point to communicate to this student daily and check in with her in order to have an idea of how she was feeling. On days when Effie appeared to be emotionally drained, I presented her with options so she could chose for herself what task she felt comfortable completing. I watched the way I spoke to her because I noticed after many experiences in communicating with this individual that my tone of voice had an affect on the way she responded. It was also important for me to start with what she did well on or positive remarks on what she was capable of doing during that particular class. From

this tactic, I observed her response to my direction for completing in class assignments, as well as how she interacted with other activities and surrounding students.

The most exciting observation, which took place closer to the end of the study, was the execution of independent work from students who previously struggled to make their own decisions. Antonio has typically never been self-motivated to work or maintain focus in my experience. Even during the first two projects conducted during this study, he struggled immensely in participating and staying attentive. There were many days when Antonio would verbally express his dislike in the project saying that it was “boring”, he didn’t care for the materials, or when I caught him off task he would say he became distracted. I first took notice of Antonio’s interest after I gave the class examples of my previous students’ Self Portraits. Many students initially were confused on how to construct their portraits so I showed them a powerpoint of different artists’ examples and spoke about what the portraits displayed. I then verbally described my previous students’ work, one of which was a pastel drawing of my student pinning his opponent in a wrestling match. I explained to the class that this student chose to show this moment as his Self Portrait because he loved wrestling and this specific image represented one of his most challenging pins. After this conversation, I noticed Antonio started to engage in the material and from this point on worked for the entire length of the class throughout the rest of the study. When I came over to him randomly to check on his progress, he always had control over his project and rarely needed my help. Mack had a similar response to the research study. I began to notice during the Pastel Landscape Project that Mack had little questions. Mack is a student who, in the past, needed constant help and lacked focus



in all aspects of the art classroom. His skill level and artistic ability was basic compared to majority of the class. As a result, he often categorized himself as weak and possessing inadequate talent. During the middle of the study, I discovered a positive response from him in class because of the strategies and precise explanation of procedures. These processes helped Mack build confidence in himself by having the ability to complete work with limited assistance, it allowed him to use a multiple array of resources to find solutions for problematic areas, and helped him engage further into his own artistic experience, thus developing his skill level.

### **Strategies**

On Day 2, I conducted a demonstration using technology as a resource in order to help students in understanding color. This was the first time these students ever had a

lesson with me in which they had to use color realistically in order to make their still life drawings appear life like. They were not allowed to use any version of tints when mixing new colors. I projected the

program Sketchbook X, a digital app

on the iPad, onto a white board. This

interactive program enabled me to take a picture of one of the groups' still life setups and compare that to a drawing. This strategy helped to show students who were struggling

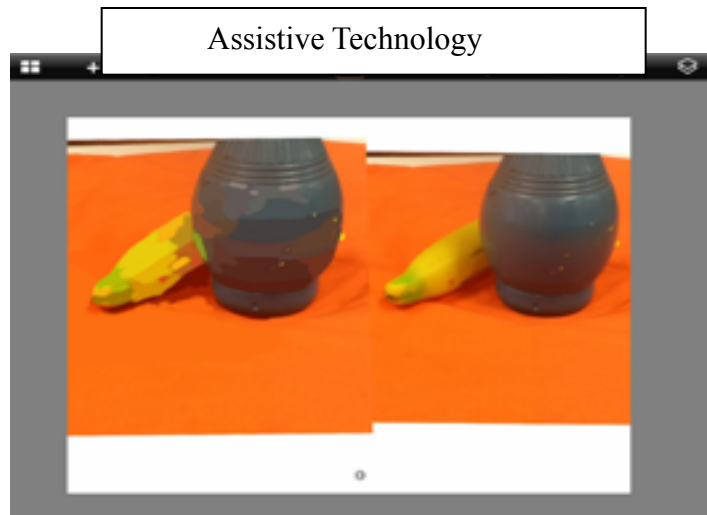
what values, shades and hues of color to use. One of the tools in this program permits an



3a) Students working independently on their self portraits. This is an example of student directed learning.

individual to take a swatch of color from the photograph and match the same color on the drawing. In previous years, I did this demo without using technology, but I also was working with smaller size classes. In this specific group of participants, there are many students who require much help and guidance when doing their projects; therefore, it was important as their teacher to provide them with information and tools they could use on their own and easily manipulate. I called on students and asked them what colors they saw in the photograph only (see 4a, image on the right); I even asked two of my males students who are easily distracted to come up to the white board and physically locate where the colors were in which they were observing so that the entire class could follow along and understand. After I gathered their responses, I translated that information with

the digital paintbrush tool and painted over those areas on the second image (see 4a, image on the left). I informed students that this digital tool could be an option for them if they were struggling with matching colors visually. This tool granted them an opportunity to



4a) Screen shot of demonstration example

practice matching and painting colors digitally, and after when they felt more confident, they could work on their actual drawing.

Another strategy I utilized throughout the entire study was having students practice their color applications in their sketchbooks. If they made a mistake or were not

exactly sure of the color, students were able to experiment on scrap paper before working on the final copy. Almost everyday, I reminded them to practice first before starting anything with which they weren't comfortable. I saw on countless occasions students working with this practice method during the colored pencil, pastel and Self Portrait project. As I walked around and checked on students' progress, some of them pointed out that even with these technological and hand done practices, they still continued to struggle. For these individuals, I would come and do one-on-one demos where I verbally, physically and visually explained to them what they could do to improve. For a few students, I gave them color order lists, where I laid out swatches of all the colors used from the first color to the last. Other students responded better to a written list of things they needed to work on for their drawings. The specific strategy was dependent on the particular individual, and was adapted when necessary.

Because the final project was a Self Portrait, I designed the curriculum and warm up activities to serve as building blocks for the research's end results. One of the main concepts that I continually stressed within each assignment was 'Expression'. On day 3 of the study, I started class by asking students to complete a DO NOW. I asked them to define in their own words 1) expression, 2) emotion, and 3) self portrait. Examples of this are shown in images 1b and 1c. While students were writing out their answers, I asked Queen to pass out a popsicle stick, which were labeled with a number on the bottom, to each person. When students were finished writing their responses, I asked about 4-5 different students to share their answers. Based upon the students' definitions, I posed questions to them hoping to connect the idea of what type of Self Portrait the

students were going to create. I began to elaborate on why these definitions were relevant and how they were going to associate these terms with their portraits. Students were told they were in charge of choosing a drawing media they felt most comfortable using and were responsible for designing their own arrangement of themselves because the students' choice and voice in any decision making process is extremely important for learning.

Right after discussing the DO NOW, I asked students to look at the number on their sticks and find another student within the class who had a matching number. Once students were

paired up with their randomly assigned partner, I explained to them that they were going to

find the following

three answers

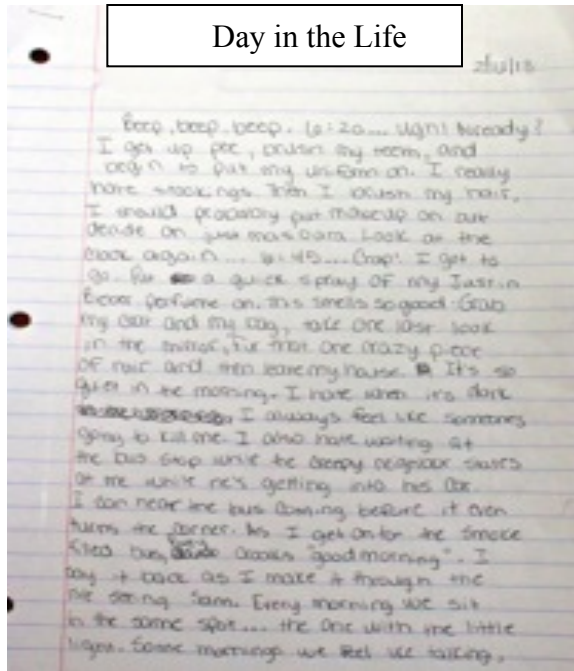
from their partner: favorite food, color and nationality, without speaking to one another.

The objective for this warm up strategy was to force students to communicate using expressive methods, whether it be writing out answers, physically acting out responses, or silently signing to each other. Although the participants appeared to be uncomfortable



4b) Image of students completing the random pairing exercise where they found their partner and nonverbally asked 3 questions and found 3 answers. This is evidence of student engagement, independence and creative problem solving.

and slightly awkward in the beginning of this activity, they all engaged in the process together and found unique ways of communicating. After all students finished, I called



on random groups to discuss what information they gathered and every single student laughed about how they deciphered these nonverbal answers. This strategy was successful because it not only challenged students to find new ways of expressing their thoughts through problem solving, but it also placed them into new social situations

4c) Page 1 of Beca's 'Day in the Life'. This document shows evidence of her beginning to observe herself through writing.

where they were forced to work with one another causing them to develop peer support.

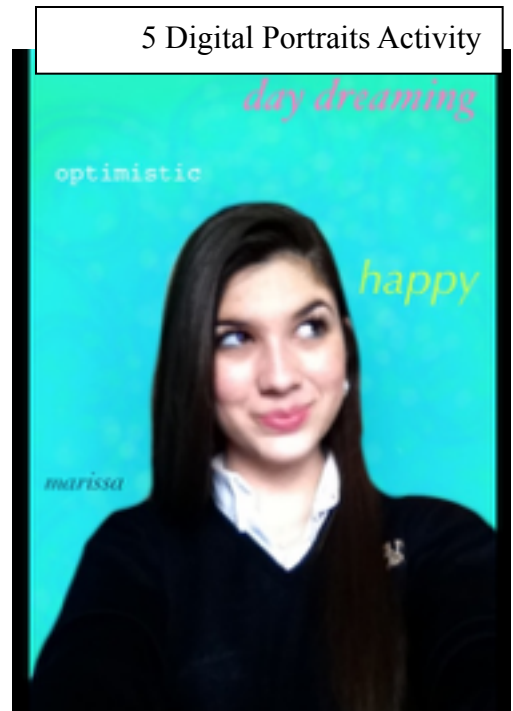
### Strategic Activities

Two additional strategies I used in order to help cultivate meaning and purpose for students' self portraits were 1) writing a 'Day in the Life...' and 2) partnering up and capturing five different images of themselves. The purpose of writing about their daily routines was to get them to understand exactly what they did, how they felt about certain situations, what they liked/ disliked, all of which identified who they really were. After students took pictures of their partners using their iPads, I had students upload their

images to the previously mentioned Sketchbook X App. I asked them to take one picture at a time, all of which displayed different emotions, and select a background color they felt best exemplified that feeling. Next, they were told to write words around themselves that further narrated the image's expression. This activity proved to be very successful in the end because when questions arose over what images and/ or colors to include in their backgrounds, I referenced this exercise and watched as students recollected learned material and established their own decisions without my input. On Day 25 of the study, Melissa was still struggling with developing a solid idea for her

Self Portrait. I initially asked her general

questions about what she was considering drawing but she could not make any concise solutions. I decided to use the mind mapping method with her in order to draw out some definitive characteristics of herself. I started by asking her basic questions regarding her favorite color, what she liked to do, what her favorite foods were, and so on. Some of the questions she seemed unsure of and looked over to her friend Clark, who quickly gave me answers. I found that this peer support helped her because she agreed with everything Clark suggested. Once I had enough information listed on the mind map, I read the words I wrote down back to Melissa. We talked for a few minutes about how to formulate this information together, and as a result, I drew a cartoon like picture of what



4d) One of Rose's 5 digital images documenting emotion, related color(s) and text.

her responses sounded like to me. Instantly, she smiled and said that was exactly how she looks when she is at home doing what she likes. I handed her the mind map and the drawings and watched as she began sketching out her ideas.

### **Data from Self Portrait Assessment and Final Survey**

This is a collection of data from the assessment and final survey taken in class.

The multiple use colors in the tables correlate to the different students' responses.

Self Portrait Assessment
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<b>Questions from Self Portrait Assessment</b>	<b>Student Responses</b>
1) What was the objective(s) of this project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Create a self portrait representative of one's true self</li> <li>-Draw yourself with realistic values</li> </ul>
2)What is a Self Portrait? What does it communicate to the audience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A self portrait is a picture of how you wish others to see yourself</li> <li>-The audience should be able to get a feel for your personality</li> </ul>
3) How does emotion play a role in a Self Portrait? In what ways did you display emotion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Emotion shows the mindset of the artist</li> <li>-The emotions tell a story</li> <li>-I think color is the main indicator of emotion because it is so easy to show your feeling through it.</li> </ul>

Questions from Self Portrait Assessment	Student Responses
<p>4) What were some techniques you utilized in this piece that helped you to reflect on who you are as an individual?</p>	<p>-I used oil pastels which are easy to mess up, are bold and show a lot of flaws, like myself  -I used warm analogous colors because I find myself to be a warm, happy person. I used watercolors (mostly dry on dry) because I think I'm pretty easy-going, forgiving individual</p>
<p>5) On a scale of 1-5 (1=worst, 5= best) how do you feel you did on this project? Please explain to me your Self Portrait. Why did you choose to include the selected image(s), styles and medium(s).</p>	<p>-I would say 3-4. I put myself in a 1940s style dress and a rose in my hair as a way to represent my Grandmom who passed away over the summer (her name was rose)  -The colors show my split emotions how I sometimes have my good days and bad days</p>

Table 1: Assessment Questions and Responses from students showing evidence of their understanding of the criteria for the self portrait lesson, ability to communicate deep emotions/ experiences through art, and knowledge in materials and techniques.



Final Survey Questions	Student Responses
<p>1) Did the Self Portrait project, including the warm up activities leading into the portrait project, help you engage in the project on a deeper level? If yes, How?</p>	<p>-Yes, it involved a lot of thought          -Yes, it helped me get a good idea of what I wanted to show in my portrait          -Getting to experiment with a series of different mediums through our warm up activities helped me to decide how to approach my self portrait project</p>
<p>2) How does specific instruction, such as written directions visual examples, and classroom rules, help you with your classwork?</p>	<p>-I believe it keeps me on track so when I am done one thing I know what to do next          -Specific instruction and visual examples really help guide me with my work          -Written directions and visual examples give me a clear guideline of what to do</p>
<p>3) What are educational strategies you experienced throughout this research that benefited you in a positive way? How could you use these techniques in other classes?</p>	<p>-When you're frustrated walk away from the piece and come back to it later          -I learned not to focus too much on one part of the picture. I could use this when doing homework by switching subjects when I get frustrated.          -I believe that because we are able to decide some things for ourselves we were able to concentrate more          -I found out a lot about myself</p>
<p>4) Do you feel as though you have learned any techniques and/ or practices that help you maintain focus and relax? Please describe</p>	<p>-Art is a calming subject          -I was pretty relaxed from the start because from the start it was turning out well. It's more relaxing when you think your doing well          -Yes, I learned how to take it slowly and focus on one thing at a time instead of focusing on everything at once</p>

Final Survey Questions	Student Responses
<p>5) How has the art classroom environment helped you in completing your work and learning new material?</p>	<p>-The art classroom just calms my nerves in general. I feel better when I can do work that involves being creative.            -It isn't very stressful            -The art classroom environment helped me complete my work &amp; learn new material by how I could see what other people were doing; it gave me ideas &amp; styles</p>
<p>6) What are some procedures done in the art classroom that you wish could be implemented into your regular academic classes?</p>	<p>-I think more explanation should be incorporated, more quietly and perhaps more lightly. Being able to pick what I want also helps            -Being able to talk and walk around really helps you to connect with other students and if you have questions, they can explain in a better way sometimes            -I wish more teachers would let us use music when doing busy work</p>
<p>7) If these strategies do not exist in your regular classes or your own home life, how can you utilize the art practices you learned and experienced to help regulate your anxiety?</p>	<p>-I can use art to relieve stress and to express any built up emotions            -I can think about all the good things I like about myself and realize that there's no need to worry            -I separate myself to get away from anxiety. I found if I stop thinking and clear my mind it helps me focus and stay relaxed</p>

Table 2: Final Survey Questions and Responses from students revealing their experience, growth, engagement in art and how these situations allowed them to positively reduce anxiety by providing them a creative outlet in which students were able to communicate ideas, problem solve, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

## **Data Analysis**

I am almost finished with this study and can testify to a number of changes in student behavior, work ethic and overall individual growth. The anxiety appears to have lessened greatly and I feel that this is primarily due to the decrease in teacher facilitated instruction and increase of student directed learning. My participants have become more independent with the decision making process, execution and construction of their work, and have created a strong sense of community with each other's support. By stepping back as the teacher and becoming more of the observer, I have witnessed students helping each other with drawings, mixing colors, brainstorming ideas and suggesting ways upon which they can improve. My instructional strategies proved to be helpful and were adapted in certain cases to adhere to the selected individual's learning methods. Some participants were able to proceed with verbal direction, while others like Effie, Patrinea, and Arianna needed me to talk slowly and precisely while giving directions, as well as provide visual demonstration. Students also grasped a firm understanding of the projects objectives and pursued those strategic avenues in their Self Portrait. Maura and Karina used two of the watercolor techniques in the backgrounds of their Self Portraits, while GiMarie and Patrinea worked with the chalk pastels because they said they loved being able to mix colors like the landscape project. Many of the students combined different mediums together on the Self Portraits; this allowed them to emphasize different aspects of their face or other featured content by utilizing a multitude of tools and techniques.

One of the more prominent aspects of this research that was noticeable as I was collecting data was the increased focus of students who previously had trouble

concentrating and staying on task. All of my male participants in the past have struggled with staying engaged in the material; for three of the five males, I began to see changes during the pastel project. I took note of their ability to listen to instruction and use technology in aiding them decipher shades and hues. The boys, along with many of the female participants, also took it upon themselves to practice color mixtures on practice paper. This helped to reduce anxiety because they could make as many mistakes as they wanted on the practice paper until they were comfortable working on the final copy. I also noted a serious change in focus during the transition between the landscape project and the Self Portrait. During the landscape project, students seemed more content working with chalk pastels, even though they complained about the mess. This was mainly due to the fact that they had more control over blending colors together, they were able to match hues better than they did using colored pencil, and had a choice in deciding what picture they wanted to draw. Looking at the Self Portraits, I see such a change in the thinking process and execution of the students' capabilities. Majority of the students have combined multiple media together, challenging themselves to experiment with different styles and techniques. This is a strong statement of independence, evidence of resourcefulness, creativity, engagement and growth because most of these participants typically took the easy way out of completing assignments in the past. Javier, one of my male participants, has had trouble staying focused and completing work on time for the last two years. When he started out drawing his initial sketch of his self portrait, he asked if he could use a couple different styles of painting because his idea required them; I immediately said yes because I could see how engaged he was in the material. He told

me that he saw a poster hanging on my wall and wanted to mimic his style off one of the images. Today, he showed me his progress and I was amazed at the amount of detail he included throughout the entire piece. Javier told me he brought home his project over the weekend because he needed extra time to work; this was a huge milestone for him. Not only did Javier push himself with his artistic ability, but he also gained control of the situation and took the initiative to make decisions that positively benefited him in the long run.

### **Comments from Final Critique**

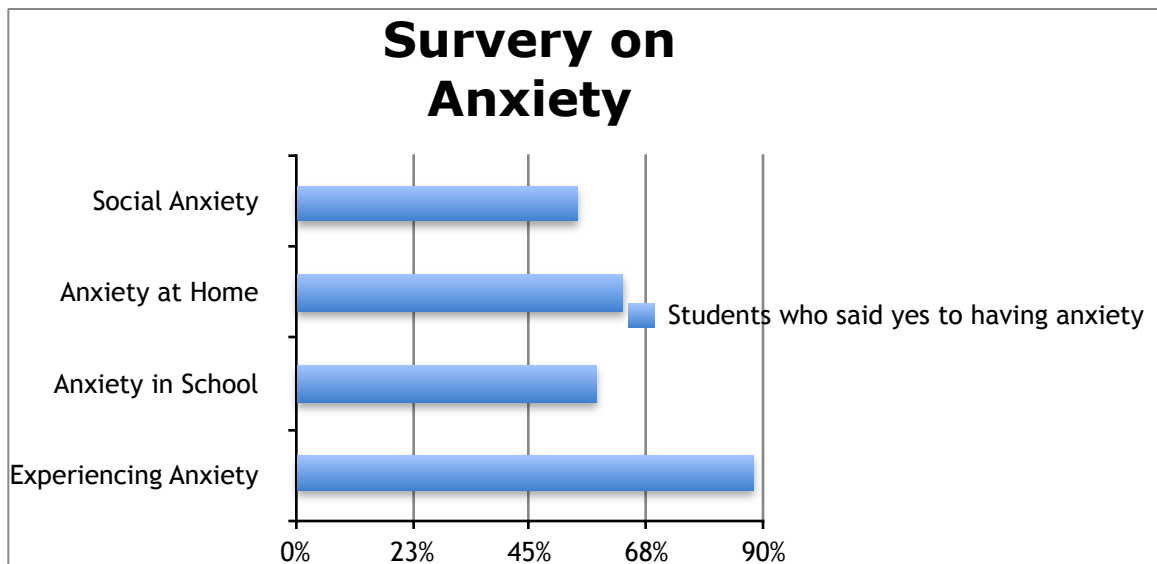
These remarks were transcribed from an audio recording of the final critique. Teacher instructed students to walk around and observe their classmates' work. I went around the room and asked one student at a time to hold up their work, asked the individual to give a brief explanation of the portrait if they were comfortable, and called upon volunteers to offer feedback. This is a common assessment I in order to observe if students' fully understand the project, learned the proper techniques, and engaged in the material. Because constructive criticism is given from both the teacher and peers, students are able to hear a multitude of perspectives that will help to identify problematic areas, as well as set forth future goals in developing and executing new creative projects. Individual analysis of his or her work is also important because this provides the audience with the necessary background information required to understand what the artist's intentions were.

Teacher Response	Class Responses	Individual's Comments
<p>-Walk around the room and observe classmates' work</p> <p>-Take mental notes of what you are seeing</p> <p>-Take time to analyze how your classmates constructed their portraits and what they are trying to visually communicate</p> <p>-Asked class objectives of project</p> <p>-How do we feel about his/her project?</p> <p>-Why do you like this project?</p> <p>-What do you think about this?</p> <p>-Why did you do your colors that way?</p> <p>-Why does the blue in her hair pop out so much?</p>	<p>-Purpose of project: express yourself, show value</p> <p>-I like how he showed his good days and bad days</p> <p>-I really like the shading her hair because she included a lot of details</p> <p>-I love the movement in the face with the colors</p> <p>-I really like it, everything pops with the darker colors and it looks just like her</p> <p>-I like the expression she chose because it shows how glamorous she is in a way</p> <p>-I think she could have done more with the background because there's a lot of empty space but her shading is really good and looks realistic</p> <p>-I really love this picture I have to say it's probably one of my favorites because it has everything from my childhood</p> <p>-I love how she brought her culture into it because I know that's really important to her</p>	<p>V: Its pretty simple, I play hockey and the purple and yellow represent my good moods and bad moods</p> <p>T: its a 1930s 1940s style, my Grandmom passed away last summer and this reminded me of a picture of her on the beach, I put a rose in my hair because her name was rose. I also put a city in the background because me and my dad love to go to different places and I put blush and lipstick on me because I'm a girly girl</p> <p>J: I put a lot of colors in skin because I feel like I can be a very outgoing person at times</p> <p>A: That's me, I did wrestling as the background because I love wrestling but I'm sad in the picture because I couldn't wrestle this year</p> <p>M: the 'oh heyy' is a saying from the play and I made so many friends in the play this year it was the best thing I've ever done it showed me who I really was.</p> <p>J: I don't know if you can see it but my lips form a heart because I believe you should always speak from love and my hair has blue in it because I love the water</p>

Table 3: Comments from teacher, individual students and class on final critique for Self Portrait.

## Findings

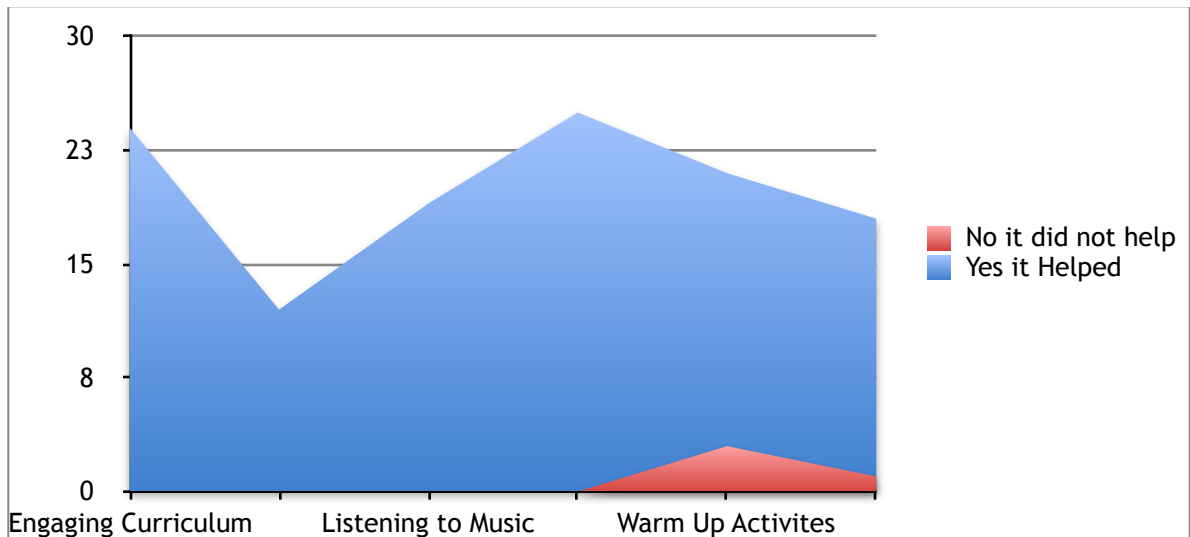
In the beginning of this study, students filled out a survey. The survey asked questions regarding how the participant's felt in certain situations, such as at home, at school, and socially with their peers. Below is a graph of the students' responses to those questions. Out of the 25 participants, 88% reported the experienced anxiety, 58% experience anxiety in school, 63% claimed to have anxiety at home and 54% stated they had anxiety in socialization. This graph is crucial in understanding how my students felt at the beginning of the study so that I could focus my attention on specific areas in order to reduce their anxiety and stress.



4e) Graph chart showing students' responses to the first surgery on anxiety.

The research study was conducive in enabling my participants to not only gain control of themselves and their emotions, which did help in reducing stress and anxiety, but also allowed me to learn from my students and adapt my teaching methods.

Significant changes were found in certain students, like Antonio, Mack, GiMarie and Javier, when they evolved from being a teacher dependent learner to an independent student learner. My classroom also metamorphosed into more of a student based learning environment where peers supported and provided guidance for each other, rather than a teacher directed space. The numerous strategies I used proved to be helpful because students were able to make decisions for themselves, relax while completing tasks, and discover creative and innovative ways of communicating ideas. The curriculum, although restrictive in certain aspects of the objectives, gave the participants flexibility, choice and voice, and caused them to engage in deeper levels of thinking and problem solving.



4f) Graph Chart indicates the amount of students who did or did not benefit from study areas.



In the beginning of the study, my data consisted mostly of my observations of how the students and the class engaged with the curriculum, instruction and surrounding environment. I took careful note of what types of triggers affected anxiety prone students. Some individuals immediately shut down when confronted with new material because they were overwhelmed with starting a new project. Others struggled with problem solving, specifically when they had to find certain color mixtures in order to match color hues and/ or values. They became vocal about their frustrations, would sit at their desks physically upset, and/or distracted themselves from the project. A few students out of the group struggled with interacting with their surroundings. Individuals, like Jordan, Vinny, and Patrinea, experienced social anxiety and had a difficult time engaging in group activities. I witnessed on many occasions as these students sat quietly by themselves, spoke with low, monotone voices, and physically seemed uncomfortable being close to other students.

After a while, I was able to read students' behaviors and adapt my teaching instruction and environment to help alleviate their struggles. For certain individuals, that meant I had to slow down my verbal responses and explanations so they could process what I was advising them to do. For others, I placed them next to students who I knew would provide more comfort and understanding of their resistance to social interaction. I utilized strategies, such as writing down directions, providing checklists, and conducting demonstrations, so that students could continue to practice their skills and build up their confidence by finding their own solutions that worked best for them. Shortly thereafter, these practices became routine for students causing them to problem solve independently,

thus helping them to build up their confidence and to stay engaged in the curriculum by maintaining focus.

During the last full week of the study, I had a moment of enlightenment when I realized that these students no longer needed my constant guidance. Everyone, although they worked at different speeds, were engaged in their material. More often than not, I watched as students came across questions but were quickly counseled by their neighboring peers on how or what to do in order to fix their problematic areas. I sat back and listened just to confirm that their directions were correct when assisting others, but I rarely disagreed with any of their recommendations. It was exciting to witness student growth, particularly when they were working on the Self Portraits because they utilized multiple skills and techniques in each of their pieces.

Although there are still some students who need further mentoring in reducing their anxiety/ stress, evidence of improvement and coping skills were seen within every participant on some level. Most of the anxiety prone students benefited greatly from of the study, while others took away only one or two aspects. As a whole, the entire group received positive advantages back from the study and showed an increased understanding of the projects' objectives, techniques and skill sets.

## **Chapter 4: Summary & Conclusions**

Through the data collection & findings, I have deduced that successful progress was made in using art to alleviate anxiety, which helped to build self-control and focus in my research participants. In the beginning of this study, my attention was centered on the 15 individuals in the study group who showed signs of abnormal stress and/or anxiety, even though I was actively researching with all 25 participants. Although I saw tremendous changes for the 15 students who did exhibit higher levels of stress and anxiety, I determined through the students' artwork, their project assessments, surveys and critiques that the other 10 participants also exhibited exceptional growth during this study.

The entire group engaged more in the presentation and understanding of the selected curriculum, whereas before this study, only students with a strong sense of creativity and ability to problem solve independently were 100% successful in fully understanding the projects' objectives. Technology also played a crucial role in the development of self confidence, management of the students' abilities to find solutions, and developing their skills in understanding specific art content. They were able to use specific digital programs to help them utilize artistic methods, such as color mixing and designing project ideas, with more control and allowed them to move at one's own pace. This allotted for less stress from students who typically struggled with independently problem solving and more self-control on how and when and to what degree the assignments were completed. As self confidence started to grow, research participants

became increasingly engaged in the material and were able to make decision on their own.

The relationship between students personally, with other members of the study group, and with me also changed. I watched as students like GiMarie, who struggled with making friends, had high stress, low self confidence and was often extremely critical of her artistic abilities, and Patrinea, who had typically been introverted in the art classroom, only engaging with few individuals because of her social anxiety, and was also critical of her own work, evolve into confident and socially comfortable young individuals who later in the research began assisting other students who struggled. This was a tremendous break through in my research because at this point I realized that my classroom was changing from a teacher-student instructional environment to a student-student based learning environment.

Through my planned activities in which the study group was placed into situations where they worked with random pairing, students who were typically quiet and lacked social engagement in the art classroom began to open up and break down personal barriers. There were a few individuals who struggled more than others and were not entirely comfortable with socialization on a daily basis. Jordan battled with being socially comfortable in the art classroom; however, towards the end of the research I did notice a small improvement in her class participation during critiques, as well as a slight increase in conversation with the other students around her table.

I personally noticed a change in the way I was communicating to my students and how they were responding to me. Before the start of this study, I was teaching students

and providing instruction as if they were on the same learning level. I knew that certain students like Effie and Javier, required more attention and prompting from me in order to complete their work. Throughout the research, I began utilizing different strategies that I customized and adapted depending upon the individual's need. Queen, who has symptoms of ADD is easily distracted, which often results in her rushing through appointed projects. She responded extremely well when we wrote checklists of what she needed to work on. This technique forced her to reign in her focus by having her go back over her work and correcting areas that needed improvement. Queen, through this process, recognized when she was hastily working and controlled this by taking breaks or working on a side project. Effie, who has trouble maintaining focus, has a high absentee rate and struggles socially, reacted better when I spoke to her slowly while explaining certain techniques. She also improved her understanding of assignments by watching me complete visual demonstrations. This helped her mentally and physically process what she needed to do and how to go about completing the specific task(s). These strategies were instrumental in boosting her self confidence and gave Effie the ability to control her emotions because she now had a stable foundation of tools and problem solving tactics.

The initial curriculum in the research was designed to establish a foundation of skill sets to learn basic color theory. I purposely planned the material content in hopes that over the course of the study, students would mature in their cognitive abilities because each new project required more responsibility from them. By doing this, I witnessed students prosper by taking on more abstract thinking, creatively problem solving, and stronger control of their behaviors, which lead to an increased focus and

independent work ethic. It was exciting to observe the build up of confidence and execution of student ideas. Students like Javier and Antonio, who before the study were constantly off task, lacked focus and struggled with working independently, metamorphosed into diligent and self-sufficient young artists. Both created meaningful Self Portraits for the final project that reflected a deep level of thought process, full understanding of materials and techniques, along with an appreciation of self worth and capabilities. This was the first time either child truly exhibited strong interest in a project and required little to no assistance from the teacher.

The results of the study proved to be beneficial for students who suffer with anxiety or high stress situations. Many changes were found in the individual's ability to process information, communicate verbally and artistically, problem solve, manage their emotions and in their ingenuity to complete assignments. Students who did not struggle with anxiety demonstrated positive growth as well. All but one student completed the final project on time and executed his or her artwork with their best efforts. Although not every study participant advanced to a comparable maturation level or transformed their learning at the same pace, everyone in the group made an effective change. The final assessment and survey verified my questions as to whether or not the skills, tools and techniques learned in my classroom during this research analysis could be used in other academic learning environments and/or outside of a school setting. Some of the common themes found in the students' feedback were questioning how they could apply these strategies, such as utilizing technology in order to help them work out problematic areas, writing out checklists, and working with others in order to gain insight on

ambiguous material. They acknowledged that having control over the decision-making where they had choice and a voice in how the tasks were carried out boosted their self-assurance. This gave students will power, confidence and stability, which supplied the study group with the support they required in order to grow. After analyzing all of my data, it was clear that my research was helping to reduce anxiety and high stress by presenting these individuals with a multitude of options.

### **Action Plan**

I plan to continue my action research by finding new methods for reducing anxiety in my classroom. This experience has been greatly beneficial to the study participants, but it has more importantly assisted me by exposing my weaknesses, like learning new ways of communication to help students learn best and taking time to observe what is actually happening in the classroom. This forced me to find solutions in order to help my students grow. I feel that by having students engage in material that requires them to think abstractly, there has been an increase in student participation and tremendous improvement on the quality of work that they produced. I will continue to prepare warm up exercises when introducing a new project, as well as distribute assessments at the end of projects because both tactics reinforced the main objectives in the curriculum.

One of the prominent themes from my students' responses to the concluding survey was the notion of how art helped them to release emotions and relax. In

continuing with my action plan, I am in the process of beginning work with an art therapist and her clients. Through a collaboration of her therapeutic practices and my educational background, I hope to develop an environment that bridges together art education with art therapy so that individuals can immerse themselves not only in learning new material and working with abstract ways of thinking, but enabling themselves to understand their emotions on a broader spectrum.



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