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Authors

Koehler, Kylie

Vu, Phu

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Effects of Choice-Based Art Education in the K-12 Art Classroom

Kylie Koehler

Kenesaw Public Schools, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

Email: klkoehler08@gmail.com

Phu Vu

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Kearney, Nebraska, USA

Email: vuph@unk.edu

Abstract

This action research project examined the effectiveness of choice-based learning in a K-12 art classroom in a small rural school with approximately 300 students, transitioning from kindergarten to advanced placement high school art. The research involved implementing a choice-based learning intervention and gathering data through surveys, pictures, and observations. Results from 127 students indicated that high school students preferred choosing from two project guidelines and enjoyed the freedom to choose their medium, leading to deeper creative thinking and engagement. Elementary students favored step-by-step guidance but also enjoyed creating their own versions of projects, increasing overall engagement. The study suggests that choice-based art education enhances creativity and engagement across all K-12 levels. However, further research is needed to assess long-term impacts and applicability in other school districts.

Keywords: choice-based learning, art education, art teaching

Introduction

Teaching is a unique and rewarding profession. As an art educator, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to help students realize their potential every day. I have the privilege of fostering creativity through hands-on projects and encouraging self-expression through artwork. Creating learning experiences and helping students grow and learn are my greatest passions. I firmly believe that by setting high expectations and actively engaging students, I can help them unlock a world of opportunities through art creation. I work as a K-12 art educator in a small rural school with approximately 300 students. This means that I interact with a wide range of learners daily, from elementary students to junior high and high school students. I encounter diverse groups of learners, including advanced, at-level, and below-level learners, which makes it challenging to determine the most effective strategies and approaches. Transitioning from teaching kindergarten art to junior high-level art, and then to advanced placement high school art, can sometimes make finding the right technique difficult. Despite the differences in learning styles and abilities across each class and grade level, I am eager to experiment with various strategies to determine what works best for my overall classroom dynamic.

I am particularly interested in exploring the impact of choice-based education on my students and myself. Choice-based education, a concept that emerged in the 1970s, according to Douglas and Jaquith (2018), aims to provide students with a broad range of options regarding the materials and techniques they use in their artwork. In this system, students are encouraged to explore their own ideas and inspirations while working in dedicated centers within the art room. Teachers act as supportive collaborators, engaging in meaningful conversations with students as fellow artists. Parker et al. (2017) noted that providing genuine options in the classroom, such as choice of subjects, tasks, collaborators, and more, has the potential to increase student involvement and motivation, empower them to leverage their competencies, and meet their unique learning needs. While creativity and exploration of different art materials may be exciting for some, others may find it challenging. I consider this when developing the curriculum and planning projects for the year. I am interested in investigating the benefits of balancing choice and structure when creating projects in my classrooms. Currently, I provide a general guideline for my high school classes, where students must create something within a given topic, but can choose the overall theme. For elementary students, we primarily follow guided demonstrations and step-by-step instructions, which allows them to observe the skills and techniques needed to advance their art-making abilities.

I am curious about the potential outcomes of choice-based art. Will it increase student engagement, provide more flexibility, and promote higher levels of creative thinking? I am always looking for innovative ways to teach my students to enhance the overall learning environment and the quality of projects. I aim to assess the integration of choice-based learning to determine the optimal number of choices to offer and discover when this becomes overwhelming for student art creation. Kane (2018) noted that too many choices could be paralyzing, while limiting choices can push work to its creative edge. It is crucial to help students understand how to choose and work within constraints by starting with two to three constraints. Although I am pleased with the quality of projects produced in my art room, I am eager to test new approaches to ensure students gain the most from the choices available. Setting high expectations in my classroom encourages students to think creatively. I communicate the quality of art I expect from each student. While I understand that not everyone excels in art, setting expectations allows students to create on their own terms and best represent themselves as

individuals. I am interested in determining whether encouraging students to make choices will enhance their overall creativity and confidence in art-making.

Research Method

The focus of this project was on examining the effectiveness of choice-based learning in art classrooms through an action research project. According to Bennett et al. (2022), action research is an investigative method where teachers evaluate and improve their teaching methods to address specific classroom issues, and it emphasizes focusing on a particular problem, allowing teachers to take on the role of researchers and develop actions based on their findings. Walker and Vu (2023) observed that many schools across the US have recently adopted the practice of teacher action research as a means of giving educators the autonomy to oversee their own professional development, while learning from their peers' successes and challenges in the classroom. This approach has been found to enhance individual student learning outcomes, as well as school or district-wide improvements.

Within the scope of this action research project to examine the effectiveness of choice-based learning in the art classroom, I implemented a choice-based learning intervention (described in the next section) and gathered data in multiple ways including surveys, pictures, and observations to better understand the topic. Asking students for feedback through surveys provided written open responses. A visual approach involved taking pictures along the way to show progress. Lastly, I observed my students to see where the success was coming from and how they were adapting to the changes being made. By utilizing multiple data sources, I could gain a better answer to how well choice-based education can influence my students, and therefore determine the best option for my students to have a successful experience in my K-12 art classroom.

Intervention Description

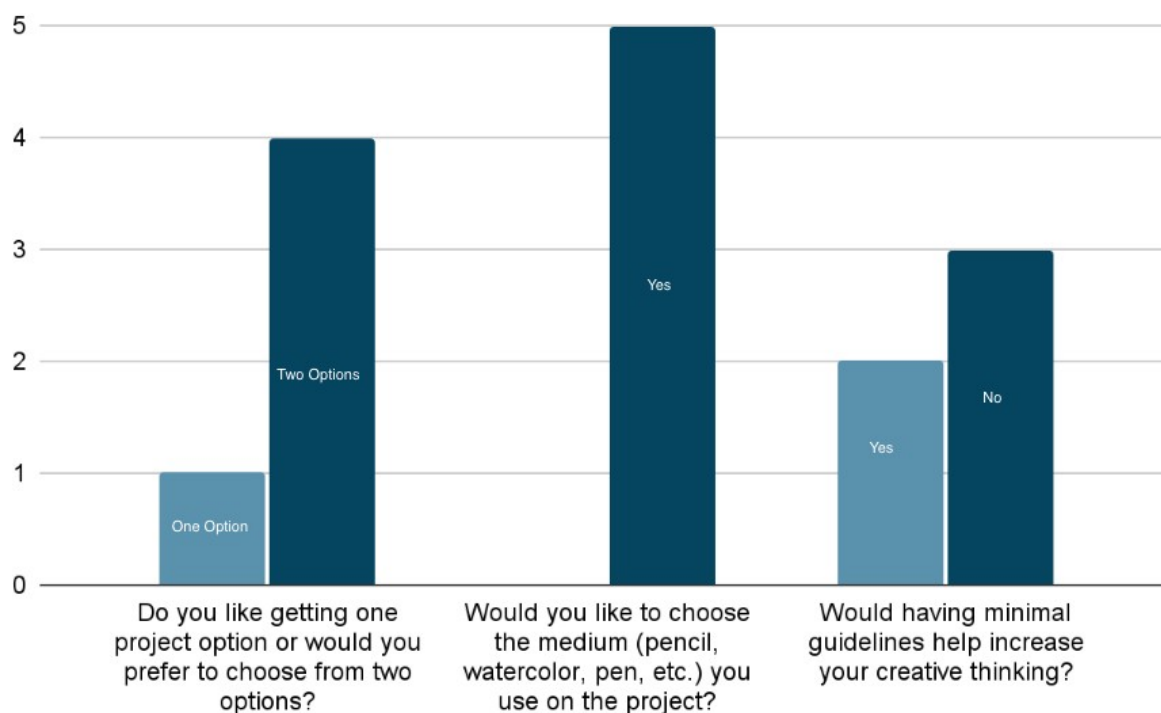
I started the choice-based learning intervention by providing two options for my five female AP high school students to choose from. I introduced two projects, Ordinary Behaviors and Perspective, and ultimately allowed the students to choose which one they wanted to create. The Ordinary Behaviors project focused on celebrating everyday life. The students were to spotlight something that occurs every day and turn it into a work of art. Doing so, it helped elevate and celebrate that behavior specific to their life. The Perspective topic focused on creating a sense of space. They had to find an interesting perspective to focus on. It could range from a portrait to an architectural form, as long as it showed space through perspective. I presented both options and had them ultimately choose which one they wanted to create. On the elementary side, instead of doing guided instruction for every project, I allowed more freedom when it came to creating projects. During this intervention, elementary classes focused on the element of art Form and learning about Global Art. Their projects were centered on creating a 3D project or artwork inspired by different countries. I went over how I would do it and then allowed them to create their own projects, based on the specific guidelines. This new strategy would help provide feedback on whether choice-based art could increase engagement and creativity. This was implemented throughout all grade levels to see a wide range of results over a five-week period.

The first thing I did during this process was to ask students in the art room to fill out the survey. I had 122 elementary students ranging from kindergarten to 6th Grade and five Advanced Placement (regular) High School students complete surveys. I made sure each and every student completed a survey to allow for a more complete analysis of any results. If a student was absent

when I first introduced the survey, I made sure to get them caught up when they came back. I wanted to see feedback from my elementary students as well as my advanced high school students. My ability to see what works best for the two groups of students would be affected by age differences and various levels of art-making ability. I wanted to figure out if choice-based art is appropriate for my classroom at all K-12 levels or if it worked better at different grade levels. I took all 127 responses from my students and put them in visual graphs to see common themes and understand the overall results.

Figure 1

Survey #1 High School AP Students' Art Results



Since I had a large group of elementary students from kindergarten to 6th grade level, I decided to create three different graphs to present the results of this group's survey.

Figure 2

Survey #2 Elementary Students' Art Results 1

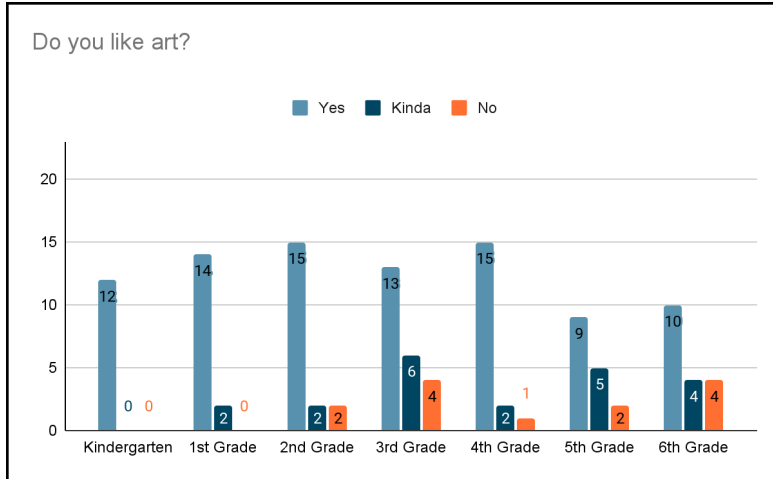


Figure 3
Survey #2 Elementary Students' Art Results 2

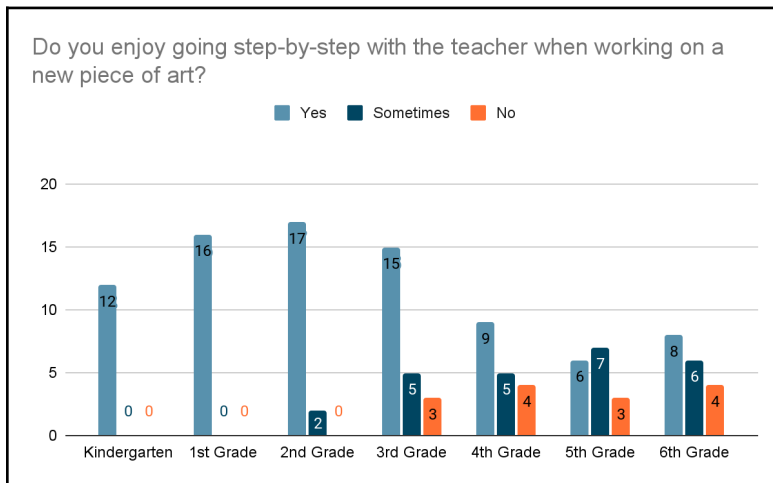
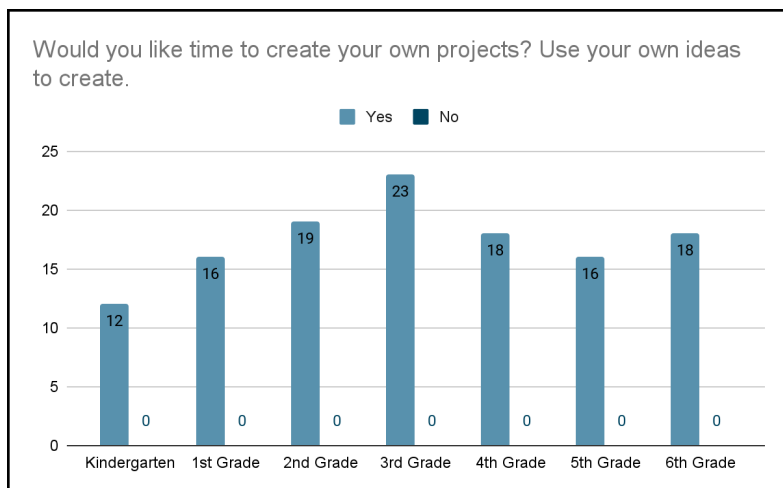


Figure 4
Survey #2 Elementary Students' Art Results 3



After completing the surveys, I implemented new strategies within my teaching such as offering and giving more choices to students. Those choices ranged from getting to pick the medium they used, to designing the overall project to fit under the guided topic, or even to having free range and allowing their creativity flow. I observed the students while working on the projects and received feedback to help get a better analysis of this implementation. I took pictures of the final pieces of art to provide comparisons and help interpret the results. Seeing all the pictures of the projects completed under the overall topic guideline would show the level of creativity offered when working on a new project.



Findings

Collected data, including the survey results, observations throughout the classroom, and the final pictures from my five high school students who are currently taking Advanced Placement Art, showed that they enjoyed having freedom, but like to know the expectations and guidelines for the final piece. One of the students stated, *“I like being able to choose what I make and what materials to use, but having a clear understanding of what is expected for the final piece makes it easier for me to make sure I meet the requirements, especially when grading is involved.”* I implemented two project guidelines for them to choose from. The two topics they could pick from were Ordinary Behaviors or Perspective. The broad topic allowed them to think creatively, but still gave them the overall guideline/expectation information. The engagement levels on this project were spectacular. The students loved thinking outside of the box to create their pieces and getting to work on something unique to them. The top picture shows examples from their guided project. As you can see in the picture, the projects vary due to the concept they chose, the medium they worked with, and the size of the piece. Based on the results from the survey and the observations taken while working on this project, choice-based art among my high school students allowed a deeper level of creative thinking and more engagement in the classroom.

The results received from the elementary side showed creative thinking projects are a must. All of the students answered yes when it comes to having time to create their own projects. Due to all students wanting more time, I implemented a creative corner in my room. Once students finished their big project, they could make something in the creative corner. Options included working with playdoh, legos, free draw paper, puzzles, string art, rubber band boards, etc. This was a huge hit with all of my classes, and I saw a mass increase in the overall engagement of the students. Making their own choices and having the freedom to create was what they enjoyed. Going step-by-step was favored by the younger classes when compared to the older classes. This makes sense because as students get older, they have more experience in the art room and a deeper understanding of the creative process. The two bottom pictures posted above, are examples of projects completed with my 4th and 6th-grade classes. I gave them the broad topic of creating a Clay Jellyfish (6th Grade) and Spanish Tile (4th Grade). Both classes had a lot of fun getting to experiment to create a unique piece specific to them. No two projects looked the same because they were given the opportunity to explore their own ideas. Based on the feedback and observations, the younger classes liked to create projects with guided demonstrations whereas the older classes seemed to enjoy more freedom.

Discussion

Incorporating choice-based art education into my classroom was an improvement and had an impact. According to survey data, students desired more choices in the art room. That was supported by the results from the questions answered by all K-12 students. In elementary students, one question made it very evident, "Would you like time to create your own projects? Use your own ideas to create." Every student in kindergarten through 6th grade answered Yes. That piece of evidence made it very clear that I needed to give them the opportunity to use creative thinking on their own more often. On the high school side, they were clear on wanting to choose an overall project guideline from two different options as well as getting to choose their medium to work with. The feedback I received was that more than two options were too many and one was not enough. The students liked having to choose from two options. High school

students have a better understanding of the elements of art and the principles of design, so they are better equipped to create from scratch rather than being guided. When comparing projects that the students created, not a single one of them turned out the same, that was clear in the picture examples. They were all made differently making them unique to each individual student. I loved being able to see all the different ideas that represented their personal self-expression. The students were able to stick with the simple guideline, but they were given more freedom in the overall final look of the project. The student feedback and my observations showed the impact and positive aspects of incorporating this method within my classroom.

The results informed me that I need to establish a balance with my students when creating projects. The older they get and the more experienced with art making, they tend to prefer to have more say in the way their project looks. As a teacher, I need to make sure I am giving them the opportunity and freedom to do so. The results from the younger students showed that they like going step-by-step. The results showed some variation between the younger and older elementary classes. I just need to keep these results in mind when planning out future projects and making sure that students are truly able to show their own personal choices in the final piece they create. Seeing the implementation actually taking place, without a doubt exceeded my expectations. I knew choice-based art was becoming more popular, but I had no idea it would make such a positive impact in my classroom. The students loved the creative corner I added and being able to create their own version of the project. It really did increase the overall engagement among students and I could tell more students, especially the older ones, enjoyed coming to art more.

Even though the results did show an impact, questions still do come to mind. I have only implemented this new method in my classroom for a month. That being said, are students intrigued and interested because it is something new and exciting or are they actually enjoying choices? I would love to see if giving them choices still keeps things exciting within my classroom months from now. In addition, I wonder if other school districts would get the same results if they implemented this in their art rooms. It would be interesting to see the impacts it has on students from other districts that are similar in size to us as well as those who are bigger. The results could possibly vary depending on the implementation as well as the teaching strategies used. It would be very intriguing to see other school districts use this teaching method within their art room to gain more evidence when it comes to choice-based art education in rural Nebraska.

Further research is necessary to see other ideas art teachers are using as well as what worked for them and what did not. Going forward, I will most definitely incorporate choices within projects, whether in the medium they use, the guideline they choose, or even just the colors they pick. By implementing more choices, students will be able to use creative thinking even more than they already do in my class. Self-expression is important for students to experience, and I would like to make sure they are getting the opportunity to do so with every project they create.

Conclusion

The results of this action research project provide important insights for art teachers looking to enhance the creativity and engagement of students. By providing students with a choice in their projects and setting high expectations, teachers can empower students to express their creativity and develop their confidence in art making. These findings have several important implications for practice. Firstly, providing students with choices boosts overall creativity and

confidence when it comes to art making: The project showed that providing students with a choice in their art projects led to a deeper level of creative thinking and more engagement in the classroom, especially with high school students. Allowing students to choose the topic of their project and the materials they use to create their art piece is a great way to empower them and increase their sense of ownership in their work. This could also help them to develop confidence in expressing their creativity. Secondly, setting high expectations can encourage students to think outside the box: The project showed that setting high expectations for the quality of art can encourage students to think outside of the box and to create art that best represents themselves as an individual. This could be accomplished by providing students with guidelines and expectations for the final piece while still allowing them to have the freedom to choose their topic and materials. Thirdly, choice-based learning can be implemented at all K-12 levels: The project showed that choice-based learning can be appropriate for all K-12 levels of art education. The implementation of choice-based learning could be adjusted to fit the specific age group and level of art ability. Finally, providing time for creative thinking projects is crucial: This project showed that providing time for independent creative thinking projects is crucial for the engagement of elementary students. The implementation of a creative corner in the classroom, where students can create their own projects using various materials, was a huge hit with all classes and led to a mass increase in overall engagement.

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