ART FOR ALL

BY MK MONLEY

As a former special educator and current art teacher, I have come to view choice-based art as an equalizing force in the artistic development of all students. Choice-based art levels the playing field because it allows everyone to explore media, tools, skills and to practice at their own pace, in their own way, giving a unique voice to each child’s art.

FOR YEARS, BEFORE CHANGING TO CHOICE-BASED ART, I taught a lesson about still life and art history. During the time of year that sunflowers are in bloom, students learned about Vincent van Gogh. I brought bouquets of sunflowers into class and showed students images of van Gogh’s work. I did a demonstration of drawing from life while looking at one of the bouquets and asked students to observe, draw, outline, and paint as I did.

For some students, this was an enjoyable task, but for others it was onerous. The students with fine motor difficulties, visual perceptual problems or other disabilities did their best to take on the task, but their chances of making their art look like their peers’ work were poor. For these students, the effort it took to make their art look somewhat like the example was enormous. Compared to their peers who don’t struggle with the motor and visual perceptual skills, these students were left with the feeling of “I’m not good at art.” The truth is, they may not have been good at making art that looked like someone else’s, but they were most likely very good at making art that was their own if given the chance.

CHOICE-BASED ART ALLOWS STUDENTS TO FOLLOW THEIR INTERESTS and experiment with the media along with everyone else. It allows for a wide range of artistic approaches and outcomes. The student who before was a behavior problem when following along with my van Gogh lesson now flourishes because he can choose to use his hands to build three dimensionally, instead of to cause trouble.

He is a 3-D thinker and is able to construct elaborate sculptures. He is looked to by peers as an expert in the field and is someone to turn to when they try to construct their own sculptures. Now students choose who they work with based upon their mutual interests. One student commented that he was most proud of his team because of “the work we put into it. It’s perfect, just the way we wanted.”

This team was inclusive of students with and without special needs. Students collaborate, problem-solve, use their imagination, and come to art eager to implement their own ideas. They aren’t afraid to experiment and learn from each other in the process.

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THE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST AT SCHOOL MARVELS at the gains students make in fine motor skills because they have the opportunity to work with a variety of materials that help to build on these skills. It doesn’t matter what your abilities are if you are given the opportunity and materials necessary to take risks and try new things.

Recently, I received this email from a paraprofessional: “I just wanted to send you a note thanking you for creating a space where all kids can harness their creativity and thrive. I look forward to art every week because I know it’s a time that [my student] will be focused and happy and engaged. It’s one of the only times in the week when I get to sit back, give him his space, and let him be a kindergartner interacting with his friends. I’m grateful for this time, and I know he is too.

“I was telling his teacher this morning that I remember art in elementary school as very directed and formulaic—everyone doing the same project and doing it the same way. The art classes you have set up are such a breath of fresh air. So thank you so much for all that you do.

“What is important about choice-based art for students of any ability level is that it allows for student-directed artistic expression. I’m a firm believer that students who are interested in what they are creating will be students who are invested in their own learning.

“A student of mine with Down syndrome did a series of drawings with many colorful, cartoon-like people. When I asked her to tell me about her drawing she said: “What I like about them is the bodies. They have belly buttons, hats, and clothes with shirts, arms and earrings. They are happy because they are beautiful, shiny, amazing, and brilliant.”

By allowing students the opportunity to express their own ideas, we see what they are capable of doing.

MK Monley is an elementary art teacher in Vermont. She is a proponent of TAB and choice-based art. She and is the co-coordinator of A River of Light Lantern Parade and believes in the power of connecting the community to the school through the arts.