ONE of the great things about being a teacher is that you never have to stop learning new things! I attend as many educational classes, lectures and conferences as I can each year. In these presentations, I’ve met and learned from renowned experts in economics, psychology, education and design. Each new encounter brings to light the common theme that a choice-based approach is the best way for students to engage in learning. This applies to all areas of education, not just the arts!

So I wanted to summarize this message for you after hearing five of these inspirational speakers, and reading their equally inspiring books. These are all easy reads that speak to the heart of student-centered learning. I recommend you check them out!

TIM BROWN AND DAVID KELLY FROM IDEO AND STANFORD UNIVERSITY’S DSCHOOL are on a personal and professional mission to train people from all walks of life in the creative mindset. Their book, Creative Confidence breaks the process into active as well as emotional components. People can be taught to explore choices, but must have the optimism and confidence to believe their ideas are valuable. Learning must provide opportunities for people to quickly build prototypes of their ideas in order to better understand and analyze them. And storytelling is essential, because great ideas are no good unless you can share them and make them real.

ECONOMIST AND AUTHOR DANIEL PINK spoke of the short shelf life of a “good student,” as opposed to the value of being a good LEARNER, when I saw him speak about motivation and his book Drive. I also recently read another book of his, A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future, and found his case studies and framework built around the six senses correlate closely with Choice-Based learning and teaching. Chapters titled: Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning guide us to envision our lives through a model of creativity!

SIR KEN ROBINSON IS A RENOWNED ADVOCATE for change in our school systems. He’s written several books about creativity in education. In his books, presentations and Ted Talks, Robinson speaks of how our education system is structured in exact opposition to how humans learn best. Institutionalized education values conformity over diversity, compliance over creativity, and linear progress over organic growth. Here again is a reminder that the art room is a haven for authentic learning, when compared to much of the rest of a child’s day in school. EVERY student has special needs, says Sir Ken, and we art teachers get to meet them! I can’t wait to dig into his most recent book, Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That’s Transforming Education.

DR. STUART BROWN IS MEDICAL DOCTOR, PSYCHIATRIST, CLINICAL RESEARCHER, and founder of the National Institute for Play. (There is such a place!) He has spent his long career advocating for more play in every facet of our human lives. Play is embedded in the natural habits of humans, and is not purposeless or frivolous. Dr. Brown also shared cautionary tales about the effects of lack of play in the lives of children, citing research that demonstrated an absence of empathy, increase in depression and interpersonal conflict leading to joylessness, workaholism and addiction in adults deprived of play in their youth. This is a real national health issue!

TONY WAGNER’S BOOK, CREATING INNOVATORS, DISCUSSES THREE TENETS FOR SUCCESS: play, passion, and purpose. He also defines the essential qualities of innovators as curiosity, collaboration, integrative thinking and a bias towards action and experimentation. Does that sound like any classroom you know? According to Tony Wagner, we are educating the Innovation Generation and they are motivated differently than generations before and lack the leadership role models they need to reach the dream they aspire to. We can be those mentors through our art classrooms!

THE ART ROOM HAS LONG BEEN A HAVEN FOR THE OUTLERS. It is a bastion for independence, confidence, problem solving, collaboration, and flexibility amidst a flood of pressure for conformity and false achievement. Art teachers, have the process, attitude and expertise for guiding the children of today to become the leaders of tomorrow.

We can now back up our instincts and intuition with a growing body of research, from a broad range of schools, businesses and institutions, that validates programs, such as Choice-Based Art Education, that value and support student-directed learning.

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