MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN are highly social and are going through massive emotional, social and physical changes. Generating their own ideas can be difficult because their minds are on their friends, family, social media, gaming, sports and after school activities. Knowing this about our students, how can we help them become better artists, generate ideas and become productive in the art studio?

Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB), delivered via choice-based art, is a way in to the hearts and minds of these young art makers. TAB is student directed and is based on working toward effective studio habits.

COLLABORATIVE WORK. Working together on projects and ideas can be empowering for young middle schoolers. Those who are having difficulty coming up with ideas can help each other and take off from other students’ ideas. Artists do not live in a vacuum and neither should we expect students to be original all the time.

Work leads to work and collaboration can lead to new ideas and perspectives. Sometimes students will start with a group and then take off on their own with a related idea. Kids at this age are most influenced by their peers so giving them the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other is very effective.

EXPERIMENTATION. Allowing time for experiments, failures and exploration of media can lead to ideas. I know that art teachers may fear the use of splatter painting, finger painting, glitter, and a reliance on non-objective work, but if students haven’t had a chance to experiment and play with media they will need time to get it out of their system.

Play leads to ideas and a desire to develop skills, as long as students are allowed to select their media of choice. Students want to be “good” at something. Why not allow students a chance to experiment and then dig deeper?

DIGGING DEEP FOR IDEAS. There will be those who really can’t find a focus. Allowing students to piggy back on others’ ideas, looking at how professional artists get ideas, letting students work on artistic projects from core subjects, guiding them to elevate a simple idea, allowing craft work, and listening to them talk about their struggle, can help.

Sometimes when a student has been unproductive for a period of time, having some starting-off ideas can help. High school TAB teacher Clyde Gaw uses the square to inspire the uninspired, Middle School teacher Nan Hathaway sets up “Art Traps” to spark interest, and other teachers have inspiration corners in their rooms.

TIME FOR REFLECTION. Making art might be a low priority especially when students go from one disconnected class to another throughout their day. They have demands coming at them from parents, teachers, coaches and especially peers. In the middle of a project students might need to spend time considering their options and where to go next.

I know I certainly do. They might need permission to put away a project and do something less demanding for a while and get a little perspective.

When students finish a piece, it is important to reflect back on what they learned, although they don’t always want to. Sometimes the teacher needs to help them with this.

In order to keep my focus on my students’ progress, I always try to remember that “Artists learn the skills they need in order to make the art they want to make” (Nan Hathaway). This thought helps me remember that my students are working on their skills even though they might not realize it and that the skills they learn are highly individualized.

Personal, one-on-one conversations about skills, techniques, ideas and media choice can be powerful. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve asked my students what they learned through the making of their piece and they can’t articulate it so they will say, “I didn’t learn anything new.”

Go through their process with them and help them by pointing out the skills they showed in their projects and the habits they are developing. In this way, you can help “frame” the learning you have observed and make it visible for your students.

Collaboration, experimentation, idea generation and reflection are just a few of the ways we can work more effectively with our students in a TAB art studio. When we keep some of these points in mind we can help direct our students to thrive in the studio and understand that they are the artist and their ideas matter.

Carol Crosby taught visual arts at the elementary and middle level for 20 years in Northern Vermont, prior to her recent retirement. She wrote her master’s thesis on Teaching for Artistic Behavior, implemented a TAB program in 2002, and has been an advocate of choice-based art ever since. An artist in nontraditional sculpture and painting, Carol exhibits regularly in Vermont.