A Qualitative Case Study of the Aesthetic Development of First Grade Students through a Constructivist Lens

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A Qualitative Case Study of the Aesthetic Development of First Grade Students through a Constructivist Lens

by

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Masters of Science in Education

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Approved by:       Date:

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Abstract

Aesthetics is sometimes overlooked in the elementary art curriculum. I wanted my students to gain the skills needed to have more mature aesthetic responses to artwork. I chose to embark on this research to expand first grade students’ aesthetic abilities and to learn how to best teach aesthetics to young children.

As the participants’ teacher, I acted as both a participant and an observer in this study. To triangulate the data, I administered two student questionnaires, one at the beginning of the study and another at the end; I observed and recorded field notes of the students as they worked independently and in small groups; and I tape-recorded class discussions throughout this study.

Through data analysis I found out about first grade ability, their initial shallow responses to works of art, the need for a more knowledgeable other, how to engage students in aesthetics, and how first grade students understand value and judgment in art. Through these five findings, I came to realize that aesthetic education needs to begin early, needs to occur over a longer span of time, and needs to focus more on the context of works of art. I learned the importance of prompting and empowering students. In addition, I learned about the student’s ability to apply what they learned about aesthetics to their own artwork. Aesthetic education is necessary and first grade students are capable of having beginning level conversations on aesthetics.
Chapter I: Background of the Study

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what young students believe justifies an artwork as being “good”? After teaching art for almost four years, I had never stopped to think about this question, nor had I ever asked my students this question. After this realization, I began having short discussions with each of my classes, asking them what they felt made an artwork good. When posing this question to young students in primary grades, particularly first grade students, I noticed some disappointing responses. My students stated that an artwork is not good unless it is neat, shows that the artist took their time on the artwork, and colored using a lot of bright “beautiful” colors.

After recording the responses of my first grade students for a few days I began to worry whether students were acquiring assumptions about art that could be detrimental to their aesthetic development. The possibility that my students may be acquiring these assumptions posed an interesting research question to explore. The assumptions they seem to have are that an artwork should always be neat and colorful and that unless you take your time and work carefully that it will not be considered a “good” work of art to the viewer. Another assumption that arose was that an artwork should look realistic with lots of details. This was less of a shock, as many of my students at this age often see artwork as only representational and have less of an appreciation for non-representational or abstract art. The lack of appreciation presents a problem, because art is a very broad term that includes a variety of styles,
media, and techniques. Students need to value a broader range of art in order to truly appreciate what art can offer.

Teaching younger students who are so concerned with realism and neatness makes the task of teaching artworks that are not typically seen as beautiful a challenge. This concern with realism also seems to make students less accepting of their own artwork and the artwork of each other. My students have a difficult time understanding that there is a time and place for observational drawing and that realism is not always necessary. It breaks my heart to hear a student tell another student something negative about their artwork, such as, “That doesn’t look like a tree,” or “Yours looks weird.” I wonder whether elementary students who learn a better appreciation of all forms of visual arts, could better accept one another’s differences in ability.

The teaching of aesthetics plays a vital role in art curriculum and needs to begin at an early age, in order to develop student abilities as capable of higher-level aesthetic responses to artwork (Danko-McGhee, 2006). According to Acer (2007), aesthetic judgment develops slowly and gradually, and therefore should begin at a very early age. Parsons (1994) stressed the importance of integrating aesthetics into every art lesson taught. Parsons is concerned with the abilities one must possess for a mature aesthetic response and the steps one needs to take to reach this higher level of aesthetic response. He believes that unless one can give a sophisticated response to a work of art that one cannot truly understand aesthetics; and without learning aesthetics one cannot fully understand art. Parsons explains aesthetic development as progressive stages through which a person passes. These stages are not based on age,
but based on a person’s experience with art (Parsons, 1994). With this in mind, Parsons validates the importance of beginning to teach aesthetics to students at a very early age.

Parsons is not the only person who constructed aesthetic stages of development based on experience rather than age. Abigail Housen’s (2001) research is crucial to understanding aesthetic development. In *Eye of the Beholder: Research, Theory and Practice*, she discusses a set of aesthetic development stages which are also directly related to how much time a person spends experiencing artwork. Her research is focused on beginning viewers of art. She studied beginning viewer’s responses to art, in order to teach people to reach a higher-level of aesthetic understanding. She stresses the importance of reaching one step at a time, using the comparison of learning to crawl before we walk or run (Housen, 2001).

Parsons and Housen are two well-known names in the field of aesthetic education. Both have categorized aesthetic understanding into stages based on experience with artwork and not the age of the viewer. My first grade students’ responses were very typical of what Parsons (1994) and Housen (2001) believe a beginning viewer’s aesthetic judgment would be. I will be referencing further the work and concepts of Parsons and Housen in Chapter II. As an art teacher I want even young students to develop a more mature aesthetic understanding of art, moving through the stages of aesthetic development as Parsons and Housen have suggested. Understanding aesthetic development involves understanding cognitive development. Lev Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development states that a person’s cognitive ability is not age related (McLeod, 2007). This same concept of cognitive ability, not
always being related to a person’s age, can be found in the work of Parsons and Housen in regards to aesthetic ability. Aesthetic ability being the way one responds to a work of art. I explain Vygotsky’s theory in the following section.

In many undergraduate education courses, college students are introduced to the work of Lev Vygotsky and his theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky’s theory is based on two important principles, one being the “More Knowledgeable Other” and the other being the “Zone of Proximal Development” (McLeod, 2007). These principles go hand in hand and can be used to propose the idea that it is possible for young students to learn and understand higher-level aesthetics.

According to Vygotsky, the More Knowledgeable Other is a person who knows more about a subject or concept and acts as a tutor to a student with less understanding of that concept (McLeod, 2007). In an art classroom there are many of these tutors to assist in a student’s aesthetic development. The most obvious tutor would be the art teacher. However, Parsons and Housen believe a person’s aesthetic development is based on their experience with art, therefore a student’s peer with more experience, could be the More Knowledgeable Other. Vygotsky’s second principle, the Zone of Proximal Development, refers to the difference in what a child can learn and accomplish on their own compared to what they can achieve when they receive guidance from a more knowledgeable other (McLeod, 2007). Vygotsky believed we can learn more when we have guidance from someone with more experience and that with this guidance we can learn more than others would believe we are developmentally capable. This theory makes possible the idea of achieving higher aesthetic development at a young age and will be explored in my research.
An art room full of students who can appreciate a wide range of art would be an ideal setting in which to teach. Hearing a first grade student of mine explain why they believe an artwork is “good” based on evidence and aesthetic qualities of an artwork would be a truly rewarding experience. The desire to have this experience with young students is what has driven me to embark on this qualitative study that investigates the aesthetic development of first grade students.

**Statement of the Problem**

After teaching for almost four years I have never really understood nor focused on how to incorporate aesthetics into my curriculum. Aesthetic education is vital to helping students have a wider more complete understanding and appreciation of art, while teaching creative and constructive thinking (Acer, 2007). The problem is that many people, including many educators, believe that young students are not capable of making a mature aesthetic response to a work of art (Schiller, 1995). Others, however, believe that young students are quite capable of discussing artwork and giving an aesthetic response (Danko-Mcghee, 2006). The assumption that young students are not capable could lead to less focus on aesthetic understanding at the elementary level, therefore unknowingly teaching and reinforcing in students the wrong assumptions about art. These assumptions are what lead students to believing that an artwork is only “good” if it is realistic, neat, uses bright colors and shows that the artist spent a lot of time on the artwork. These may be things we want our students to do for certain art projects, but I do not want to instill in them the belief that those are the only qualities we use to judge a work of art. I want my first grade students to have more mature aesthetic responses to and a better understanding of
artwork in order to find more ways to justify their understanding of the nature of art, the quality of art, and the value of art that constitutes their judgment of a work of art. In my review of literature, I will be addressing the problem of the lack of aesthetic education in art curriculums with early elementary students. Part of the reason I have not focused on aesthetics in my curriculum is my lack of knowledge of theories and strategies to teach aesthetics to young children. My research addresses the problem of how to make those curricular changes at the first grade level in order to help students achieve a deeper aesthetic understanding.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain insights into the aesthetic understanding and responses of first grade students in order to improve my teaching. I have looked for insights into teaching aesthetics to first grade students by employing new teaching strategies. Another purpose of this study is to look for differences in first grade student’s responses to works of art, before and after my curricular changes. By conducting this research I hoped to learn what changes I may need to make to my current curriculum, including teaching strategies, and what I can learn about teaching aesthetics to young children. In this research aesthetic understanding will be generally defined as the ability to explain and defend ones judgment of a work of art and other puzzles and problems in art.
Research Questions

Central Question:

- What insights might I gain from employing strategies and approaches for teaching aesthetics to first grade students in my classes?

Sub Questions:

- What variations might be found in first grade student’s aesthetic responses to artworks?
- What changes in content and instructional strategies need to occur in order to achieve increased levels of aesthetic development in first grade students?
- What can I learn about teaching aesthetics to young children from researching first grade student’s aesthetic responses?

Significance of the Study

Parsons believes that in order to say that an art curriculum is complete it must teach aesthetics (1994). This study will help to understand first grade students and how they respond and discuss works of art, in order to learn how to best teach aesthetics to this age level. My research may provide art educators with strategies to teach aesthetics and ways to promote aesthetic development at an early age using a constructivist theoretical framework, which I explain in Chapter II. Acquiring teaching strategies and approaches will help educators to be more knowledgeable and comfortable in teaching aesthetics and to understand the importance of including aesthetics in early childhood art curriculum. My research attempts to address these benefits for educators.
Vocabulary

I intend to use these particular terms in my research based on the following definitions.

- Aesthetics: “A body of knowledge and inquiry about the nature of art” (Seabolt, 2001, p.45). Louis Lankford (1992) defined aesthetics as “a group of concepts for understanding the nature of art. Aesthetic concepts address virtually all aspects of art, from process to product to response” (Lankford, 1992, p.4). Lankford also categorizes aesthetics into six topics. “These six topics are: the concept of art, values in art, metacriticism, the artworld, artistic expression, and aesthetic experience” (Lankford, 1992).

- Aesthetic Development: According to Housen (2001), aesthetic development is the growth one can see in somebody’s process of talking about works of art. As a person develops her/his aesthetic ability the steps they take to understand and discuss a work of art change.

- Mature Aesthetic Response: Parsons (1994) notes, that a mature aesthetic response is a response that interprets artwork meaningfully. This type of response includes “being able to interpret artworks meaningfully and to respond to them relevantly, to place them in context, to understand their kinds, to value some for relevant reasons, to discuss them in a critical way” (Parsons, 1994, p.35). During my research I hoped to work towards this type of response from my first grade students.
Limitations of study

The limitations of a study are factors that may impact the findings, and limit them to this specific study (Merriam, 2009). This study is limited by: a) the small sample size consisting of only one grade level of 25 first grade students; b) one cite in one elementary school; c) the focus on only one suburban district in Western New York; and d) the limited amount of time for the study.

Conclusion

Questioning my students about their opinions on what makes an artwork good has been eye-opening for me. In the past I focused too little instruction on aesthetic education, which may be hindering my student’s aesthetic development. In my research through questioning and observing my first grade students’ responses to the introduction of new curriculum that includes aesthetics, I seek insights into their aesthetic understanding. The results can help art teachers find ways to integrate lessons and units of study on aesthetics that can promote further aesthetic development for young children. In Chapter II, I will provide a foundation for my research by discussing research on cognitive development, stages of aesthetic development involving responses to artwork, and finally teaching strategies for aesthetic education.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review provides an overview of the discipline of aesthetics and its’ relationship to the field of art education. This review of literature will cover research on aesthetic development, children’s aesthetic responses, and aesthetic education. The review will discuss both teaching strategies for teaching aesthetics and how one can better include aesthetics into an art education curriculum for young children. The literature covered in this review will provide a foundation for my research in aesthetics as it relates to first grade art education. First I will discuss the discipline of aesthetics in art education.

An Introduction to the Discipline of Aesthetics in Art Education

“Aesthetics consists of a complex of contested concepts and issues that intrigue and beguile as they resist easy resolution” (Hamblen, 1985, p. 24). Hamblen pointed out the complexity of aesthetics. As mentioned earlier, Louis Lankford (1992) defined aesthetics as “a group of concepts for understanding the nature of art” (p.4). These “aesthetic concepts address virtually all aspects of art, from process to product to response” (Lankford, 1992, p. 4). Lankford also categorized aesthetics into six topics, the concept of art, value, metacriticism, the artworld, artistic expression, and aesthetic experience (Lankford, 1992). Karen Heid (2005), a professor of art education, discussed the development of a focus on aesthetics from the branch of philosophy that focused on the study of beauty and art to focusing on the learning processes involved in making and responding to art. Similar to Lankford, art professor, Betty Oliver Seabolt (2001) defined aesthetics as “a body of
knowledge and inquiry about the nature of art” (p. 45). One of the most prominent questions in the field of aesthetics is, “What is art?” (Lankford, 1992). This question encompasses all of Lankford’s six topics of aesthetics (Lankford, 1992) and reveals, as stated in the beginning of this section, the complexity of aesthetics, which Hamblen (1995) described.

In aesthetic theory, Immanuel Kant’s work remains one of the most significant, yet controversial contributions (Lee, 1931). Kant’s theory stated, “Aesthetic is what pleases without a concept and aesthetic is what pleases without desire” (Lee, 1931, p. 538), meaning the aesthetic beauty of a thing has nothing to do with an idea or the desire behind it. In 1931, Lee critiqued Kant’s theory and discussed the many paradoxes and confusion found in his work. One of the paradoxes that Lee discussed is the idea of beauty. Kant’s theory states that beauty is a judgment, but that it is not an intellectual judgment (Lee, 1931). However, according to Kant’s theory, the intellectual aspect of the judgment is removed at first and then brought back into importance “by the back door” (Lee, 1931, p. 539). Lee means that one might not begin with an intellectual judgment, basing the initial judgment on a feeling or experience, but intellect will become important for justifying the judgment including evidence to back up ones’ opinion. “Beauty is subjective to Kant, and yet he shows that in the explanation of the experience it must be treated as if it were objective” (Lee, 1931, p. 546). Kant is saying that our initial idea of what is beautiful is a subjective idea or personal opinion, but in trying to explain why one feels something is beautiful, a person must do so in an objective way using facts to support ones’ opinion. So one must use that acquired knowledge to provide that
evidence. Lee (1931) proposes a solution to solve the paradoxes and confusions of Kant’s aesthetic theory by approaching aesthetics from the standpoint of value. Lee (1931) states, “Value has a relational status, emerging from a relation between subject and object, therefore it seems to partake of some subjective conditions and some objective conditions. No confusions or paradoxes need arise from this situation if it is clearly realized” (p. 547). Lee’s solution to the confusion created by Kant’s theory is clear and accessible for defining and using aesthetics in education. Focusing on value in aesthetics, beyond seeing aesthetics from Kant’s modernist lens of beauty seems to be a more concrete way to teach. Teaching students to view aesthetics based on the idea of value and everything that encompasses the idea of value in art gives educators a clear direction in regards to teaching aesthetics. For instance, teaching students to defend or justify their opinions using facts and evidence is an objective way of teaching aesthetics.

To bring these ideas of Kant and Lee into a more contemporary context, teaching aesthetics from the standpoint of value would require understanding of aesthetic preference, art appreciation, and critical judgment of artwork as discussed below. “An observer enters into a direct personal encounter with a work of art to seek its meaning, resulting in an interpretation and possibly an evaluation and judgment of the work” (Seabolt, 2001, p. 45). Southern Polytechnic State University Arts professor, Betty Seabolt (2001) states, “Art appreciation, both affective and cognitive, engages emotions and feelings about art while knowing and understanding develop” (p. 45). Seabolt (2001) discusses what it takes for a student to enjoy and understand art, which contributes to art appreciation. To achieve both of these,
students need a well-rounded art education, which includes art history, aesthetics, art
criticism, and art making. Teaching aesthetics will give students a wider art
vocabulary and foundation for understanding art (Seabolt, 2001).

When one hears the terms aesthetic preference and critical judgment one often
assumes these concepts are based on what we find beautiful. However, following
Lee’s (1931) approach to aesthetics based on value, beauty is only one way to
determine aesthetic value. Beauty is however, a prominent aesthetic value, but
should not be the only value considered (Battin, 1989). If beauty were the only value
used to judge a work of art, how could one justify an “ugly” work of art as having any
value? (Battin, 1989) The wide variety of subject matter, materials, technique, and
themes in artwork makes it impossible to value a work of art on beauty alone. In
Chapter 6 of the text, *Puzzles About Art: An Aesthetic Casebook* (1989), the authors
pose the question:

Is aesthetic appreciation a private affair, to be savored in silence rather than
openly discussed? Some people equate appreciating art with enjoying ice
cream or perfume; they insist that aesthetic judgment should not be debated,
because valuing art is as much a matter of personal preference as the taste of
chocolate or the scent of sandalwood (p. 180).

The authors raise an excellent question to discuss in regard to aesthetic preference
and teaching aesthetics. Students may often have this type of attitude towards their
preference of works of art and aesthetic education could address this attitude through
dialogue and debate in the classroom. In my research I worked to promote dialogue
and debate in my classroom and teach my students to defend their aesthetic preferences.

One’s preference and personal opinions of works of art are prominent in teaching aesthetics in the classroom and the discussions on these varying opinions of the value of art are encouraged (Battin, 1989). “Art is experienced in public contexts that encourage critical discussion. Such discussion often occurs when people need to reach an agreement about the value of an aesthetic object” (Battin, 1989, p. 180). Within these discussions one will notice the differences in aesthetic responses and student’s reasons for valuing works of art. In order to complete research on young children’s aesthetic responses and understanding one must learn these differences in abilities and understand theories of aesthetic development, to which I now turn.

**Aesthetic Development Theories**

One leading name in research on the differing ability of viewers’ aesthetic responses that I mentioned earlier is Abigail Housen. Housen is the founder and co-director of Visual Understanding in Education, a non-profit educational research organization, and is also a consultant and evaluator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Housen, 2001). Housen has been a leading name in the field of aesthetic development for well over 30 years (Housen, 2001). According to Housen, aesthetic development is the growth one can see in somebody’s process of talking about works of art (2001). Her work revolves around what she names, the beginning viewer. A beginning viewer is someone who is new to the process of viewing and discussing works of art (Housen, 2001). Housen believes strongly that an educator teaching aesthetics must begin by looking at the needs of a beginning viewer and tailor the
lessons to this viewer (Housen, 2001). She has come up with five different stages of viewers with regard to their aesthetic development and how each viewer makes sense of art. Stage I in Housen’s research consists of accountive viewers. “Accountive viewers are storytellers. Using their senses and personal associations, they make concrete observations about the work of art that are woven into a narrative” (Housen, 2001, p. 8). Stage II includes constructive viewers. “Constructive viewers set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools, their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional world” (Housen, 2001, p. 8).

Housen’s classifying viewers make up Stage III. “Classifying viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance” (Housen, 2001, p. 9). Stage IV is the interpretive viewer. “Interpretive viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art” (Housen, 2001, p. 9). They look for meaning in a work of art in order to make a connection with the art work. Stage V is the re-creative viewer. “Re-Creative viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now willingly suspend disbelief” (Housen, 2001, p. 10). Although there are five stages Housen stated that most non-college viewers are rarely above a stage II (Housen, 2001). Housen (2001) discusses how valuable each stage is and the importance of progression through each stage. To quote Housen (2001), “The higher stages of expert viewing can only be arrived at by passing through these necessary initial states, just as crawling naturally proceeds walking, which comes before running” (Housen, 2001, p. 13). Housen’s theory of aesthetic development states that
this development will occur through active experience with works of art and it happens slowly over time, taking years to fully develop (Housen, 2001).

As mentioned briefly in Chapter I, another leading name in the field of aesthetic development is Parsons (1994). Parsons developed his own stages of aesthetic development. Parsons’ (1994) research deals with answering the question, “What are the key abilities required for a mature aesthetic response, and what are the steps by which one acquires those abilities?” (p. 33). Parsons (1994) explains his view of aesthetic adulthood, or mature aesthetic response, as follows:

Aesthetic adulthood, we can say, means being able to respond appropriately to the art of one’s society. This includes being able to interpret artworks meaningfully and to respond to them relatively, to place them in context, to understand their kinds, to value some for relevant reasons, to discuss them in a critical way” (p. 35).

This aesthetic adulthood can be compared to Housen’s Stage V viewer’s abilities, who have had a lot of experience with viewing and discussing works of art and now “willingly suspend disbelief” (Housen, 2001, p.10) about a new work of art.

However, much of Housen’s writing states that most viewers are not above a Stage II unless they have attended college. Parsons’ theory differs in that he does not have a set age for achieving this aesthetic adulthood. He created stages of development and has found some ages common to these stages. Parsons stages are based on the ability to respond to a work of art. There are four stages of ability, stage one being the lowest and stage four being a mature aesthetic response. Parsons’ research in 1978 studied students’ responses to six different topics; their responses to each of these
topics are categorized from stage one to stage four. The six topics include semblance, or representation, subject matter, feeling, artist’s properties, color, and judgment. Parsons categorized the students’ responses, for example a student’s response for semblance put into stage three in relation to paintings would show:

The demand for realism is dropped, except in cases where the painting seems to require it. Otherwise various styles and degrees of abstraction and distortion are accepted. There is an increased awareness of, and tolerance for, a variety of kinds of paintings, intentions of the artist, and responses of the viewer (Parsons, 1978, p. 89).

Parsons worked to be able to categorize various types of responses to a work of art into a stage of aesthetic development, whereas Housen focused on categorizing a viewer’s ability in viewing and discussing works of art.

Many other researchers have re-created Parsons’ study of aesthetic development with different age levels to find out the accuracy of his stages. In 1980, Antonio D’Onofrio and Calvin F. Nodine, professors at Temple University conducted a study of the aesthetic responses to works of art of children ages three to sixteen. Their research categorized the children’s responses into four general levels of aesthetic response. Level One, having a median of age five and called aesthetic idiosyncracy, focused on personal experience. Level Two has a median age of eight and is concerned with conventional representations of people and objects, what Parsons called semblance. Level Three is aesthetic intentions, in which they believe an artist is solely concerned with being original and unique. This level was not given an age median. Level Four has an age median of eleven years old and is called
aesthetic perspective. This level used the content children found in the artwork to verify the significance of the artwork. Their study found that as students got older their aesthetic responses increased and became more justified. This study also supported Parsons’ idea that aesthetic development happens in sequential order, progressing through levels. However, reading their research misleads a reader into believing that Parsons’ stages of aesthetic development are also categorized into specific age level and they are not. D’Onofrio and Nodine’s (1980) levels do reflect Parson’s stages and the ages are similar to what Parsons found, but Parsons’ research did not give an exact age median for each stage. Parsons (1994) stated, “The content of our understanding of art as we grow up is dependant on the art that we encounter and the cultural context in which we encounter it” (p. 37). Therefore, hypothetically if a child at age eight had received effective aesthetic education throughout his life, that child could be capable of having a more mature aesthetic response to art. Schiller notes that, “Parsons is clear that his stages do not necessarily represent ages, although in general young children use the ideas of stages one and two in their responses to art” (1995).

Marjorie Schiller’s study in 1995 based on Parsons’ stages of aesthetic development clarifies the idea of age not being the sole factor in aesthetic development. The following is Parsons quoted in Schiller’s research (1995):

In short, what I describe here are not people, but sets of ideas, or stages. People are not stages, nor are stages labels for people. Rather, people use stages, one or more of them, to understand paintings. It might perhaps be
more accurate to say that we can use stages to understand people’s understanding of paintings (p. 28).

Schiller’s study was on pre-school children and their responses to works of art. Her study indicated that young children enjoy having discussions about art, and that pre-school children are capable of these types of conversations (Schiller, 1995). This determination by Schiller supports my intentions for research with first graders.

The aesthetic development theories of Housen and Parsons are not grounded in age; therefore their theory of aesthetic development is limited to cognitive development of a specific age. In the following section, I elaborate on Lev Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development, as it is also not based on age. Teaching aesthetics involves understanding how one develops aesthetically and to understand how one learns in relation to aesthetics, one must look to cognitive development theories as well.

**Cognitive Development Theory**

As I indicated in Chapter I, Lev Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development is based on two principles. One main principle is the More Knowledgeable Other and the other is the Zone of Proximal Development (McLeod, 2007). The principle of the More Knowledgeable Other is learning from a tutor who has more knowledge of a subject, whether it is a teacher or a peer (McLeod, 2007). This tutor can share their knowledge with the student to help them advance in their knowledge and cognitive ability (McLeod, 2007). The principle of the Zone of Proximal Development is the idea of the difference between what a child can learn independently and what a child can learn with guidance and encouragement from a more knowledgeable other
(McLeod, 2007). Vygotsky believed that working cooperatively with peers or a teacher in each student’s zone of proximal development would help children to develop higher mental functions (McLeod, 2007). His theory is based around guidance and instruction from a more knowledgeable other, to promote the cognitive development of students (McLeod, 2007).

Karein Heid, an associate professor and coordinator of art education, is a leading name in the field of art education and in an article written in 2008, she puts Vygotsky’s principle of the more knowledgeable other to use in the art classroom. Her article (2008) describes a case study done with eleven third graders and eleven kindergarteners in an art class. Creating a caring environment and teaching care was stressed in the classroom. One older student, in third grade, and one younger student, in Kindergarten were paired up to work together through an art unit. The study found that through this pairing the students worked together to learn and helped each other to have a richer more engaging learning experience (Heid, 2008).

When students are grouped, not by ages but by abilities without regard for age, then there is a real chance that those students might be able to work together in an atmosphere of care and thus reach new levels of aesthetic understanding (Heid, 2008, p. 87).

Having younger students in the class minimized competition in the classroom. Not having competition in the classroom made a more caring environment, which is stated as being the best type of environment for learning to occur (Heid, 2008). The pairing of students helped kindergarten students learn skills originally thought to be too advanced (Heid, 2008). Heid indicated that in this type of environment the
kindergarten students and third grade students could both learn the new concepts being taught (Heid, 2008). The article stressed the idea of embracing the social aspect of learning and using it to help increase the cognitive development of students at all age levels and abilities, which mirrors Vygotsky’s principle of the more knowledgeable other. Keeping Vygotsky’s theory in mind one could critique Housen’s (2001) statement about aesthetic development taking many years and developing very slowly. If one uses strategies such as Heid’s (2008) one might be able to help students learn more, and learn more quickly than one may have assumed.

My research investigates young children’s aesthetic responses as I employ teaching strategies that may help accelerate aesthetic development. To have a better understanding of the research it would be beneficial to know young children’s typical aesthetic responses from previous research and the importance of talking to children about art, to which I turn in the following section.

Young Children’s Typical Aesthetic Responses

Categorizing student’s responses to works of art is discussed throughout Housen and Parsons work, however student response to artwork made by their peers is not. Alan Cunningham conducted a study in 1997 that analyzed seven-year old-children’s responses to artwork done by other children. His study interviewed and observed 296 children from schools in three states and territories in Australia (Cunningham, 1997). The study found that responses fell into three phases, the first being the initial response phase (Cunningham, 1997). In this phase the students gave these responses independently without probing (Cunningham, 1997). Students offered responses such as “They are good,” “They are very pretty,” or, “I like that
one.” This phase is the child’s personal opinion. Phase two contained aspects of judgment and this phase did not occur without prompting questions such as, “Why do you like this work?” or “What do you like about this painting?” (Cunningham, 1997). The children’s responses were then based mainly on neatness, time, and effort they thought was spent (Cunningham, 1997). Along with personal preference such as, “They used my favorite color” (Cunningham, 1997). These responses were very typical with my students as well. The third phase, the emotional response did not happen without prompting (Cunningham, 1997). Their responses were then about how they felt, such as happy or sad; and they based these responses on personal experiences related to what was depicted in the picture, or, if non-representational, then on colors and lines (Cunningham, 1997). Cunningham’s study (1997) found that the students based their responses to an artwork’s quality or value mainly on the neatness of it. They sometimes asked about the artist to find out more information on which to base their opinions, but not always (Cunningham, 1997). Seven-year-old children were very critical about skill, noticed mistakes in others’ skill level, and thought artwork that looked like it took more time was of better quality (Cunningham, 1997). Most students preferred representational artworks (Cunningham, 1997). However, the non-representational artworks did gain interest from many students (Cunningham, 1997). Cunningham made clear the fact that, “if probing questions were not asked, aesthetic response ceased” (Cunningham, 1997, p. 42). My findings will show relationships to Cunningham’s study.

Marjorie Schiller’s study conducted in 1995 also deals with students’ aesthetic responses to artwork. She found the importance of giving the students vocabulary
and the necessary prompting to facilitate discussions about art, as Cunningham noticed. Schiller stressed how children’s responses to works of art are just as important as their production (Schiller, 1995). When children are responding to works of art, teachers must take a back seat and listen to the students’ responses (Schiller, 1995). Teachers can provide many opportunities for discussing works of art. Providing these opportunities is the first step in a successful aesthetic education (Schiller, 1995). The teaching strategies that are employed appear to be an important piece in understanding aesthetic development in children. Therefore, I will now turn to research on teaching strategies and curriculum for an aesthetic education.

**Aesthetic Education: Strategies and Curriculum**

“Aesthetic education can begin when a child is very young” (Heid, 2005, p. 52). But, how much aesthetic inquiry are young students capable of? Lankford (1992) states:

A general rule of thumb is to aim high rather than low in developmental-theory-based expectations; time and time again once-skeptical art teachers have reported their surprise at the interest and insight children have demonstrated during discussions about aesthetic issues (p. 34).

Art educator Katherina Danko-McGhee (2006) also wrote about the misconception of young children not being able to have rich aesthetic experiences. Danko-McGhee (2006) explains that young children are aesthetic experts and very capable of discussing artworks and having aesthetic moments. She also states that the best place to start when involving young children is to pick artworks that are interesting to them (Danko-McGhee, 2006). Other developmentally appropriate ways to engage young
children are play, conversations, and authenticating the experience (Danko-McGhee, 2006). Play involves connecting the child with the artwork by using tangible objects (Danko-McGhee, 2006). Conversation is focusing on rich language to describe an artwork and authenticating the experience is about engaging the students in a studio activity after learning about a work of art (Danko-McGhee, 2006). Danko-McGhee (2006) stresses the importance of discussing artwork with young children in a developmentally appropriate way in order to promote opportunities for exploration and discovery within an artwork. She quotes Lerner & Ciervo (2004), “Children learn best from interactive, hands-on experiences—touching, feeling, manipulating, and problem solving with people they care about” (p. 2). Having parents involved with their children’s experiences with art is essential to learning about art and aesthetics (Danko-McGhee, 2006). The types of experiences children have with works of art that focus around art appreciation will help to heighten their aesthetic awareness (Danko-McGhee, 2006).

Karen Heid’s (2005) writing supports these types of learning experiences as well. Heid states, “Cognition, aesthetic experience, and emotions are inextricably tied to our mind and body. How we reason, learn, and think have direct correlations to interpretations of our sense systems of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and vision” (Heid, 2005, p. 50). If the purpose of aesthetic education is to help our students aesthetic development, as Danko-McGhee (2006) states, then “for aesthetic development to occur, children need exposure to fine art and as they get older, they need opportunities to discuss art and beauty with thoughtful adults” (p. 21). “If adults engage young children in meaningful conversations about artwork, then young
children are intellectually capable of observing and reflecting upon their own artworks as well as adult artworks” (Danko-McGhee, 2006, p. 34). Danko-McGhee seems to be saying that engaging students in discussions of works of art is the first step in incorporating aesthetics in an art curriculum.

When incorporating aesthetics into an art curriculum and deciding what is needed, one might find it helpful to look at the work of Dilek Acer and Ezra Omeroolu (2007). Their research, done in Turkey, was a quantitative study on how aesthetic education affects the development of aesthetic judgments of six-year-old children. The study had three groups, the experimental group, the placebo group and the control group (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). The students were pre-tested on their aesthetic judgments based on The Taylor-Helmstadter Pair Comparison Scale of Aesthetic Judgment and then post-tested on the same scale after the experimental group received aesthetic education twice a week for ten weeks (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). The results of this quantitative study showed that the experiment group did not significantly increase in their aesthetic judgments after the aesthetic education lessons (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). Acer and Omeroolu (2007) discussed reasons for these results. They discussed limitations of the study including needing more time to develop the students’ aesthetic judgment, the age of the students, highly personal preferences, and the lack of an aesthetic environment at both school and home (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). They encouraged further research of aesthetic education programs and longer research studies (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). Their research also includes activities they used and recommended for teaching and promoting aesthetic development in children. Some examples of the recommended activities and teaching
strategies include inviting guest artists, visiting art galleries or museums, encouraging dialogue and questions about the process and products of art, getting to know the art and culture of other countries, along with many other ideas (Acer & Omeroolu, 2007). Reading about a study of aesthetic development, wherein the students did not advance in their aesthetic responses after an aesthetic education program offers insights on how to improve ones’ own aesthetic education programs, as to avoid these results. My research may provide more insights for program improvement.

In regards to aesthetic education programs, Parsons (1994) stated, “I believe aesthetics should be so integrated into art classes that students are hardly aware of the transition from one to another” (p. 44). With this idea in mind, I examined some aesthetic based art curriculum. Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS, is an aesthetic-based curriculum created by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine (Housen, 2001). This teaching method supports aesthetic development and is entirely based around asking students two questions, “What is going on here?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?” (Housen, 2001, p.15). When posing these questions, Housen stresses the importance of teaching students that there are no right or wrong answers to these two questions and that there can be multiple interpretations and responses to a work of art (Housen, 2001). VTS focuses on a lot of time on task with discussing artwork using those two questions. Students learn that those will always be the two questions they are asked when viewing a work of art (Housen, 2001). The questions are simple and straightforward, but give way to rich deep discussions about art (Housen, 2001).
In a Vermont newspaper article, journalist Jon Potter (2009) discusses Housen’s VTS program and how it has worked for schools and an art museum in his area. Potter (2009) states that VTS “puts a focus on the experience of looking at art, elicits a host of opinions about a piece of art and values everyone’s opinions equally” (p. 1). Potter quotes Susan Calabria, an education curator at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, about VTS: “It empowers kids. It validates their own experiences” (Potter, 2009, p.1). Calabria reports that teacher training is very important for implementing the VTS method. If done properly this teaching method could be used in different subject areas, as it teaches critical thinking skills (Potter, 2009). A fourth grade teacher explained that VTS taught her students to respect each other more because they learned to agree and disagree more gently about their opinions (Potter, 2009). VTS not only teaches critical thinking skills but also teaches social skills by learning how to value one another’s opinions (Potter, 2009). Housen and Yenawine’s VTS method works for many age and developmental levels, as the questions are basic but “still get the conversation going” (Potter, 2009, p. 2).

If one wants to follow the VTS method to teach aesthetics, the basic questions to ask have been uncovered, but it is also important to learn how to choose the appropriate images to ask the questions about. Philip Yenawine, Housen’s partner in creating VTS wrote an article on selecting the right images to show students. Yenawine (2003) explains that the first thing to consider when choosing artwork is accessibility, or making sure the viewers will recognize the subject of the artwork they are viewing. Next, is selecting images that will be captivating to the select audience (Yenawine, 2003). The artwork should also have an expressive content so
that it can be open to interpretation in many ways (Yenawine, 2003). If the artwork is narrative, it is more helpful because beginning viewers want to find stories in artwork whether there is actually a story or not (Yenawine, 2003). Diversity in time and culture is important, but Yenawine (2003) explains that the work of art should not be too unfamiliar to the viewer, so they can still understand and interpret it (Yenawine, 2003). Realism is usually well accepted by beginning viewers as well as some photorealism (Yenawine, 2003). Subjects begin with narrative and can expand to landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes, portraits and self-portraits (Yenawine, 2003). Sequencing the images from simple to more complicated images and having obvious links with themes is valuable as well (Yenawine, 2003). Yenawine (2003) also discusses things to avoid showing beginning viewers such as artworks that show sexuality, nudity, violence etc., as they may offend a beginning viewer. Abstractions are also discouraged because they do not always tell a story and beginning viewers will look for a story in every work of art (Yenawine, 2003). Appropriate image selection is a key part in a curriculum that will foster aesthetic development and should not be overlooked (Yenawine, 2003). When planning my research, the artwork I chose was carefully thought about and planned from ideas from several researchers. Previous research on aesthetics in art education is now being debated by art educators as the following excerpts indicate by Kevin Tavin and Paul Duncum.

**Current Views on the Discourse of Aesthetics in Art Education**

Kevin Tavin, professor at Ohio State University, is one of the names in this debate over aesthetics in the art education field. In Tavin’s 2007 article in *Art Education* magazine, he wrote about the “use and uselessness of the discourse of
aesthetics” (p. 40). Tavin believes that art educators use the discourse of aesthetics to cover a wide variety of topics such as choice, beauty, judgment, awareness, experience, feeling, quality and taste, and that art educators use aesthetics to fill any void they believe cannot be filled any other way (Tavin, 2007). Tavin (2007) explained that discussions on topics that connect to aesthetics such as “value, desire, or artistic practice” (p. 44) are examples of the usefulness of aesthetics in art education. However, Tavin also explains the uselessness of aesthetics and states that there is too much baggage and many outdated uses of the term aesthetics and he wants art education to “strike through” the word aesthetics in writing. Tavin explains, “We should strike it through, marking it as always already under a form of erasure, ensuring that it never speaks for itself” (p. 44). Meaning, art educators should be cautious in letting aesthetics cover the entire unknown and refrain from using this term. Tavin’s second argument for the uselessness of the discourse of aesthetics is his belief that the word aesthetics holds a “magical” quality to it in the field of art education (Tavin, 2009). Tavin relates art education’s desire to hold onto this discourse to the philosopher Lacan’s concept of objet a (Tavin, 2009). He believes this is why we have such a problem getting rid of the term or striking through it (Tavin, 2009). Objet a, is “an unconscious fantasy” (Tavin, 2009, p. 269). It is “an object in desire and not a material object, the objet a, is an open-ended and dynamic concept” (Tavin, 2009, p. 269). This fantasy he states is, “incapable of ever leading to complete satisfaction of desire” (p. 269). Tavin believes that by striking through the word aesthetics when written, art educators will strike through the fantasy surrounding the term aesthetics (Tavin, 2009).
Mary Carter argues against Tavin’s comparison of aesthetics to Lacan’s objet a in an article written in 2009. Her arguments revolve around two main points, one being that, objet a represents an abstract mental state, therefore not a good phrase to describe aesthetics (Carter, 2009). Second, there are phenomenological (lived) experiences of aesthetics, which would then, “provide a practical approach to aesthetics in art education” (Carter, 2009, p. 401). Carter (2009) argues that one can make real, aesthetic meaning and value in art, and it is not a fantasy or an unconscious abstract state of mind, as Tavin claims (Carter, 2009). Carter’s article (2009) used an example of a painting that showed violence in response to a historical event, this painting was held in high value when it was first created, yet years later in a different context and setting, that same painting was looked at as less valuable because of its’ violence (Carter, 2009). Carter’s example brings awareness to the idea that as a culture changes so do their notions of aesthetics and what they value as “good art.” Carter’s argument against Tavin’s case is that aesthetics is lived and because we live and experience aesthetics; it is important and we should not strike through the word or veer away from this discourse, but should instead embrace it (Carter, 2009).

Another name in the field of art education that believes the discourse of aesthetics should be embraced is an art educator, Paul Duncum (Duncum, 2007). Duncum agrees with some of Tavin’s arguments against aesthetics, and states, “I completely agree with Tavin that in conversing about aesthetics, we should do so self-consciously” (Duncum, 2007, p. 46). However, Duncum discusses how aesthetics play a very important role in our contemporary world (Duncum, 2007). Duncum
(2007) states, “It is ironic that there should be a call to abandon aesthetic discourse at the very time sensory surfaces have taken center stage as a social phenomenon” (p.50). Duncum (2007) explains the relationship of aesthetics to our current economy and everyday life and uses this as his biggest argument against Tavin’s suggestion to “strike through” the word aesthetics in art education (Duncum, 2007). He believes it would be a huge disadvantage to art education to not continue the use of this term, as so many other fields are continuing to use this term in abundance (Duncum, 2007).

As one can see, the term aesthetics and its use in art education is complex and controversial. As George Dickie (1997) states, “it is an untidy discipline” (Heid, 2005, p. 109). The mere definition of aesthetics can be debated and used in various ways in the field of art education.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this literature review was to give a brief overview of the field of aesthetics in regards to art education. This review of literature is needed as a foundation from which to conduct further research into first grade students’ aesthetic responses to works of art. The literature discussed explained some of the theory and history behind the field of aesthetics and went into depth about aesthetic development and its relationship to cognitive development. The work of Abigail Housen and Michael Parsons in regards to aesthetic development and aesthetic responses of students will be important as seminal works for my study that seek to explain aesthetic responses. Teaching strategies and methods that could be incorporated into an aesthetics curriculum were discussed and will be used further in my own research. Much of the research involving students’ aesthetic development needs further
investigation, especially since the discourse of aesthetics is being debated in the field of art education, which provides another justification for my research. My research will look to the aesthetic responses of first grade students to works of art, to help me to teach aesthetics. This study should help educators to gain further insights into how to teach aesthetics to young children. In Chapter III, I will discuss my plan for implementing my study.
Ch. III: Methodology and Procedures

Introduction

In this research I studied how certain interventions and changes to curriculum might improve my teaching of aesthetics to young elementary students and how first grade students respond aesthetically to works of art. In my art classroom, I have not focused enough of my curriculum and instruction on aesthetics and I believe young children can learn to have a deeper understanding of the visual arts by learning about aesthetics. I was eager to implement strategies and modify the content of my instruction to help develop the aesthetic responses of first grade students. I examined their responses and reflected on my teaching to learn what is needed to promote aesthetic understanding in young children. This chapter focuses on the plan for conducting this research.

Information Needed

In order to study the research questions stated previously, the following information was needed. Understanding the background to the field of aesthetics in regards to art education is very important to my study. As stated previously when discussing Lankford’s work, the field of aesthetics encompasses many areas of art and art education. Understanding this wide field is crucial to conducting research on aesthetics. My review of literature covered some aspects of aesthetics in art education. In Chapter II I discussed aesthetic development theories of Parsons (1994) and Housen (2001) to understand the foundation of aesthetic theory. My research uses their work, and focuses on first grade students, while their research covered many different ages.
Conducting this research also involves the understanding of Vygotsky’s cognitive development theory and also understanding constructivist theory. As mentioned in Chapter II, Vygotsky’s theory of learning from a more knowledgable other’ states that we learn best from a tutor who has more knowledge of the subject, this tutor can be a peer or a teacher (McLeod, 2007). Vygotsky’s theory believed that working cooperatively together could help to increase learning and promote cognitive development (McLeod, 2007). The constructivist theory in which my study is grounded, shares many of the foundations of Vygotsky’s theory of education. Constructivist learning theory considers each student as an individual with different capabilities who bring something to share into the learning experience (Lankford, 2002). Constructivist learning theory is about students learning from other students and building upon their previous knowledge and understanding of a subject (Lankford, 2002). This notion of learning from another student with more knowledge of a subject is what Vygotsky’s more knowledgeable other theory states. Constructivism, also aims to promote curiosity in students, encourage them to ask questions and to find the answers on their own or cooperatively (Lankford, 2002). My teaching will employ constructivist ideas to help first graders learn aesthetics. My research also uses a constructivist lens from which to build connections among the findings.

In Chapter II I also discussed the work of Cunningham (1997) and Schiller (1995). The work discussed focused on typical responses to artwork by young children. They both found that young children need a lot of prompting when
responding to a work of art. This research is important to look at to build my strategies for teaching aesthetics.

Aesthetic education teaching strategies and curriculum examples were also discussed in Chapter II, including the work of Danko-Mcghee, Yenawine and Housen. Danko-Mcghee (2006) gives many helpful tips in how to engage young children with artwork and creating connections between the artwork and the children. Yenawine and Housen created the VTS curriculum on teaching aesthetics. Understanding previous work in the expansive field of aesthetics is important in conducting further research into aesthetic education in primary grade students. I now turn to my method of inquiry.

**Method of Inquiry**

This study, as stated in its title, is a qualitative case study of a class of first grade students. “Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 39). More specifically Merriam (2009) explains that a case study is a research study focused on a bounded system, for example, one specific classroom of students, which is the case for my study. Within a case study, the researcher may need to use multiple methods of gathering data, including interviews, observations, document analysis and questionnaires (Marshall, 2006). I chose to use observation, audio taping teacher and student dialogue and questionnaires in this study to achieve triangulation of data. I explain these more fully in the data collection section below.
**Site of Study**

The site of this study is an upper middle class suburb of Western New York. The actual research was conducted at Ferndale Elementary School\(^1\). Ferndale is a large elementary school in a beautiful suburb of Western New York. The population of this suburb in 2010 was 5,300 residents (http://www.city-data.com). Ferndale Elementary is very inviting from the outside one can see a large colorful playground and manicured landscaping. Across the road you will find family-centered neighborhoods. As a teacher at Ferndale, I can state that the inside of the school is just as inviting with its' many colors, friendly staff members, and student work displayed throughout the hallways. The actual location of my data collection took place in my classroom, the art room. The art room is located on the back end of the school surrounded by second and third grade classrooms. I am fortunate to have a large and spacious room with brightly painted walls. The tables are arranged in a circular design to help with the flow of classroom discussions, which became essential to collecting data. I will discuss the participants of this site in the next section.

**Participants**

I chose convenience sampling to select the participants for this study. Merriam (2009) states, “Convenience sampling is just what is implied by the term-you select a sample based on time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents, and so on” (p. 79). My sampling of participants is one first grade class from Ferndale Elementary School, a class of 24 students, including 13 girls and 11 boys. My

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\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms including site and participants.
research questions are centered on the development of aesthetics in young students, specifically in first grade, which is why I chose these participants.

According to Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development, “Young children are curious and actively involved in their own learning and the discovery and development of new understandings/schema” (McLeod, 2007, p. 2). My participants are young children and through this research, grounded in constructivism, they are actively involved in their own learning and the learning of others. Vygotsky’s theory, in which the ideas of constructivism are grounded, states that children are born with “the basic materials/abilities for intellectual development” (McLeod, 2007, p. 2). Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development is important to my research and in understanding the ability of my first grade students being involved in their own learning and the learning of others. In the next section I will discuss my role in my students’ learning and this study.

**Role of Researcher**

My role as the researcher in this case study is a participant as observer (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) explains that as a participant as observer “the researcher’s observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher’s role as a participant” (p. 124). Since I am my participants’ art teacher, I will be more of a participant than an observer, however I will take on both roles during the study. I will encourage my students to lead discussions and talk to each other about works of art, including their own artwork, allowing me to become an observer as well as a participant, as I lead our class discussions. As I lead these class
discussions I will be collecting data in three different ways which I will discuss in the following section.

**Data Collection Methods**

To ensure validity and reliability of this research study, I have used triangulation. Merriam (2009) defined triangulation as “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (p. 229). My research consists of three data collection methods including observation, questionnaire, and audiotaping class discussions. In discussing observation, according to Almy & Genishi (1979), “The most common use for observation is the study of individuals and their progress” (p.25). During this study I observed my first grade students and recorded these observations in carefully dated field notes onto a yellow lined notepad. One half of the note pad was for facts and the other half was for observer comments. During each day of my study I audio recorded our classroom discussions and transcribed these tapes after each session, sometimes paraphrasing what the student’s said. I also administered questionnaires to my students during this study to get their opinions on works of art, and later analyzed their responses to these questionnaires. These questionnaires consisted of images of two paintings; I directed the students to circle the painting they felt was a better work of art (see Appendix A). I collected nine weeks of data, audiotaping important classroom discussions, and recording copious field notes. I collected data from my participating class for 45 minutes once a week over the course of the nine weeks. In the following section I discuss the steps I took to address ethical issues.
Ethical Issues

Before my research began, the principal of Ferndale Elementary signed a Letter of Consent permitting me to conduct my research in the building (see Appendix B). All of my first grade participants completed a Letter of Assent (see Appendix C) and their parents completed a Letter of Consent (see Appendix D) allowing me to use their child’s questionnaires and audiotaped responses in my data analysis. All participants were informed that all proper names and other identifiers used in this study have been changed. I filed and received approval for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the university as an exempt study.

My study contains minimal risk, meaning the risks involved with my study do not exceed what could be encountered in everyday life (Merriam, 2009). While risks for this research are minimal, students could display some emotional reactions to the discussions. For example, a student may become upset if another student laughs at their response or opinion of a work of art. As the researcher and their art teacher, I will inform my students that we are going to be an accepting classroom and listen to everyone’s responses to works of art and not judge anybody’s response. The potential benefits of this study include participants learning more about aesthetics and being able to have a deeper connection with works of art. Subjects may also feel special, having been chosen to work with me on this research, and may gain a sense of pride in their achievement regarding a very difficult aspect of art. They will also gain a better understanding of how to discuss artwork with others at a more mature level. My plan for data management and analysis will be discussed in the followings section.
Data Management Plan/Analysis Strategies

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read--it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 2009, p. 177). Throughout my data analysis, I looked for facts in the data that formed patterns and categories which become generalizations about how first graders respond aesthetically to a work of art. The categories I discovered from my data helped me to gather information that might help in teaching aesthetics to young children, including curriculum content modifications and teaching strategies. During my research all documents were stored in file folders labeled with the type of data and then later sorted by increasingly abstracted categories. All of my audiotapes were labeled by date and stored in a box. I transcribed important conversations from these audiotapes and analyzed these transcripts along with my questionnaires and field notes, using triangulation to help the validity of my study. The data I collected including field notes, questionnaires, audio recordings and any other documents used during this research are now stored outside of my classroom in my home for up to 3 years, as per federal regulations (Merriam, 2009).

Summary

I began this chapter with an overview of the foundational literature for my research. I summarized key findings from Chapter II that laid the foundation for my own research. My research is considered a qualitative case study involving observations, questionnaires, and audiotapes of my students’ responses to artwork and
my teaching. The research was conducted in an upper middle class suburb in Western New York and used a first grade class from Ferndale Elementary School. My role as the researcher throughout this study was a participant observer, as I not only acted as my students’ teacher, but also as an observer conducting research. This chapter also discussed the ethical procedures, which took place before I began my research, including letters of consent and letters of assent from my participants. Potential risks and benefits from participating in this research were also discussed. Lastly I explained how I managed my data throughout the study and how I analyzed the data. This chapter lays out the design for my study. In Chapter Four I will discuss my findings from the analysis of the data.
Chapter IV: Results and Discussions

“Art is your dreams. You can draw what your dreams are.”

Cindy

Introduction

The Ferndale art room is full of color and life, especially when it is filled with 25 enthusiastic first grade students like Cindy from the quote above. These five and six year old students come in with bright smiling faces, some giving hugs as they enter, and this sets the mood for another exciting day of research. This particular class of first graders was the perfect choice for this case study. These students are a kind, enthusiastic, talkative bunch of five and six year olds with varying dynamic personalities. Crucial for this study was an eager and willing group of students. These students proved to be the perfect choice. Envision a group of children who when asked a question are so eager to answer that they energetically raise their hands and it appears as if they may pop right out of their chair. They are storytellers with vivid imaginations, and are not afraid to share their ideas with their classmates and me. Whether the tape recorder was on or off, it did not matter to most of these students. Throughout the study I worked hard to create an inviting environment in the art room. This environment led to smiles, creative thoughts, imaginative ideas and long wonderful aesthetic discussions that were tape recorded for the purpose of this research. In this chapter, while painting a picture of the adventure in aesthetics that I took, I will discuss the major findings of this study.
Chronology of Events

To begin explaining this adventure in aesthetics, the following is a chronological overview of the nine weeks of this study. I will elaborate on specific days throughout this chapter in order to present the findings from this study.

On the first day I administered student questionnaires asking the students to circle the work of art that they thought was better (see Appendix A). Following the questionnaire was a class discussion on the students’ opinions. Also addressed was the concept of what makes an artwork good. The second week of research I decided to see how well first grade students could write about a work of art. We viewed Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Night Café* and the students completed a worksheet that asked them questions about their opinions of this work of art (see Appendix F). I noticed that writing was challenging for these students, therefore we also had a class discussion where the students could verbally respond. I began to notice through these discussions that the students relied heavily on colors when responding to a work of art. I addressed this issue the following week by showing only black and white artwork, teaching the students to look for a story or interpretation in a work of art.

The fourth and fifth weeks of this study were centered on Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. In my classroom, the Van Gogh *Starry Night* coloring sheet is the most popular, so I chose this artwork as a focus for a discussion on valuing works of art. I assumed that since this was a popular image for my students that they would have strong opinions about the painting. In order to teach the meaning of value I had students to recreate their own version of *Starry Night* and then discuss what made Van Gogh’s artwork valuable and what made their artwork valuable. These few
weeks led to a more in depth study of value in week six. During this week we discussed what the definition of value was and what made something valuable or invaluable. The students took part in a hands-on activity where they had to arrange rocks in order of value and then discuss why. The students understanding of value led me to focus on what should be considered art the following week. Week seven I attempted to have an aesthetic debate with the class about the notion of animals as artists. We viewed artwork done by sea lions and penguins and discussed what it meant to be an artist. Week eight we discussed what is more important in a work of art, careful execution or an original idea. The students also completed a second worksheet where they wrote responses to Hokusai’s *Great Wave*. They also worked at arranging items in order of value, this time using famous artwork. During the last day of this study the students completed a second questionnaire as a post-test (see Appendix A). Instead of having a class discussion the students recorded their responses individually into a tape recorder, without any prompting from me.

To culminate this study of aesthetics the students created original artworks of a beautiful place (see Appendix I). The creation of this artwork allowed them to apply what they learned throughout the nine weeks. The remaining sections of this chapter will explore and expand on the findings that emerged over the course of these nine weeks, beginning with the ability of these first grade students.

**First Grade Ability**

Before embarking on the research of first grade students’ aesthetic abilities, I did not realize how much I would learn about the minds of six and seven year old children, outside of their aesthetic ability. I had some previous assumptions of the
level and ability that this age level may have, and some of these assumptions were right, while others were proved wrong. I will say after spending so much time studying first graders, that being in the mind of a first grader would be fun and interesting.

One of the initial things I learned about a first grade student’s mind is that they seem to be overly critical of their own artwork and the artwork of peers. Prior to beginning this research, I noticed that first grade students could be extremely critical which sparked an interest in studying aesthetics. I thought that younger students were more accepting of famous artists and less accepting of their own artwork and their peers. I hoped that focusing on aesthetics would help students gain a broader acceptance of all kinds of artwork and ability. After exposing students to various styles of artwork, including abstract, realistic, and even art made by an animal, I found that first grade students were very accepting of the artwork shown by me. Students assumed that these works of art were famous and therefore good. I remember one day showing the students an abstract painting done by a sea lion, and asking them, “Who do you think created this painting?” The students gave me answers such as, “A famous artist” and “You”. The students assumed that since I was showing this work of art that it must be good, because almost all of the students said that it was a good work of art. While they seemed to be very accepting of the artwork I showed them, regardless of the style, they still seemed very critical of their own artwork. One day as I was observing my students drawing, I overheard a student say, “This thing is terrible.” He was referring to his own work of art and proceeded to take a colored pencil and scribble quickly over his entire picture. This is not the only
time I noticed a student being overly critical of their artwork. I realized that no matter how accepting they are of the artworks I show them, they are still less accepting of their own artwork. One day as the students were working on creating their own *Starry Night* I noticed one of my students staring blankly at his paper. I approached him and asked if he needed any help. He told me, “I don’t know how Van Gogh made that look so good. I can’t do it like that.” This student was noticing the difference in ability, and therefore upset with his own artwork. First grade students are beginning to realize the difference between their work and the work of an artist and therefore do begin to feel discouraged. As upsetting as it is to see students discouraged, it is a part of the artistic process and they will learn the skills needed to improve their artwork as they develop as artists.

The second thing I found out about first graders is that they are too easily persuaded by others who they believe have the right answer. This age level of students wants to agree with me or with each other no matter what their own opinion. I began to notice this in the first few classes of this study when I began asking students to raise their hands if they liked a work of art. The students would look to their left, then to their right, and then slowly raise their hands if they felt enough of their classmates had agreed with their opinion. Even when I played the role of devil’s advocate, the students would most likely agree with what I was saying and disregard their previous opinions which ruined my attempts at sparking any kind of debate at all. There would be times where almost the entire class disliked a work of art that I had shown and if I told them how beautiful I thought the work of art was, the majority of the students would then change their opinion of it. This happened on a few
different occasions. I noticed this agreeability a lot during the second day of research while teaching about Vincent Van Gogh’s ugliest painting (see Appendix E). During this lesson I showed the students *The Night Café* by Vincent Van Gogh, who deemed it his ugliest painting because of the way the colors clash. I showed this painting to my class and asked them how many students like this work and how many students dislike this work of art and why? I had fourteen students like it and seven dislike it. Even after reading them a passage by Van Gogh about how ugly he thought the painting was, the numbers of students who liked the work of art only dropped to thirteen. I believe that most of the students liked the work of art because I chose to display it. They wanted to please me and give me the right answer by liking it. “If it is famous, it must be good” seemed to be the mentality of the students. They even explained that they liked the work of art because of the colors, even after I explained that Van Gogh purposefully chose colors that clashed to make it look ugly. This idea of something ugly having the ability to be a good work of art seemed very foreign to them. One student said, “It doesn’t matter what an artist thinks of his own work.” I thought that was a very interesting aesthetic idea; however the student could not elaborate any more on this idea. The remainder of the class bounced back and forth from liking the work of art to not liking the work of art, depending on my responses and the responses of their classmates. This age level seems to look for the right answer in many subject areas including art. During one class period with my students I stopped our discussion to talk to the students about the concept of right answers.
The following is what I told the students:

There is no right or wrong answer. That is what I have been trying to teach you the last couple of weeks. Do not be afraid to raise your hand if you feel one way because there is not one specific answer that I am looking for. As your art teacher I am not looking for one answer, it is what you think. You just have to be able to tell me why.

Even after explaining this to the class, they continued to mimic each other and search for one right answer. The following is an example of students mimicking one another:

Me: What makes this a good work of art?
Jenny: It has a good background.
Me: Okay, somebody else tell me why they think this is a good work of art.
Michael: The background.
Me: What about the background?
Michael: It is bright.

Before Jenny and Michael I also had another student mention the background as what they liked about the artwork, and not one student was very specific as to why. This leads me to believe that they may not have really thought the background was what made it good. They may have thought that was an easy answer and must be right, because others had said it before them.

After the first few weeks of research, I discovered how agreeable this age level is and how difficult it would be to have aesthetic debates during the remainder of the study. This difficulty will be discussed in the following section.
Aesthetics, for me, is about questioning aspects of art and debating issues, having opinions on the value of art, and being able to have discussions about art. I had high hopes for some interesting debates on various aesthetic problems throughout the study however, because this age level is so agreeable, it was difficult to initiate any type of debate. Looking back on the study now, day seven exposed this difficulty. During this class I had shown my students paintings done by animals, specifically sea lions and penguins (see Appendix E). I hoped that this type of artwork would initiate an aesthetic debate regarding what makes an artist and whether an animal can be considered an artist. However, I quickly realized that there would be no debate about whether an animal could be an artist or not, it was unanimous that an animal could be an artist. Once again, I tried to play devil’s advocate by asking the students if an animal could really be an artist because an artist is somebody who has original creative thoughts and ideas. Still, they all agreed with one another that animals could be artists. In that scenario the students were not agreeable with me, only each other. Below are some student quotes in which students discuss how animals can be artists:

Sarah: Anything can be an artist.

Jennifer: Any animal can be an artist because you can help them to be a good artist.

Ashley: Everyone can be an artist. Animals can do it.

These were typical responses given to me during this attempt at an aesthetic debate. The idea of even trees being able to be an artist came up in the discussion. A student explained to me, “If a tree’s leaves had paint on them, when the wind blew the leaves,
the tree could actually be painting a picture.” This imaginative idea solidified my understanding of the acceptance of these first graders’ minds.

Through conducting this study I gained further insights into a first grader’s ability to express their learning. The majority of my study involved students talking about works of art, however I did try to have the students write about artwork as well (see Appendix F). I was impressed with the students’ verbal responses, however writing was challenging for them and I received shallow responses. Below you will see their writing ability. The first is a verbal response from Tara discussing Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and the second is a written response from Robbie on Hokusai’s *The Great Wave* (see Appendix E).

Tara: I like the swirls and how it’s kind of spread out with special art materials. The colors spread out around the moon and stars.

Robbie: I like the waves because they are high.

I saw a big difference in aesthetic ability in these two responses. It was clear to me that writing about works of art was too challenging for this age level. Tara’s verbal response was from week four of the study and Robbie’s written response was on week eight of the research. I would have expected to see more growth by week eight, however, writing responses proved too advanced for these first grade students.

I also discovered the preferences in artwork that first graders have. Whether the artwork looked real or not, was not their biggest preference, as I originally thought. Their preference was based on colors and the amount of details in the artwork. Abigail Housen labeled beginner viewers of art as accountive viewers.

“Accountive viewers are storytellers. Using their senses and personal associations,
they make concrete observations about the work of art that are woven into a narrative” (Housen, 2001, p. 8). I saw the same characteristics in the way the first graders in my study talked about artwork. The students preferred works of art where there was more going on and more details. These details made it easier for the students to tell stories about the artwork. One student told me that he preferred one artwork over another because it had more details, and more details meant that it was good artwork. After a little more probing, he explained that he liked how the painting had more of a background than the other, and there was more to talk about. I noticed this storytelling most during my third week of research when I had the students look at two M.C. Escher artworks and discuss them using Housen’s Visual Thinking Strategies (see Appendix E). Escher’s work allowed the students to sit for 45 minutes and talk about the artwork. They found many stories in his work and I literally had to stop the discussion as we ran out of time. For example, one of my students, Martin told the class a long story about how the man in Hand with Sphere (see Appendix E) was a chiropractor. He came to this conclusion from the class talking about how the artwork looked like an image of a doctor’s waiting room. Martin believed that because the artwork had a doctor’s waiting room with so many books, that maybe it was a chiropractor’s office. He explained that those books were there for the doctor to use if he needed to look something up for a patient. Martin has always been my storyteller in this class and he thrived during the discussion that day. Escher’s artwork has many details and each student was able to find something to discuss. Like Martin, they were able to create a story and some began to interpret the artwork.
After that class, I realized the importance of image selection as did Philip Yenawine, who was discussed in Chapter II. He explained that for a beginning viewer artwork should be captivating to your audience, expressive so it can be interpreted, and narrative so viewers can easily create a story from it (Yenawine, 2003). These students are beginning viewers of art and preferred these types of images to discuss, along with colorful artwork. I actually chose M.C. Escher’s artwork to discuss because during the first two weeks of this study the students would only discuss an artwork based on its’ colors. As much as I tried to push them past this initial response to color, I finally came to terms with the fact that as a first grader they just prefer a lot of colors in artwork. They can easily relate to the colors and it is the first thing they notice. I will further discuss their focus on color later in this chapter.

Understanding a first grader’s mind became very important for me throughout the study and these findings solidified through the analyzing of the data. This age level is overly critical of their artwork and the artwork of peers. They are very agreeable with others and lack debate skills. These first grade students had a difficult time with written aesthetic responses, but could respond better verbally, especially when it involved telling a story. These students preferred artwork with lots of colors and details, which made these works of art more appealing to discuss. Again, the inside of a first grader’s mind seems to be a very interesting place.

“I Like that Because it Looks Cool and it Looks Uh, Good”

The title of this next section is an example of what I consider a shallow response to a work of art given by one of my students. Unfortunately a student gave
this response on the last day of this study. The student was responding into the tape recorder about why he liked one painting over another. Fortunately, the shallow type of response seen in this section’s title, are typically just my students’ initial responses before any probing questions. These initial shallow responses are what Alan Cunningham categorized as, initial response phase, which are responses given without any probing and are strictly the child’s opinion (Cunningham, 1997). I found these to be the typical initial responses in my study. On the first day of research I gave each student a questionnaire (see Appendix A). This questionnaire was a way to find out the student’s preferences. One painting was very realistic (number one) while the other was more abstract (number two). The students circled the work of art that they believed was better. Following this we discussed why they chose the work they did. Some of the initial shallow responses I received from my students were:

Becca: I like number two better because it is a girl.

Cindy: I like number two better because it looks more real.

Tara: I like number one better because it has more color.

Jared: I like number one because it has more light colors.

After the first day of the study and hearing these types of responses, I made a point to listen for these types of shallow responses in order to work toward more mature aesthetic responses.

As I discussed in the previous section, first grade students seem focused on colors. This appeared throughout my study in observations, audiotapes, questionnaires, and their writing. The focus on color, detail, and looking real were typical initial shallow responses. I had a lot of expectations going into this research
because I had worked with these students previously. I assumed the students would be focused on how real an artwork looked, but I had not expected that there would be so much focus on color. On the second day of research after discussing Van Gogh’s *Night Café*, I noticed this focus and wanted to address this concern. When looking at *Night Café*, I had assumed the students would dislike the colors because they clash. However, most of the students liked this artwork and stated that:

Jennifer: I like it because it uses all of my favorite colors.

Kimberly: I like it because of the light colors.

Cindy: I don’t like how the lights and people don’t look real.

After probing questions and an attempt to debate, I did not receive anything other than shallow responses. I wanted these students to look past the colors and begin to interpret and tell stories when they see a work of art. This realization led me to a lesson on M.C. Escher’s black and white artwork, as previously discussed. This switch to artwork without color allowed the students to move past initial responses and allowed for interpretation to begin.

As the study progressed I began to prompt my students with probing questions to help them learn to defend their opinions using evidence from the artwork. At the end of the class discussion on Escher’s *Hand with Sphere* and after discussing the use of evidence to support your opinions, a student gave me the following response. I felt this was a more mature, interpretive response:

Sarah: I like it because he may be like stressed and he is trying to imagine how he can make himself feel better and he’s going into his mind and discovering how he can do stuff right and make stuff right.
This was an example of a student who was beginning to interpret a work of art using evidence from the artwork. I found by asking more probing questions, prompting, and encouraging the use of evidence, I was able to push these students past those initial shallow responses. This finding of the need for guidance leads me to the next section on the need for a more knowledgeable other.

**The Need for a More Knowledgeable Other**

This newfound understanding of the importance of prompting solidified Lev Vygotsky’s learning theory of the more knowledgeable other and the constructivist theory in which my study is grounded. As stated previously, Vygotsky’s theory of learning from a more knowledgeable other states that one learns best from a tutor who has more knowledge of a subject (McLeod, 2007). This tutor can be a peer or a teacher. In this study the teacher was the more knowledgeable other as their peers were not strong enough in aesthetics to fill this role initially. Students building on previous knowledge and understanding of a subject to learn more in that area is central to Constructivist theory. Constructivism also promotes curiosity in students and encourages them to ask questions and play a part in their own learning (Lankford, 2002). Throughout this study the importance of both Vygotsky and Constructivism theories became evident.

The difference in the students’ confidence levels was one of the first things I noticed. Students who were confident in their art making ability would say things like, “Look at mine, I’m gonna be a great artist.” Others were like John, the little boy I mentioned earlier who called his artwork terrible. With such a wide range of confidence levels, it was beneficial to have the students working in small groups
during this study. The students were able to work together to encourage one another and help build their confidence. On the day when the students were recreating their own version of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, they stopped midway through the class to have a small critique at their table. This idea stemmed from the Constructivist idea of working cooperatively. Hearing classmates state what they liked about their artwork and giving suggestions helped those students with less confidence. The small critique by these six and seven year old students was beyond expectations. As mentioned earlier, this age level does tend to be overly critical of one another, but during these small critiques with teacher guidance they were successful. Students were asked to tell each person at their table something positive about that person’s artwork that made it special or valuable. I overheard things such as, “Okay, what does everyone like about Emma’s?” and “Wow you are doing a really good job with your tree.” The students talked such things as their classmate’s color use, how they blended colors well, and how their artwork was arranged. I did not hear any negative comments being given and I saw a lot of smiling faces as they gave each other compliments and encouraged one another in their abilities. This small exercise was helpful in improving student confidence and encouraging cooperative learning.

Empowering the students as their more knowledgeable other was important to this study. I constantly encouraged the students to not be afraid of giving a wrong answer. I strove to empower them with the ability to express whatever thoughts they had. I tried to make the environment open and inviting for long rich discussions of artwork with the students. One way to create this environment was to have the students form a large circle when discussing a work of art. In order to further
promote this environment, I joined in on the students’ circle, to make them feel like I was more of a part of the learning experience and not just their teacher. I always let the students know when they were really impressing me. I explained to them explicitly how and what they did to impress me. When a student had a more mature aesthetic response using evidence in support of their idea, I stated how proud I was of them, with statements such as, “That was a great answer with a lot of evidence” and “Great job supporting your opinion”. This was done in order to empower the students to always use evidence in support of their opinions. Expressing to the students how proud I was of their accomplishments empowered them to continue growing and learning in this new foreign territory of art. I let the students know that I had specifically chosen their class as I had confidence that this experience would be successful. During the lesson on M.C. Escher, after the students discussed this artwork, I told them, “Wow! I am really impressed. I am not sure fourth grade students could even do this!” During another activity I stopped and told them, “I did this activity with third grade students and you, boys and girls, are doing just as well.” I hoped that after hearing this, the students would feel that they had accomplished something difficult for their age, and be proud. It was my hope that with this constant encouragement I was able to empower these students.

As stated before, prompting is necessary to get students past their initial responses. As their teacher and more knowledgeable other the students looked to me for guidance and help in stating what they believe is the right answer. In an aesthetic discussion there is no right answer, however supporting your opinions with evidence is the right way to answer. As mentioned prior, most of the students’ initial responses
were shallow. However, with the right probing, questioning, and prompting their responses were more mature. While discussing *Starry Night*, I used prompting to elicit the following responses:

Me: Why is this such a good painting?

Julian: Because of the church and all of the buildings and the big tree and the swirls and the stars.

Me: Okay. Is there anything that Van Gogh did that is really special that makes those things special?

Julian: Um, all the dots and, um, stuff like in the sky and, um, it’s not all colors bunched together.

Me: Can you explain that a little bit more.

Julian: Like one color all stuck together.

Me: It is not all one color?

Julian: Uh, no it is.

Me: It is all one color?

Julian: No, it isn’t all one color.

Me: Right, the sky is not just blue. It has little pieces of other colors. What did the artist do to make the sky special?

Julian: The swirls are blue and yellowish.

The more prompting I did with Julian, the more he elaborated. However, this was still early on in the research and he had difficulty. Each time I saw this class I emphasized using evidence. I continued to prompt each student if their response did not have enough evidence to support their opinion. Prompting and good probing questions
became key in having the students give more mature aesthetic responses. As the students became more comfortable with supporting their ideas with evidence, they were able to get past their initial shallow responses.

Although prompting helped the students to increase their responses, I was expecting them to be capable of more independent responses. Without guidance and probing questions, these students reverted to their previous shallow responses. At the end of the study, I gave the students a second questionnaire as a post-test (see Appendix A). After completing the questionnaire indicating which painting they preferred, they independently recorded their responses. I prompted them at the beginning of class emphasizing the use of evidence to support their opinion. However, when they recorded their responses it was independently without probing questions to guide them. Their responses were as follows:

Tom: I like number two because it’s wavy.

Julian: I like number two because it’s all swirly and doesn’t look like the other.

Sarah: I like number two because I like the color.

Katie: I like number two because it looks like you could imagine it or it could be in your dreams.

Becca: I like number one because it looks real.

Daniel: I like number two because it has more color and it’s beautiful.

Bradley: I like number one because it looks cool and it looks uh good.

Some of these responses are shallow especially after spending nine weeks learning how to give evidence to support their opinions. I will admit I was disappointed until I
took a step back to reflect and realized that this was a difficult independent task for this age level.

Vygotsky’s theory of the more knowledgeable other was evident throughout this study. In planning future lessons on aesthetics I will need to remember the importance of the foundations of constructivism. These students need guidance, as well as, time to work together to expand their knowledge and understanding of new topics.

“It’s Fun Talking”

One afternoon as the students were lined up to leave I asked, “Boys and girls what have you enjoyed during the last few weeks of art?” Maria enthusiastically exclaimed “It’s fun talking!” This response makes one think that Maria must have been truly engaged during our discussion that day.

I found myself continually asking “What is working?” and “What is not working?” Changing the way my art class was conducted for nine weeks was challenging to adjust to. I quickly learned what engaged my students and what did not engage my students. There seemed to be many factors that contributed to the engagement and disengagement of the students. Some days were extremely engaging and yielded wonderful results while other days seemed to flop. Overviews of the nine weeks of this study are attached (see Appendix E).

An inviting layout of the classroom was important to the success of these aesthetic lessons. The Ferndale art room is very large with seven tables arranged in a horseshoe type shape with the seventh table being the largest and in the center of the horseshoe. In the front of the room there is a projector and screen. This screen is the
large surface used to show the artwork that we were discussing. At times, I kept the students at their tables, while other times I had them form a large circle in front of the screen. This large circle allowed every student to have an up close view of the artwork projected on the screen. Joining in the circle allowed me the opportunity to become more of a part of the class instead of always being in the front of the room. This set up worked best early in the research when I wanted to spend long periods of time discussing works of art with the students. It was also practical, as I was tape recording the sessions, and the tape recorder was able to pick up all of their voices.

As helpful as this practical set up was, there were times when the circle hindered their engagement. As they are only six and seven years old sitting for long periods of time in close proximity with each other was the cause of distraction at times. Usually, with a look or a quick reminder they would get back on task. However, there were times when I realized this was not the best arrangement. At those times, I would have the students move back to their tables to work on various tasks in smaller groups. These tasks included small group discussion, art making activities, and cooperative learning experiences.

Smaller table activities seemed to be the most engaging for these students. These activities were more hands on, and the students had more opportunities to talk and share their own ideas. The lesson on valuing artwork seemed to be the most engaging for these students. The students were engaged right from the start with our discussion on the value of their favorite toys. They closed their eyes and envisioned their favorite toy. I asked, “Why is this toy your favorite, and why is it more special than any other toy?” I chose to use the word special when talking about value so
they did not think of the monetary value, but the intrinsic value of an object. I told the class about my favorite toy growing up. I explained that this was a stuffed monkey that my uncle from out of town gave me. I told the class that this was my most valuable toy because of who gave it to me and when it was given to me. After giving these reasons about why I valued a certain toy, I received more responses about the intrinsic value of their toys. Discussing aspects of their everyday life, such as toys, helped them to understand how to discuss value. Following this discussion, I began a hands-on rock activity where the students had to arrange rocks by value. I chose to use rocks as I felt the students would be less emotionally attached to these objects as opposed to their toys. However, one of the students was in tears because her classmates did not agree with her choice of the most valuable rock. Even though I tried to avoid this type of emotional response by using rocks instead of toys, it still occurred, as they can be sensitive at this age. However, I still felt that using toys would have generated more of this type of emotional response. Each table was given six different rocks and two cards. One card had a smiley face and one card had a frown face. I explained that the smiley face card was for the rock with the most value and the frown face was to label the rock with the least. The remaining four rocks were to be arranged in order in between the other two. The students were excited and engaged in this activity and they wanted to start immediately. I loved their enthusiasm and realized they had been craving more hands-on activities. The students worked on this for approximately ten minutes rearranging the rocks and changing their minds often. It was fun to watch how the students worked together on this task. At the end of class, each table shared why one rock was more valuable,
and why one was less valuable than the rest. Each table had very different reasoning for valuing these rocks. What one table thought made a rock less valuable, another found made the rock valuable. For example, one table chose the smoothest rock as the most valuable because it did not have any scratches or bumps and did not look cracked. Another table chose the smoothest rock as the least valuable because it was the least interesting, with no bumps or cracks. It was informative to hear the differences in the way they assigned value to the rocks.

To further engage the students I chose works of art that lent themselves to storytelling. The lesson on M.C. Escher, mentioned earlier, was a very engaging class discussion activity. This was the first time I introduced Housen’s Visual Thinking Strategies and asked the students, “What is going on here?” and “What do you see that makes you think that?” These questions are engaging in themselves and when asked to six and seven year olds about a work of art, one can get endless conversations. During this class I introduced narratives to the students. They learned how to tell a story from looking at a work of art and they were hooked. Here are some stories the students told about Escher’s artwork:

Ashley: The guy’s name is John, he is 36 years old and he was making a pose for a new statue of liberty because the other one was knocked down by a tornado.

Julian: Once in Nepal there was a big castle with lots of people there for a wedding.

Jared: There was a king who was building a castle and he found someone stealing so they put them in the dungeon.
These responses show that the students were learning how to imaginatively interpret a work of art. They were beginning to use storytelling as a way to discuss works of art. They enjoyed telling different stories about these works of art. Their discussion made me realize how right Marjorie Schiller was when she explained the importance of talking about art. She stated how children’s responses to works of art are just as important as their art making (Schiller, 1995). She also stressed that providing opportunities for discussing works of art is the first step in successful aesthetic education (Schiller, 1995). Katherine Danko-McGhee as stated in the review of literature, discussed that the best place to start when involving young children in aesthetics, is to pick artworks that are interesting to them (Danko-McGhee 2006). I found that if I was not going to teach aesthetics with a hands-on activity, I needed to select engaging artwork that would allow for storytelling to captivate the students’ attention for an extended period of time. The artwork by M.C. Escher did captivate and engage these students. I also found days and lessons that were not as engaging to my students, and I learned from those.

Nearing the end of the research I found that my students were getting more distracted during large group discussions. They appeared to be bored with these types of discussions and this led me to believe that they needed a change. After reflecting on this, I knew that I needed to get back to more hands-on small group activities. During the second to last week of this study, I decided to have the students make a large circle around the middle table. Even the act of getting into this circle was an issue. They were unengaged and distracted by their friends. I realized that in order to keep the students engaged I needed to differentiate instruction. Another lapse of
judgment was to distribute a prize previously earned for good behavior at the
beginning of class. Their engagement in their prize was much higher than their
engagement in talking about art. Reflecting on the lessons, the day that was least
effective and disengaging was the lesson on Van Gogh’s ugliest painting. It was too
early on in the study for the students to understand how to have an aesthetic debate.
I had not provided them with any of the tools or skills needed to discuss this work of
art and its’ value. I found myself frustrated with the research and the students that
day. At the end of class, I made this comment to the students, “Boys and girls, we
have a lot of work to do, in order to get to where we need to be.” That was not
encouraging or empowering and expressed my frustration. The frustration was in the
lesson that I had planned, and it was not fair to project that onto the students. I was
not adhering to constructivist teaching because if I were, I would have realized I had
not provided them with the skills they needed to build on their previous knowledge.
Looking back, I would either remove the lesson from the unit or teach it later on
when they are more capable, as it was not effective or engaging at this time.

I am fortunate to now have a complete unit on aesthetics, which includes nine
separate lessons to be used in the future. Some were engaging and others need to be
refined in order to be more effective. I am beginning to understand what works and
what does not work with teaching aesthetics to this group of students.

What makes Art ‘Good’?

What makes a work of art good? I asked the students this question throughout
the study. “A good background”, “lots of colors”, “details” and, “bright
backgrounds” were some of the responses from the first day. The expectation was
that as we progressed through this unit on aesthetics, the students’ responses would become more mature. However, up until the last day of the study I continued to receive responses such as, “The details in the art make it good, lots of things in it makes it good.” In addition, they continued to list colors as a main factor in determining if a work of art was good. Their responses continued to be shallower than I had hoped. However, I did find that their acceptance of different forms of art was wider than expected, as they did not only prefer realistic looking artwork.

When beginning this study I thought I would be more interested in widening the students’ acceptance of different types of art, but that did not end up being the case. The research became more focused on understanding what value means and how to defend ones judgment of a work of art. On week seven of the study, I showed them an abstract painting. (see Appendix E). I asked the students, “Is this a good work of art and why?” I did not explain anything about the painting or tell them who the artist was. The acceptance shown in their responses surprised me:

Ashley: Yes it’s a good work of art because you can imagine whatever you think you see, like a flower blooming.

Michelle: Yes it is good because it kind of looks like an abstract painting.

Jennifer: Yes it’s good because it has a lot of line, they curved it, got it diagonal and straight down.

I did not expect this type of response to such a simple painting. However, I was pleased at the growth in the students’ responses to what makes a work of art good and their acceptance of abstract art. After the students were given some context behind this work of art, including the fact that it was created by a sea lion, they were even
more accepting. Then all of the students decided it was a good work of art, based on who created it. This may have been due to their love of animals. However, I was impressed at their acceptance before they knew it was created by a sea lion. I thought these students would only determine realistic looking artwork as good. Therefore, I may not be teaching the misconceptions of art that I had mentioned in Chapter I.

Since the focus of this study turned towards more of understanding value and how to judge a work of art using evidence, I began to look for the different ways that the students judged artwork. The first and most common way that I found was their initial immediate judgment, which I discussed earlier. These judgments are quick immediate responses to works of art based on the students’ first view of them. When I first projected the abstract sea lion painting I heard a lot of comments such as, “What is that?” As soon as I began asking the students to tell me if this is a good work of art and why, their responses became richer and they used more evidence from the work of art.

Another type of judgment that I found was, judging an artwork by comparing and contrasting it to another work of art. I will continue to use the sea lion painting as an example. One student still did not like the sea lion painting even after learning it was created by an animal. When I asked this student why he still did not he replied, “I saw an elephant painting one time and, if an elephant makes it, it has way more colors and stuff.” How this student compared two animals and how their artwork was similar, yet different, was impressive.

A third form of judgment that appeared at the end of the research was context based. The students were directed to order famous works of art by value, just as they
had previously done with the rocks. I noticed that the students were back to focusing on the realistic quality of a work of art, the colors and the details. I was confused and therefore asked the students, “Does an artwork always have to look real, be colorful and full of details to be valuable?” They replied, “No!” So I asked, “Why is it that you are all choosing the artwork that is most colorful, real and detailed as the most valuable?” We talked about this for a while and then I held up the sea lion abstract painting reminding them that most of them had thought this was a good work of art. But it lacks many colors, details and does not look real. I asked, “How come you said this is so valuable?” A student raised his hand and replied, “Because a sea lion made it.” I went from frustration to excitement. One of my six year old students had learned that sometimes what makes a work of art good is the context surrounding it. This judgment based loosely on context was a single occurrence during this study. After reflection, I realized that I do not focus enough on the context surrounding works of art. Therefore, these students did not have the ability to truly judge based on context.

I believe the students now have a better understanding of what the word value means. This is illustrated by some of the following students’ responses to what makes a work of art valuable:

Cindy: Lots of people like it.

Charlie: Like when you have a rock and it’s just plain, if you paint it, it will get more special. I did that once over the summer, I painted a rock and gave it to my dad.
Cindy was implying that the number of people who like a work of art adds to its intrinsic value. Charlie felt that personalizing a work of art increased its value. He spoke of a time when he personalized a rock in order to make it a more valuable gift for his dad. In addition, I asked the students whether they believed that their artwork or the artwork of a famous artist like Vincent Van Gogh’s should be more valuable. When posing this question to the students, I did not expect to receive this response from a six year old:

Tara: Ours should be more valuable because it is made by kids and it’s special to see how kids draw and make things look.

This was surprising as it was a very mature response for a first grader, as I did not give my thoughts on this question until after. This response helped me to see that the students may be feeling empowered and more confident in their ability to discuss value.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this chapter I found through triangulation. I analyzed field notes from observations, audiotapes of class discussions and student questionnaires to acquire these findings and show the validity of my study. Through a nine-week unit on aesthetics, and the intense study of one first grade class, I have found new insights into first grade ability. I observed their preferences and difficulties and then used these findings to effectively teach aesthetics to this grade level. I now have a more thorough understanding of Cunningham’s (1997) phases of aesthetic responses. Like Cunningham, I found that students would stay in his initial response phase until prompting was added. However, through the prompting of the
students, my knowledge of Vygotsky’s more knowledgeable other, and constructivism, I was able to help the students develop more mature aesthetic responses. In conducting this study, I gained insight into what engages students in conversations about aesthetics and which activities were less engaging and effective. Lastly, I found that the students have a wider acceptance of art than I had expected. They have learned new ways to judge and talk about the value of a work of art and now have a deeper understanding of the core aspects of aesthetics. The remaining chapter will discuss what I have learned and include recommendations for further study.
Chapter V: Conclusion & Recommendations

Introduction

Through analyzing the initial data and findings, four main themes emerged from teaching this unit on aesthetics. The themes that arose were: prompting, empowering, applying, and assumptions. This chapter will explain these themes and how they relate to this study and the field of art education. I will also give my recommendations for further research and teaching on aesthetics.

Prompting

In his research, Cunningham (1997) found, “If probing questions were not asked, aesthetic response ceased” (p. 42). My research proved the validity of this statement. I learned the importance of probing questions in gaining richer aesthetic responses from my students. I discussed at length in Chapter IV the types of initial responses that the students gave before any prompting from me. It is clear that their responses were not mature aesthetic responses. However, after prompting the students and guiding them to build a case for their opinions by giving evidence, the students were able to give much deeper responses. As mentioned in my review of literature, Schiller (1995) also found the importance of prompting students and giving students the necessary vocabulary when having aesthetic discussions. Without prompting and acting as their more knowledgeable other, the first grade students were unable to produce the mature aesthetic responses I had hoped. With prompting questions I learned that it was possible to see some growth in first graders’ aesthetic ability. However, I learned that in this short amount of time I would not see as much growth as I had originally anticipated. Some of the aesthetic ideas I thought first
grade students could debate, such as what is art? and what makes an artist?, were too complex for these students. Therefore even with prompting I could only get the students slightly above shallow responses. Prompting the students throughout this study also led me to empowering students, which is the following theme.

Empowering

In Chapter II, I mentioned Schiller’s (1995) research, where she indicated that young children truly enjoy having discussions about art. She believes that even preschool children are capable of having these discussions. Parsons (1994) also explained that if a young child received effective aesthetic education throughout their life, that child could be capable of a more mature aesthetic response. I used what these two researchers discovered to shed a new light on my own study. I made sure not to underestimate the ability of these students and to empower them throughout the study. The students were more motivated to succeed when I used encouragement to empower them. The students needed to be hear when they were improving and when they were really impressing me, as this instilled confidence and pride. One cannot assume that students cannot do something without allowing them the opportunity to try and empowering them along the way. I have always thought the empowerment and encouragement of students was important, and through conducting this study I learned even more about how much the students need this type of encouragement. Building the students confidence in their ability allowed the students to apply this new knowledge to their own artwork, as I will discuss in the following section.
Applying

Another theme that I found was how effective the students were at applying their knowledge of aesthetics to their own art making. I had not expected improvement in their own art making as a result of weeks of aesthetic discussions. However, after spending much time discussing famous works of art and what makes them valuable, the students were able to apply this knowledge to their final artwork (see Appendix I). This artwork as discussed in Chapter IV was a culminating project that allowed the students an opportunity to apply all that they had learned through creating a work of art of a beautiful place. The students had a variety of art materials to choose, along with many possibilities of subject matter. I already knew through conducting this study that these first grade students preferred a lot of color and details in artwork. When creating their final work of art they incorporated even more color and details than they had in the past. I also noticed the students discussing their artwork with one another more as they worked. They told each other what they liked about each other’s artwork and gave suggestions as they worked. Watching the students complete this culminating art project solidified the importance of teaching aesthetics at a young age. Not only did their discussions on artwork improve, but they were able to apply this new knowledge to other aspects of art, including their art making.

Assumptions

I began this study with many assumptions and expectations about the students and how this research would unfold. I realize now how inaccurate my assumptions were, and I learned to never assume when teaching children. I originally decided to
tackle this research on aesthetics in hopes of widening the students’ acceptance of
different types of art. After several classes I found that the student’s acceptance of
artwork was better than I had expected. I assumed that I would have a lot of work to
do with the students before they were able to accept more abstract artwork. I did not
think that they would be accepting of any other than realistic artwork. However, I
should not have underestimated their acceptance. This acceptance changed the focus
of the study. I began to focus on their understanding of value and being able to use
evidence to defend their opinion of a work of art.

I also had assumptions about the results that I would receive from the pre-test
and post-test questionnaires. Each time, these expectations were inaccurate. In the
beginning, I assumed that the students would all choose the artwork that looked more
realistic. However, the students were evenly split in their opinions. After nine
weeks of research, I assumed the students would prefer the artwork with more color
on the post-test, as there was much focus on color throughout the study. Again, my
assumptions were proved wrong as their choices were almost evenly split. I have
learned not to assume too much about teaching and the students’ abilities prior to the
completion of the lesson. If one is not aware of their assumptions, these assumptions
can hinder one’s lesson planning, and ultimately hinder student’s learning.

**Recommendations**

My recommendations for further study on aesthetic education with first grade
students are as follows. First and foremost, more time is needed to observe more
aesthetic development. When conducting a future study of aesthetics I would
recommend a longer span of time to see more growth in students. I would also
recommend a longer span of time when teaching any aesthetic unit. This would enable the teacher to spread out the aesthetic activities. It would be beneficial to incorporate more art making days in between the intense aesthetic discussion classes. Without this change in activities, students may become disengaged as I experienced.

For the field of art education I have the following recommendations. First off, I would encourage art educators to focus on the context surrounding artwork at a very early age, as students need this context to truly value art. Students need context to use as evidence when defending their opinions on works of art, and to be able to participate in any type of aesthetic debate. My next recommendation is to include additional experiences with aesthetic debates in art curriculum. I believe this is often overlooked in developing art curriculums. Aesthetics is scarcely found in my district curriculum thus students are not learning these skills and therefore have difficulty giving mature aesthetic responses. If I had begun these aesthetic lessons with the students in Kindergarten, I believe they would have been more capable of what Parsons labeled, mature aesthetic responses as first graders. This study on aesthetic ability has been both beneficial and enlightening for me, and hopefully for other art educators who wish to explore this “untidy” discipline further.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main themes that emerged through conducting this study and how that will affect my future teaching, while giving further recommendations. I began by discussing the importance of prompting in the growth of students. Prompting these students was the only way I could move them past their initial shallow responses. Along with prompting comes the empowerment of students
and how important it is to encourage one’s students. Empowering students leads to achievement and an increase in student confidence. Another theme I mentioned was applying. I learned through this study that these students were able to apply what they learned in aesthetic discussions to their own artwork. I also discussed the theme of assumptions and why it is important not to assume too much about one’s students or teaching. The assumptions that I had throughout this study proved wrong, which led me to avoid assuming as much in future teaching. I ended this chapter with my recommendations for further study on aesthetics, teaching, and the field of art education. Ultimately this research has improved my ability and comfort in teaching aesthetics to elementary students. I have learned the instructional strategies and content changes needed to teach aesthetics, while learning more about first grade students and how they respond to works of art. I hope this study helps art educators and future art educators in tackling the complex discipline of aesthetics.
References


Appendix A: Sample Student Questionnaire (Pre-Test):

Circle the painting below that you think is better and let’s talk about why.

Sample Student Questionnaire (Post-Test):

Circle the painting below that you think is better and let’s talk about why.
Appendix B: Principal Letter of Consent

Dear Administrator/Principal,

I am writing this letter to ask your permission for our students to be a part of a special art study this year. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, one of my first grade art classes will be involved in an in depth study of aesthetics.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “What insights might I gain from employing strategies and approaches for teaching aesthetics to first grade students in my classes?” Our students will have the opportunity to experience works of art in a new way with aesthetic discussions and engaging activities. The benefit of this study for our students is learning more about aesthetics and being able to have a deeper connection with works of art. The participating students will learn to use evidence to defend their opinions on works of art, as an older peer or adult may do, this should instill pride in the participating students. The benefits to our district from this study are the strategies and techniques that art educators can use to teach young elementary students about aesthetics. Aesthetics is a complex discipline to teach and this study should be very helpful for those eager to learn more about aesthetics and aesthetic ability of young children.

Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study to protect our student’s privacy. I will be audiotaping my own teaching and some student responses. Students have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, though they will continue to take part in normal art room activities. Students will not be penalized in any way if they choose not to participate or withdraw from participation. Everything created for this research project is for educational purposes and will be kept confidential. I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development.

☐ I give permission for you to conduct this research study with our students

☐ I DO NOT want our students to participate in this research project

Please sign and date the line below,

Principal Signature___________________________________Date:_____________

Sincerely,

Ms. Brittney Kern

*If you are unable to reach a member of the research teach and have general questions, or have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Gina Game, IRB Administrator, SUNY Research Foundation/Buffalo State at (716)878-6700 or gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu
Appendix C: Student Assent Form

Student Name:________________________________________

Please color in one of the smiley faces.

I want to participate       I DO NOT want to participate

Thank you,
Miss Kern

*If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Gina Game, IRB Administrator, SUNY Research Foundation/Buffalo State at (716)878-6700 or gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu
Appendix D: Parent Consent Letter

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am writing this letter to ask your permission for your child to be a part of a special art study this school year. As part of my Masters project in Art Education at Buffalo State College, your child’s first grade class will be involved in an in depth study of aesthetics.

The goal of my research is to investigate the question, “What insights might I gain from employing strategies and approaches for teaching aesthetics to first grade students in my classes?” Your child will have the opportunity to experience works of art in a new way with aesthetic discussions and engaging activities.

In the final written report fictitious names will be used to protect your child’s privacy. Your child has the right to withdraw from this study at any time, which means their words will not be documented in my final report for the study, though they will continue to take part in normal art room activities. Your child will not be penalized in any way if they choose not to participate or withdraw from participation. I will be audio recording class discussions and analyzing questionnaires in order to learn more about how first grade students respond to works of art. These questionnaires will involve your child circling one famous painting that they think is better then another, and then we will discuss why they feel this work of art is better. Everything done during this study is for educational purposes and will be kept confidential. If you wish, a copy of my final report can be made available to you upon the completion of my research.

I appreciate your time and willingness to help me in my professional development. Thank you very much for your help. If you have any questions about my research study before signing, please do not hesitate to contact me at (716) 626-8800, or bkern@williamsvillek12.org. Please sign your name below, and check one of the following:

☐ I give permission for my child to take part in this research project.

☐ I DO NOT want my child to participate in this research project.

Student Name (Print)_______________________________________

Parent/Guardian (Print)_____________________________________

Parent/Guardian (Sign)_____________________________________

Date__________________

Sincerely,

Brittney Kern

*If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Gina Game, IRB Administrator, SUNY Research Foundation/Buffalo State at (716)878-6700 or gameg@rf.buffalostate.edu
Appendix E: Overview of Plans

**Day 1**

*Explain the pre-test student questionnaire (see Appendix A).

*Students complete questionnaire independently.

* Students form a large circle to have a class discussion.

Ask students:

“Which painting did you think was better and why? Defend your answers.”

“Is the Matisse painting beautiful? Name two things the artist did to make it beautiful.”

*Students go back to their seats and discuss in small groups this question: “Which would you rather have hanging in your bedroom? Defend your answer.”

*End class by asking students:

“What makes an artwork good?”

**Day 2**


*Students complete student worksheet (see Appendix F).

*Class discussion in a large circle. Ask students:

“Who likes this painting and who doesn’t like this painting? Defend your answers.”

*Read Van Gogh’s opinion of this painting from *Puzzles about art: An aesthetics casebook.* Ask students:

“Why would he say that?”

“Now what do you think of this painting?”

“Is it less valuable than *Starry Night,* why?”

*To end class have students discuss in small groups the question:

“Can something ugly still be good art?”
**Day 3**

*Large circle discussion. Show these M.C Escher artworks. *Hand with Sphere* and *Belvedere.*

*For each artwork, ask the students:*

“What do you see?”

“What is going on here?”

“Tell me a story about this artwork.”

*Ask the students to discuss at the end of class:*

“What is evidence and how might we use that in art class?”

**Day 4**

*Show Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and ask:*

“What is going on here?”

“What do you see that makes you think that?” (VTS curriculum questions-Abigail Housen)

*Ask students: “Why do you think this artwork is loved by so many?”*

*Have students recreate their own version of this painting on 8x10 inch matte board using mixed media. Encourage students to talk to one another about their process and the artwork as they work.*

*End class by asking the students:*

“Why do you think this painting is so famous?”
Day 5
* Allow students the majority of class to finish their *Starry Night* artwork.
* At the end of class have a class discussion on these questions:
  “Why do we value things?”
  “Which artwork should be valued more, yours or Van Gogh’s and why?”
  “Can our artwork be just as valuable?”

Student Examples:

Day 6
* Class discussion on value. Ask students:
  “What’s your favorite toy and why?”
  “Why do you value it? Use evidence from your toy.”
* Pass out six different rocks to each table of four students and ask the students to rank these six rocks in order by value. The most valuable should go near the smiley face Post-It and the least valuable should go near the frown face Post-It. They must work cooperatively to agree on the order and use evidence to defend their opinions with their group.
  * Let each group share their most valuable and least valuable and explain why.
* End class by asking students:
  “What causes a thing to be valuable or special?”

Day 7
* Show this abstract painting made by a sea lion. Do not tell the students anything about the artwork or the artist. Ask students:
  “Is this a good work of art and why or why not?”

* Give them the context behind this artwork and then ask them again:
  “Is this a good work of art, why or why not?”
  “Did your opinion change?”
* Read students the aesthetic dilemma on page 41 of *Games for Teaching Art* by Sandra L.H Alger. This is an aesthetic dilemma about the value of artwork created by a duck in a pet shop. Ask the students the aesthetic questions listed after the passage.
Questions:
1. If Ms. Gledhill liked the painting, why do you think she took it off of her wall?
2. Who was the artist, the duck or the pet shop owner?
3. Does an artist have to be human?
4. Ms. Gledhill is not sure what to think of the painting that she bought. What would you say to convince her to hang it on her wall? What would you say to convince her to throw the painting away?
   *Read the book Art Is by Bob Raczka
   *End class by asking the students:
   “What is Art?”

Day 8
*Begin class by showing Hokusai’s The Great Wave Off Of Kanagawa.

*Have students complete the student worksheet (see Appendix F).
*Read students the aesthetic dilemma on page 42 of Games for Teaching Art. This dilemma is about original ideas vs. careful, neat execution of artwork. Ask the students the questions that follow this passage.
Questions:
1. Must an idea be original to be art?
2. Is a careful or precise technique required to create art?
3. Which is more important when creating a work of art, an original idea or careful execution?
   *Pass out six small copies of famous artworks to each table of students. Repeat the value activity that was done with the rocks. Use the same smiley and frown Post-Its and allow the groups to share with the class how they ranked the artwork.

Day 9
*Students complete the post-test questionnaire independently (see Appendix A).
*Explain that their final artwork for this unit will be to create an artwork of a beautiful place. They may choose the art materials they wish to use, and they can draw any type of beautiful place. Encourage students to use all that they have learned about what makes art valuable and what they like in artwork to make this their most valuable artwork.
*As students are beginning their artwork call students up one by one and ask the students why they chose the work of art they did for their post-test.

The creating of this final artwork may take one or two more additional classes and when it is completed I would encourage having students talk about what makes their artwork valuable. For student artwork examples see Appendix I.
Appendix F: Student Worksheet

Name:_______________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Who made it?</th>
<th>2. What is going on in the picture? (the story)</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>3. What is the mood?</th>
<th>4. How does it make you feel?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. What do you like about it?</th>
<th>6. What do you dislike about it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. How did you decide you liked or disliked this?</th>
<th>8. Is this a GOOD work of art? Why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix G: Visual Abstract

**Problem Statement:** Aesthetic education is vital to helping students have a wider more complete understanding and appreciation of art, while teaching creative and constructive thinking (Acer, 2007). The problem is that many people, including educators, believe that young students are not capable of making a mature aesthetic response to a work of art (Schiller, 1995). On the contrary, young students are quite capable of discussing artwork and giving an aesthetic response (Danco-Meghee, 2006). The assumption that young students are not capable could lead to less focus on aesthetic understanding at the elementary level, therefore unknowingly teaching and reinforcing in students the wrong assumptions about art.

**Research Questions:**
What insights might I gain from employing strategies and approaches for teaching aesthetics to first grade students in my classes?
- What variations might be found in first grade student’s aesthetic response to artwork?
- What changes in my content and instructional strategies need to occur in order to achieve increased levels of aesthetic development in first grade students?
- What can I learn about teaching aesthetics to young children from researching first grade student’s aesthetic responses?

**Findings:**
1. First Grade Ability
2. Shallow Initial Responses
3. The Need for a More Knowledgeable Other
4. Engagement in Aesthetics
5. Understanding of Value and Judgment in Art

**Data Collection Methods:** Triangulation
1. Student Questionnaires-pre and post assessment
2. Observation-field notes
3. Audiocapes of my teaching and my students’ responses.

**Review of Literature:**
Introduction to the Field of Aesthetics
- Definitions and complexity of Aesthetics

Aesthetic Development Theories
- Michael Parsons
- Abigail Housen

Cognitive Development Theory
- Lev Vygotsky (More Knowledgeable Other)
- Karen Hood (MKO in the art room)

Aesthetic Response
- Children’s responses to works of art

Aesthetic Education
- Teaching Strategies
- Aesthetic Curriculum
- Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)
- Kevin Tavin and Paul Duncker’s views on the discourse of aesthetics in art education
Appendix H: Review of Literature Chart

Review of Literature Chart

What insights into teaching aesthetics to young children might I gain from studying how first grade students respond to works of art?

Theory
- Cognitive Development
  - Vygotsky: Vygotsky’s Theory of Thought Development
- Aesthetic Development
  - Michael Parsons: Person’s Stage of Development
- Pure Aesthetics
  - D’Oench: Commentary on Person’s Model

Aesthetic Education
- Teaching Strategies
  - D’Oench: Commentary on Person’s Model
  - automotive: Sensation, response, and the aesthetic experience

Aesthetic Response
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Appreciation
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Education
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Response
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Experience
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Interpretation
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Appreciation
- Aesthetic Education Curriculum
  - Joret: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"
  - Cuneo: Sensation and response to the classic, "What is art?"

Art Response
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Appendix I: Student Artwork

Assignment: Using your knowledge of the value of art, and art materials of your choice, create a work of art of a beautiful place.

Ask students:
“What is a beautiful place?”
“What makes a work of art beautiful?”
“What can you do to make your artwork more valuable?”

Artwork #1

Artwork #2
Appendix J: Executive Summary

**Background:** Aesthetic education is sometimes over looked in the elementary art curriculum and this bothered me. I did not want my students to lack the skills to have more mature aesthetic responses to artwork. I chose to embark on this research study to expand my first grade students’ aesthetic abilities and to learn how to best teach aesthetics to young children.

**Research Questions:**
1. What insights might I gain from employing strategies and approaches for teaching aesthetics to first grade students in my classes?
2. What variations might be found in first grade student’s aesthetic response to artwork?
3. What changes in my content and instructional strategies need to occur in order to achieve increased levels of aesthetic development in first grade students?
4. What can I learn about teaching aesthetics to young children from researching first grade student’s aesthetic responses?

**Approach/Methods:** Participant as Observer- As my participants’ teacher, I acted as both a participant and an observer in this study.
   1. **Student Questionnaires**- I administered two student questionnaires one at the beginning of the study and another at the end.
   2. **Observation**- I observed and recorded field notes of my students as they worked independently and in small groups.
   3. **Audiotaping**- I tape recorded our class discussions throughout this study.

**Important Findings:** All of the collected data was used to answer the research questions and to further understand aesthetic education.
1. **First Grade Ability**- This age level is overly critical of their artwork and the artwork of peers. They are very agreeable with others and lack debate skills. They had a difficult time with written aesthetic responses, but could respond better verbally, especially when it involved telling a story.
2. **Shallow Initial Responses**- Without prompting students their aesthetic responses remained shallow, focusing only on their personal opinions without being able to support theses opinions.
3. **The Need for a More Knowledgeable Other**– These students needed a more knowledgeable other to prompt and empower them in order to give a more mature aesthetic response to works of art.
4. **Engagement in Aesthetics**- Hands-on activities and discussing more narrative artwork proved to be more engaging for first grade students.
5. **Understanding of Value and Judgment in Art** - Through this nine week unit on aesthetics students began to understand how and why we value artwork. The students also gained some of the skills needed to support their judgment of a work of art.

**What I Learned:** I found these predominant ideas in the findings.

1. **Prompting** - I learned that prompting students with probing questions was the only way to get more mature aesthetic responses from my students.
2. **Empowering** - I learned the importance of empowering students, and never underestimating their capabilities. The more empowered students feel the more they strive towards goals.
3. **Applying** - I learned that through an intense study of aesthetics through classroom discussions, students were able to apply their knowledge of aesthetics and value while creating their own artwork.
4. **Assumptions** - I learned that I had a lot of assumptions about these students and the research and I was surprised by the actual outcomes. I learned that these students already had a wide appreciation of various forms of art, and were more accepting than I had expected. It was important for me to learn not to assume or expect too much beforehand.