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Qualitative Narrative Research Investigating the Value of Visual Art Education Captured through the Stories of High School Students Labeled At-Risk

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Buffalo State College
State University of New York
Department of Education

A Master's Project in Art Education

Qualitative Narrative Research Investigating the Value of Visual Art Education Captured
through the Stories of High School Students Labeled At-Risk

by

Leah C. Peca

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science of Education

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Approved by:

Date:

Dr. Shirley Hayes

Project Advisor

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Abstract

My personal and professional experiences in education led me to develop a unique perspective on the value of the visual arts. Existing literature about the impact of visual art education on students is written primarily from the point of view of educators and researchers. I wondered what the stories of high school students who have been labeled at-risk might reveal about their visual art experiences. As a participant-observer, I studied my own students using a postmodern approach to qualitative narrative research. I chose six students, three of whom were labeled at-risk, to share their stories and opinions about their visual art experiences. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection, while daily observations and analysis of artworks triangulated the findings.

Common themes expressed by the participants included an appreciation for the freedom and sense of control offered within art activities, as well as positive responses to the upbeat and casual art environment. Art processes were described to be engaging, fun, and relaxing. The student stories revealed a belief that personal growth is also associated with visual arts involvement, including improved self-esteem, motivation, and personal relationships. The research revealed that for my students, the value of visual arts experiences is personal and experience-based.

I learned that by allowing students to regain an element of control over their education, they perceive their learning experiences with greater value. I also learned that the presence or absence of a label such as “at-risk” does not necessarily define a student’s potential, nor is it always an accurate way to identify those who are facing challenges in their personal or academic life.

Chapter I: Introduction

Background Narrative

I have two brothers, and both of them dropped out of high school before their senior year.. While selecting a topic for my masters' project I found this fact impossible to ignore, and it led me to develop a new curiosity for how and why their educational journey ended in the unfortunate manner it did. My sister and I, on the other hand, could not be more different from them. We both fully participated in our education and graduated in the top five of our class. I excelled at and loved math and science, but I decided to take my first high school art class after seeing and being inspired by my older sister's work from the introductory Studio in Art class.

My art teacher was very passionate about his field. Being a people pleaser, I ordinarily would never dream of arguing with a teacher, but Mr. Thomas¹ and I had a friendly relationship that often invited debate. One particular debate was a recurring one. We would often argue over what was "cooler," art or science. He, of course, defended art while I argued on behalf of science. While I loved art, I did not really think it could win against a field like science. Science was challenging, interesting, and above all, more useful than most people believe art to be. Science could be used to develop medicines, solve crimes, predict the weather, and create new technologies. I would concede that art was enjoyable, but consistently argued that it was not as important or meaningful as science.

Science and math were going to be my stepping stones to a successful future. Not only did I do well in those fields, but they provided for a wide range of lucrative job

¹ Pseudonyms were used for all identifying names of people and places involved in this study.

opportunities. I could not see a successful future for myself in art. To me, being good at art did not mean I was smart, and it just did not seem as if it was that important. I was proud of my academic achievements, and based much of my self-esteem and self-worth on intelligence. To me, art did not invite the same level of respect and prestige as the more academic disciplines that produced doctors, scientists, and engineers. Nevertheless, I continued to take art classes every year, and I looked forward to them more than any other part of the day. I also made sure to register in a drawing class during my first semester in college. Looking back I can see that although I could not admit art's significance in regard to career or status, I obviously knew it had an intrinsic value.

In the battle of art versus science (the debate that continued in my head after I left high school), art ultimately won and I am now an art teacher. I learned in college to base my values on what held my interests, not what would impress other people. I realized the stigma was in my head, however I do believe that society did play a role. After all, art was an elective, a "special," while science was a requirement. Therefore, in my mind as a high-school student, the sciences were more important than the arts.

While my personal educational journey was a smooth one, for others the path is more turbulent; such was the path of my brothers. I never understood how they could give up. I was so different from them that I had a hard time relating to their decision-making. My younger brother went to a different school, so I am not in a position to speculate about what went on that led him to stop attending. However, I was able to observe my older brother Dylan a little more closely.

Dylan's troubles were never related to intelligence or ability. He was very creative and a great problem solver. He also had an extreme temper and behavioral

issues. He did not get along with many teachers and his personality did not always fit well into a traditional classroom environment. Many teachers at school were not shy about letting me know at the beginning of the year that they hoped that I was more like my sister than my brother. His feelings were mutual, and Dylan was not shy about making his teachers well aware of how he felt for them. His days at school were often filled with conflict, and he acted out in many of his classes. Eventually, after one extreme incident, Dylan was expelled. He chose not to finish his schooling even after he relocated to another district.

Yet, I could not help but notice that there were a few teachers in the school who did not seem to dislike my brother. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Cramer got along great with my brother, and it just so happened that both of these teachers taught “specials” – Art and Technology/Wood Shop. Dylan and these teachers had personalities that allowed them to get along, however that was not the only reason they had positive relationships. Dylan worked and behaved differently in those classes as well.

The summer before Dylan’s junior year, Mr. Cramer was killed in a car accident. Dylan, like many other students in the school, dropped what would have been Mr. Cramer’s classes that year. Some did not want to give the replacement teacher a chance. Others found it too difficult to be in the shop room without the familiar voice of their beloved teacher there to guide them. Unfortunately, Dylan did not have room in his schedule for any art classes that year. His misbehavior escalated, and it was barely past the halfway point of the year that he had finally pushed too far and was expelled. I have often wondered since then whether things would have been different if Dylan had been taking a class like Art or Shop that year. In prior years, those classes had given him a

time to excel and he was able to enjoy school for 41 minutes at a time. Maybe things would have been different if he had something about going to school that he liked and could be in an environment in which he looked forward to participating .

Aside from my personal and family experiences with being a student, I also made many observations as a teacher that led me to the topic of this project. As an art teacher, every student in the school comes through my classroom, due to their middle school arts requirement. I am in a unique position in that I see them every year as they move through both middle and high school.

Throughout the years, I have noticed students who stand out in my classes. Some stand out due to their technical abilities, others for their enthusiasm or creativity. Many students encompass all of these traits. I really enjoy teaching these students. They work hard and we usually get along very well; and we have healthy teacher-student relationships.

What surprises me, however, is how many times I discover that the students who stand out so positively in my room are often the ones who are struggling in other areas. These students are often identified as being “at risk,” a blanket term that means there is a reason to believe that these students will have difficulty graduating or otherwise succeeding in school (Bulger & Watson, 2006). The term “at-risk” encompasses a variety of limitations to learning and is applied to any students who are deemed “poorly equipped to perform up to academic standards” (Quinnan, as cited in Bulger & Watson, 2006). Many times I would never have known that some students in my classes are those students labeled at-risk if not for discussions with other teachers and administration, or through documents such as IEPs. For whatever reason, the at-risk label put on these

students did not seem to follow them into my classroom; and while they are in my classroom, I am able to observe them closely and carefully.

Working in a high school, it is a daily occurrence to overhear students' conversations. Countless times I hear students say things like, "I wasn't going to come to school today, but I didn't want to miss pottery," or "I wish I could just stay in this (art) room all day." These comments, along with my personal experiences have led me to an even greater appreciation for all that the arts seem to offer towards an individual's personal and educational development. Yet I have found it unfortunate that many people do not realize art's benefits, sometimes even the students themselves. My friendly debates with my teacher Mr. Thomas sparked a curiosity in me that ultimately led to my greater understanding of and appreciation for the arts. I believe this to be a unique experience that not all students are able to have, even though entering into such discussions or debates could prove to be beneficial. Upon reflecting on my own narrative regarding my thoughts about art education, I have wondered how art students who are labeled at-risk perceive their art education. Would they argue on behalf of or against the arts when compared to their other subjects? Do they, the students who struggle with their education, see the value of the arts more clearly or differently from someone like me, who always found school enjoyable? I believe that it is time to discover the answers to these questions by asking students their opinions regarding the value of art education. In addition, asking questions like this could potentially add another layer to existing research that seeks to assess the value of art education. In this section I have explained the circumstances that led me to this research topic. Next I will discuss the context

surrounding this issue, which is explored as the problem statement in the following section.

Problem Statement

We are living in a difficult economic time, and it seems like every year our school budget becomes more scrutinized. Across the country teachers are being laid off and as a result classes and opportunities for students are eliminated as well. Art and music programs are often the first to be eliminated. In the eyes of many, art and music are not as important and beneficial to one's education as other subject areas. At the same time, schools are facing numerous challenges with students such as high dropout rates and achievement gaps. Studies have shown that exposure to art education can help to significantly improve both attendance and academic achievement (Dwyer, 2011). However, much of the literature that explores the value of the arts regarding its many benefits for students is based on the point of view of teachers and researchers (Dwyer, 2011; Cirillo, DeMuro & Young, 2008; Duncom, 2002; Fowler, 1994; Lufti & Respress, 2006; Hopper & Miller, 2010; Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996; Mason, Thorman & Steedly, 2009). When reviewing the literature regarding the importance and benefits of art education, such as the development of emotional intelligence (Aguilar, Bedau & Anthony, 2009) and cross-curricular learning (Hopper & Miller, 2010), the student's perspective is overlooked. Students who are labeled at-risk, in particular, do not always have an opportunity to express what they believe is important about their education, and the decisions about what courses they "need" are often made by others. The voices of these students are missing from the research on the value of art education that I have reviewed to date. This section reviewed the circumstances that led me to the topic of this

research, as well as the problem statement that gives rise to this study. Next I will discuss the purpose of the study.

Purpose of Study

In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) was enacted to change the culture in America's schools and close the achievement gap. Trinetia Respress and Ghazwan Lufti, are Associate Professors of Educational Leadership and Human Services at Florida A&M University. They believe that as a result of NCLB, many states now use a "cookie cutter" approach that is focused on homogeneous learning styles and common core subject areas such as reading, math, and science (2006). In their writing, Lufti & Respress (2006) expressed their belief that as a result, students with atypical learning styles have increasingly struggled with "boredom, underachievement, and discipline problems." Research by Lufti & Respress (2006) investigates the impact of participation in a fine arts curriculum and indicates that participation in the fine arts can alleviate many of these issues, as well as provide students with environments that are positive, nurturing, stimulating, and encourage action and interaction.

Several art educators and researchers (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling; Lufti & Respress, 2006; Franklin, Fernandez, Moshby & Fernando, 2004; Hopper & Miller, 2010; Mason, Thorman & Steedly, 2009; Cirillo, DeMuro & Young, 2008) have compiled a range of data regarding the benefits and impact of art education on students, particularly those identified as at-risk. For example, educators from the School of Art at East Carolina University, Sibyl O'Thearling and Cynthia Bickley-Green (1996) conducted a study that explores how students who are labeled at-risk benefit from art programs in a way that differs from the general population of students who are not

considered at-risk. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) wrote how teacher perceptions of diverse student populations can interfere with creating learning experiences that allow students to reach their full potential. Trinetia Respress and Ghazwan Lufti (2006) explored how exposure to the arts contributes to whole brain learning from a scientific perspective. They explain, “Social scientists have postulated that students who participate in the fine arts tend to experience greater academic achievement and are less likely to have social, emotional, or behavioral problems” (p. 24). In addition, Franklin, Fernandez, Moshby, & Fernando (2004) found that “participation in the arts positively influences brain performance” (p. 24). While all of these researchers and educators compiled a variety of information regarding the impact of the arts, a gap still exists within the literature on this topic.

Despite the breadth of articles and studies dealing with at-risk students and art education benefits that will be uncovered and reviewed in Chapter II, I have found that the students’ perspective regarding the value of art education is being overlooked. The existing research on the value of art education lacks insights based on the opinions expressed directly from students. Therefore, the purpose for this narrative study is to discover the insights and perspectives of students who are labeled “at-risk” in my classes. I wish to collect the stories that students have to tell regarding how they think about their art education. In the next section, I will review the research questions used to structure my study.

Research Questions

This narrative study asks several questions. The following central and sub questions will be investigated:

- What can the stories of high school students who have been labeled at-risk reveal about their visual art experiences?
 - What are the perspectives of high school students who are labeled at risk on the value of visual art education?
 - How do students identified as at-risk believe their personal, social, and/or emotional development is influenced by participation in visual art classes?
 - What do students say about how learning in visual art classes impacts the way they think about and approach challenges?
 - How do art classes have an impact on how students labeled at-risk view or rate their overall educational experience (considering factors of motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm)?
 - What can I and other teachers learn from a study on how students who are labeled at risk think about their visual arts education?

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it allows an opportunity for students' personal stories to be considered when analyzing the value and impact of their visual art education. This project explores the impact of the arts from the perspective of the students who are labeled at-risk and compares them with some who have not received that label. Even with ample research and literature on the importance of art education, that literature often cites measurable, technical, and quantitative data such as test scores and graduation rates (Dwyer, 2011). Conversely, this qualitative study reveals students' feelings and perspectives regarding their exposure to and participation in visual art classes and provides teachers with insights for improved teaching of this population.

Definition of Terms

Below I will provide definitions for terms used in my research. The definitions are compiled from published, peer-reviewed literature and coincide with how I use the terms in my study.

- **At-Risk:** a term used to identify students who have difficulty integrating into the educational system (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). The term at-risk encompasses a variety of circumstances that coincide with perceived limitations to learning (Bulger & Watson, 2006). Elizabeth Blue Swadener (2010) of Arizona State University is one of many critics of the term at-risk, finding it to be stigmatizing and overused.
- **Diverse Students:** learners who account for variances in the population due to factors including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, learning styles, and physical and/or mental abilities and disabilities (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
- **Visual Culture:** images from mainstream society such as those from advertisements, logos, signage, product packaging, fine arts, and entertainment media that can be examined for cultural meaning (Duncum, 2002).
- **Emotional Intelligence:** “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Limitations of Study

This study is limited to a small population of participants. The narrative research interviews are administered with six students in my classes within a single school district in a rural town in upstate New York. Working in one small district limits the range of

diversity among the students who are interviewed. The short time-frame in which the study will be conducted is also a limiting factor within the research. Furthermore, my role as the students' teacher may impact their ability to comfortably reveal all of their opinions regarding how they feel about art education and perhaps elicit responses that intend to please. I needed to be aware of my own and students' biases as I moved forward with this project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as an art educator I would like to learn from the students by listening to their views regarding how they value their experiences in the visual arts. Students who are labeled at-risk are becoming an increasingly larger portion of the population (Bulger & Watson, 2006). My research seeks to expand the literature reviewed in Chapter II, adding a new component to the understanding of the impact of visual art education that takes into account the perspectives of those who are most directly affected by this topic, the students.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

When beginning the review of literature for my research on students perceptions of art education as revealed in the stories of students labeled at-risk, I considered previous research and theories in the field of general education and art education. As a foundation for my research project, I reviewed literature on topics specifically relating to students who are labeled at-risk. Dwyer (2010) noted that the value of art education can be extended to various aspects of the development and learning abilities of students, including social and emotional growth, cross-curricular learning, and creative problem solving skills. This chapter will review literature that examines each of these benefits, in addition to relevant educational theories and practices that have been identified by researchers and educators in their writing (Gardner, 1983; Gainer, 1997; Abramson, Ankeman & Robinson, 1995; Collins, 2007; Kornhaber, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996; Chen & Kaufman, 1997; Bulger & Watson, 2006; Lufti & Respress, 2006; Dwyer, 2011; Mason, Thorman & Steedly, 2008; Hopper & Miller, 2010; Gainer, 1997; Cirillo, Demuro & Young, 2008; Fowler, 1994; Duncom, 2002; Aguilar, Bedau & Anthony, 2009). First I address Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, then connect to research regarding the neuroscience of learning in order to provide background information regarding the scientific understandings about how students learn. This information will then be compared to more specified research regarding art education and the various educational, personal, and social impacts of these learning experiences.

Multiple Intelligences and Neuroscience of Learning

Dr. Howard Gardner (1983), an educator and researcher with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, developed a theory of Multiple Intelligences which asserted that different areas of the brain are responsible for different skills or abilities. He labeled these competencies as different intelligences (Gardner, 1983), which every individual possesses to varying degrees. Originally, Gardner (1983) proposed that there are seven categories of intelligence, and that individuals may have varying levels of strengths and weaknesses within each category. He also believed that learners could be educated more efficiently if the method of instruction coincided with the type of intelligence that related to the individual's strengths. His seven sources of intelligences were identified as linguistic, musical, logic-mathematical, spatial-aesthetic, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal (Gardner, 1983). In 1999, Gardner expanded upon his lists of intelligences to include naturalistic intelligence. According to Gainer (1997), a professor at York University and President of the International Society for Third Sector Research, Howard Gardner's contribution of the theory of multiple intelligences has helped to reveal that traditional educational systems may neglect intelligences that were not the traditional linguistic or logical.

In 1999, Gardner updated and expanded his original list of intelligences and noted that traditional IQ tests only measure a limited amount of human potential. He stated that IQ tests measure primarily logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligences, while musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and intrapersonal intelligences are neglected (Gardner, 1999). Dr. Shareen Abramson of California State University and Kate Ankenman of University of Washington's Variation in Individuals (VIP) Project teamed up with

Roxann Robinson of the Virginia House of Delegates to write about working with diverse students for the publication *Childhood Education* in 1995. Abramson, Ankeman, & Robinson discuss Gardner's contributions towards the importance of understanding of student learning, stating, "An approach that recognizes multiple paths of expression and intellectual performance is especially effective with students whom the standard curriculum fails to reach" (1995). Gardner's theories are relevant to my research project because I am interested in the perspectives of the "students whom the standard curriculum fails to reach" (Abramson, Ankeman & Robinson, 1995) for my research. So far in this section I have discussed how Howard Gardner's theories apply to the understanding of how students learn. Next I will introduce information from the field of neuroscience to explore how it relates to Gardner's theories and can connect to learning through the visual arts.

Scientists within the field of neuroscience completed extensive investigation into the unique biological characteristics of learning. Dr. John Collins is a neuroscientist working with the Bronson Neuroscience Center in Michigan. Collins (2007) wrote about how discoveries in neuroscience can be applied to the study of education saying,

Neuroscience teaches us several ways that material can be emphasized. A powerful technique is to build on existing learning networks. This approach incorporates new learning experiences into existing long-term memory. Presenting material in different sensory modalities is another technique used by educators. Linking visual pictures of the material with existing knowledge is an example of using sensory modalities in education (p. 309).

The above statement by Collins illustrates how the visual aspects of art education can be viewed as a helpful tool to the practice of learning. Next I will review how Gardner's theories align with neuroscience of learning and the educational experiences provided by the visual arts.

Regarding the validity of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the opinions of neuroscientists are mixed (Collins, 2007). Collins states that research has not documented "specific evidences of intelligences located in specific areas of the brain," (Collins, 2007). This criticism does not dispute the presence of multiple intelligences; it argues that the intelligences identified by Gardner do not exist in separate areas, but actually overlap in cognitive areas of the brain (Klein, 1997, as cited in Collins, 2007).

Educators are often encouraged to present information in multiple modalities (such as taking notes, role-playing, creating visuals) that allow students of all learning types of intelligence to best learn and understand the content. In support of Gardner's theory, Associate Professor of Penn State and Principle Investigator for Harvard's Project Zero, Mindy Kornhaber (2004) noted that through their research "the theory of multiple intelligences has been associated with improvement in both standardized test scores and the behaviors of elementary students, including students with disabilities" (Collins, 2007). Students with disabilities are only one type of learner who encounters challenges in the educational system. The following section will explore the qualities and characteristics of more students who are often identified in schools and in literature as being at-risk.

Diverse Students and Students Labeled At-Risk

It is important to note that the use of the term “at-risk” to describe students who may be facing challenges is not supported by all members of the educational system. One particular critic is Beth Blue Swadener (2010) of Arizona State University , who likens using an at-risk label to using a “language of deficiency” (p. 10). Swadener argues that the use of the term at-risk should be questioned, due to a number of factors including its overuse and negative connotation that some find stigmatizing. The term at-risk is used in this research since it is commonly used in the field, specifically in the district of the students being studied. As the researcher, I found few other relevant terms available to describe the population being studied in a succinct manner. This following section will review the various definitions and characteristics that identify those who are believed to be at-risk.

Today’s classrooms are filled with students from a variety of contexts. Gloria Ladson-Billings is a pedagogical theorist and educator on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education. She wrote, “Classrooms are filled with richly textured biographies that go beyond race and ethnicity” (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Oftentimes these biographies describe students who have difficulty finding success in a school environment (Ladson-Billings, 2011). To identify the students who are struggling in their education, many schools describe or label students as being “at-risk” (Chen & Kaufman, 1997). The term encompasses several factors that can impact student performance (Chen & Kaufman, 1997). O’Thearling & Bickley-Green described these students in another way when they wrote,

At-risk youth are those who have not found a way to integrate into the general educational system. Sometimes the school community isolates them...And sometimes the student isolates himself or herself from the community because these troubled children do not apprehend the worth of participating in a larger society (1996, p. 20).

The at-risk label, however, does not mean that the identified students are lacking in skills; the challenge is in the manner in which they apply their skills.

Within their cohort, they may display social talents, skills, and knowledge that are as highly developed as those of more conventional students.

Nevertheless, the at-risk [*sic*] apply these talents in an apparently contrary manner, and as a result they are marginalized (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996, p. 20).

In summary, these authors found that students labeled at-risk can have a variety of skills and talents, while also facing challenges, some of which serve as limitations to their learning; others inhibit their expression of learned material.

Adding more specificity to the definition of at-risk, Chen and Kaufman (1997) identified five factors, indicating a student would be considered at risk if they had one or more of the named characteristics. These factors include having low socioeconomic status, coming from a single parent family, having an older sibling who dropped out of school, changing schools two or more times, having an average grade of "C" or lower from sixth through eighth grade, and having repeated a grade (Chen & Kaufman, 1997). Similar guidelines were proposed by Bulger and Watson (2006) when they identified three categories within the definition for at-risk including background characteristics,

internal characteristics, and environmental factors. Within those categories, individual characteristics of students who are labeled at-risk include having poor K-12 experiences, English as a second language, learners returning to school after extended absences, and physically and/or emotionally challenged students (Bulger & Watson, 2006). Students who are lacking in technology literacy also encompass a newly identified risk-factor that serves as an inhibitor to learning (Bulger & Watson, 2006). To summarize, students who are labeled at-risk are part of diverse group of learners who may struggle in a variety of different areas. The following paragraph will discuss the prevalence of students labeled at-risk in today's schools, as well as the importance of finding a way to reach and assist them in their education.

In their research, Bulger and Watson (2006) found students who are at-risk comprise an increasingly large portion of the population. According to Bickley-Green and O'Thearling (1996), trends indicate that there will be increasing numbers of students who are labeled at-risk of dropping out of high school in the future. Along with the population increase of students labeled at-risk, there are also increased incidents of violence at school, which Bickley-Green and O'Thearling (1996) believe speaks to the importance for students to learn ways to develop positive habits of responsiveness towards others. Lufti and Respress (2006) also express the importance of finding a way to reach these students, stating, "Many of the youth who have trouble at home and school will ultimately enter the welfare and judicial processes. Early interventions for poor school achievement and behavior problems can stop this cycle and significantly improve outcomes for at-risk [*sic*] youth" (p. 25). The research in this section shows the characteristics associated with students who are labeled at-risk and the importance of

intervening to reduce the negative impacts that are associated with students labeled at-risk. The following sections review the numerous ways in which the visual arts can specifically provide assistance to these students in need. Next I will introduce how prior research has made connections between the arts and students who are labeled at-risk.

The Arts and the Student Labeled At-Risk

Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, T.S. Eliot, Martha Graham, and Mahatma Ghandi are examples of individuals who were marginalized, but were able to find ways to make significant contributions to society (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). Most adolescents experience times of loneliness and rejection; however, their circumstances allow them to transition more easily into adulthood (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). At-risk students may have numerous skills but difficulty applying them, or they may have issues with self-esteem that hinder their ability to express them (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). A study exploring the perceptions of art by Bickley-Green and O'Thearling asked a variety of students to respond to the question, "What is art?" The students labeled at-risk showed notably different answers from their peers. The majority of students labeled at-risk did not view the power to make art to be within the artist nor the viewer (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). Bickley-Green and O'Thearling (1996) concluded that this study revealed how the majority of students labeled at-risk viewed art as something separate from themselves that was not in their control. They summarized this finding by saying, "This view of the artist's communicative role is similar to the way the at-risk child sees himself as powerless to effect a change in his own environment" (p. 23). By introducing arts-based skills, they believe that educators can further a student's understanding of art

while simultaneously working to improve his/her outlook on life; and the art practice of visualization is one such approach (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). Research has shown that suicidal youth who practiced positive visualization techniques were more successful in returning to normal life activities than those not using visualization practices (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). The information revealed in this section shows that in some cases, students who are labeled at-risk can struggle with self-empowerment issues. According to the authors cited in this section, visual art experiences can be helpful in working through some of these issues. However, the issue of self-empowerment is not the only category within the realm of challenges that students labeled at-risk have to overcome to enhance their learning. Students who struggle with learning in core subject areas also are in need of additional intervention.

For the remainder of this section, I pull from work by Lufti and Respress (2006) regarding the Health, Education in the Arts, Refining Talented Students (HEARTS) project through the Family Life Center. The HEARTS project studied how African American students labeled at-risk respond to arts intervention activities, with emphasis placed on developing students' inherent talents, skills, and interests through the fine arts. The students who participated in the HEARTS project were assigned to modules of music, drama, dance or visual arts based on their interests, and the arts activities were incorporated into their everyday learning and core subject areas. Results of the program showed that these integrative strategies promote increased school engagement, promote a more internal locus of control, promote adolescents' academic achievement, and discourage school disciplinary problems. This research, along with similar studies reviewed by Lufti & Respress (2006) reveals that African American students who

participate in the arts have higher GPAs, are more committed to academic success, participate more in extra-curricular activities, and can manage conflict with more proficiency (Lufti & Respress, 2006). Assisting students with learning in other subject areas and developing an overall appreciation for learning is an important benefit of participation in visual arts experiences, and the HEARTS program as examined by Lufti & Respress (2006) serves as an example of how this can be achieved. Lufti & Respress (2006) also explain in their writings how some youth arts programs are being used across the country as effective crime prevention tools.

In addition, the arts also offer an alternative mode of expression to those who struggle with language barriers according to Abramson, Ankeman, and Robinson (1995).

Expressive activities give linguistically diverse students equity and a common ground with others....The students' use of creative expression not only supported their English language development, but also affirmed their sense of themselves as productive, inventive and active learners....Creative endeavors enhance students' attitudes of risk-taking, spontaneity and self-confidence that then carried over into their language-learning (p. 199).

My point in mentioning this research is that these findings introduce the impact that the visual arts can have on students labeled at-risk. The following section will explore more of the impact that experiences in art education may have on diverse student populations. Understanding this impact will allow for a more thorough understanding of why it is important to consider the perspectives of students struggling within the educational system.

Overview of General Benefits and Challenges Facing Art Education

Dwyer (2011) noted that as part of his 2008 Arts Policy Campaign platform, President Obama pushed to “reinvigorate” creativity and innovation by reinvesting in arts education. According to Dwyer (2011), The Committee on Arts and Humanities, at the request of the President, conducted extensive research regarding the current challenges and opportunities facing arts education. This research was compiled and prepared by M. Christine Dwyer (2011) of RMC Research Corporation. Some of the challenges facing America’s schools today that were cited in the Arts Policy compilation include high dropout rates (up to 50% in some areas), a narrow curriculum with focus on standardized testing, achievement gaps, and lack of tools for teachers (Dwyer, 2011). For example, the school district in the rural upstate New York town used for my research in this project showed a 12.2% dropout rate for 2010, the highest in the county (Retrieved from <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/press.html>).

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) provided foundational studies for the Committee on Arts and Humanities when they were gathering their data, and also followed up its original compilation of research with *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (Deasy, 2002, as cited in Dwyer, 2011). The AEP reported on 62 separate research studies, including several meta-analyses, that found transfer of skills from the arts to learning in other subject areas (Dwyer, 2011). Positive outcomes from arts engagement such as habits of mind, self-motivation, and social skills (including tolerance and empathy and positive peer interaction) were documented results of the AEP’s numerous studies (Dwyer, 2011). In the following paragraphs I cite examples of some of the research used in the AEP’s studies.

Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey provided insights regarding the relationships between the involvement in the arts and academic performance as revealed by the study of Dr. James Catterall from UCLA Graduate School (Dwyer, 2011). The study yielded quantitative results such as standardized test scores, academic grades, and dropout rates that, as reported by Dwyer (2011), showed that students with high involvement in the arts (including minority and low-income students) performed better in school and stayed in school longer than students with low involvement. Catterall (1997) conducted a follow-up study which found that the original cohort of students studied continued to show strong connections between arts learning in earlier years, and academic success and pro-social outcomes into their mid-twenties. As Catterall (1997) reported, arts-engaged, low-income students are more likely than their non-arts-engaged peers to have attended and done well in college, obtained employment, volunteered in communities, and participated in the political process by voting. According to Catterall (1997), low-income students who are engaged in the arts tend to perform more like average higher-income students.

Another study within the compiled research was conducted by anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford and Brown Universities, which showed that an arts education for low income youth allowed them to be four times more likely to have high academic achievement and three times more likely to have high attendance. Dwyer (2011) noted the validity of these statistics: “Heath’s findings are especially credible because she was not specifically studying arts education; the findings were an unexpected outcome of another investigation.” According to Dwyer (2011), these results reaffirmed

beliefs that arts education provides crucial benefits to the development of a productive workforce.

Although Dwyer (2011) writes of Catterall and Heath's studies as being well-regarded, there are those who question the amount of validity that can be applied to his claims. The Journal of Aesthetic Education published an article in the year 2000 that, according to Dwyer (2011), generated controversy among arts education advocates. The authors of the article, Louis Hetland and Ellen Winner both work with Harvard Graduate School and contributed to Harvard's Project Zero. In the article, Winner and Hetland (2000) argued against instrumental claims (such as Catterall's) based on correlational links between arts education and learning outcomes. Winner and Hetland (2000) believed that correlation should not be confused with causation. According to Winner and Hetland, there are several studies that claim to show how the arts are the cause of improved learning, when in fact there is often little evidence provided proving that study in an art form can improve academic functioning. However, they do note that they do not want to be misinterpreted as arguing that the arts do not help children saying, "We argue instead that the arts have great value in a child's education but that this value is due first and foremost to the importance of learning in the arts" (Winner & Hetland, 2000, p. 5). Catterall addressed these critiques in his most recent study involving the arts, achievement, and at-risk youth published in 2012. He agrees that a great deal of research would be necessary to prove that participating in art activities could directly cause the outcomes to which they are often attributed. Instead, Catterall (2012) suggests the hypothesis that "arts involvement are *associated* with better academic and civic outcomes" (p. 11) than non or low-arts involvement. In summary, these authors were

urging researchers and advocates to distinguish in their claims whether learning outcomes could be directly attributed to arts education involvement, or if the benefits were only a correlational link between the two. I am interested in discovering how students may believe the arts do or do not benefit them personally, academically and otherwise. Despite how the researchers may define the correlational or causational effects of the arts, each student may have his or her own opinion on this topic, which I would like to reveal with this study.

While the research reviewed in this section regarding the quantity of student retention and participation are impressive, one should also note how a visual arts education can impact the quality of the educational experience as well. Dwyer (2011) summarized the findings regarding the quality of total educational experiences from the Committee on Arts and Humanities, writing, “There’s a pride and collegiality in an arts-integrated school. Learning seems more fun, students and teachers are more engaged, and the whole school seems more creative” (p. 20). The next paragraph will introduce additional researchers and educators who agree that including the visual arts in schools enhances students’ motivation and passion for learning.

Dr. Christine Mason, senior research scientist at New Editions Inc., along with Dr. Kathlyn Steedly, Director of Evaluation and Outcomes at VSA Arts, and Dr. Mary Thorman, Educational Consultant and President of Educational Links International, conducted focus groups and interviews to examine how the arts can impact one’s educational experience. Mason et al. (2008) believe that students who are actively involved in creative methods to derive answers to problems begin to view the learning process as personal and hands-on, not an abstract and vague concept. Hopper and Miller

(2010) of Mississippi State University found that students develop better habits of learning through structured art programs and more flexible ways of thinking through problems. As a result, students tend to feel that they have ownership of what they have learned, heightening their perception of academic achievement (Hopper & Miller, 2010). Gainer (1997), a professor at York University and President of the International Society for Third Sector Research, cited studies showing that the arts not only enhance learning in other subjects areas, but they also promote skills and abilities such as problem solving, teamwork, goal-setting, creative thinking, self-expression, coordination, memory skills, self-confidence and esteem, concentration, poise, time management, cultural understanding, communication, and technological awareness.

Despite the claims of the above researchers, there are still many who resist the idea that including the visual arts into the schools are important or necessary. Some of the resistance might be attributed to a misunderstanding of the critique presented by Winner and Hetland (2000) which questioned the correlation versus causation connection between the arts and claims of its resulting benefits. In the following paragraphs I introduce additional reasons the arts encounter resistance in today's schools.

The belief that the arts are an unnecessary aspect to education remains a constant threat to any continuing presence of visual art education in many schools. The economic challenges schools face do little to help this situation as Gainer (1997) noted: "As research on education and learning emerges that suggest arts education should play a vital and central part in the school curriculum, the resources required to fund such an improvement are shrinking." With limited resources, many school districts choose not to develop art programs in favor of directing funds toward required core subject areas. Lufti

& Respress (2006) describe how required standardized testing (resulting from the *No Child Left Behind* Act) has caused many schools to shift their focus away from programs in the arts. In addition to issues regarding funding, further resistance to the visual arts can be attributed to the views of those who are outside the realm of art educators and researchers.

For example, in a study designed to explore parental attitudes towards the arts and arts education, findings showed that nearly all participants viewed the arts as “feminine” (Gainer, 1997), thus revealing a societal bias that limits how arts education is supported or discouraged across a population of students in this country. In addition, many parents viewed art as a “frill” that distracted from the academic subjects (Gainer, 1997). To dispute these biases and highlight the instrumental and intrinsic value of art education, the following sections will review how the visual arts can impact student educational experiences with regards to cross-curricular learning, social and emotional growth, and the development of creativity and problem solving skills.

Benefits of the Visual Arts Related to Cross-Curricular Learning

This section presents a variety of arguments regarding the concept that involving students in the arts enhances their learning in other subject areas. In the opinion of arts writer and consultant Charles Fowler (1994), art can connect to any subject area, and will allow for that subject to be understood for personal meaning by the student. Fowler wrote, “The British aesthetician and critic Herbert Read once said, ‘Art is the representation, science the explanation - of the same reality’” (1994, p. 7). To have validity, however, Fowler’s beliefs also need to be backed up with more concrete evidence. Cirrillo, Demuro, and Young (2008) present such evidence with data they

collected while administering the Colorado Visual and Performing Arts Education Survey of 2008. According to Cirillo et al. (2008) the results of the survey indicate that an art-based environment enhances creativity, independent thinking, cognitive development, and social skills. Cirillo, DeMuro, and Young (2008) noted that students who have access to a strong art program tend to perform better on achievement tests than students who do not have an art program or are in a school in which little emphasis is placed on the arts. Hopper and Miller (2010) agree with these findings in their research that pulls from numerous studies, which revealed the influence of a strong art program in a school system can have on overall student achievement. They showed that students with an arts education tend to perform better across all subject areas than students without art-based backgrounds (Hopper & Miller, 2010).

Government research, such as that conducted by The Committee on Arts and Humanities and commissioned by President Obama, revealed that exposure to the arts results in improved attention skills, as well as general intelligence. Evidence also revealed that in schools focused on arts education and integration, students consistently showed higher scores on reading and math assessments than those in similar districts with little support from the arts (Dwyer, 2011). These findings were backed up with physiological explanations, as noted in the report from the Committee on Arts and Humanities: “Arts integration techniques, which use multiple lenses to repeat information, cause more information to be stored in long-term memory, and may actually change the structure of the neurons” (Dwyer, 2011, p. 23).

Lufti and Respress (2006) also sought biological evidence when researching the cognitive benefits of the arts. When discussing how participation in the arts impacts

brain function they wrote, “It appears that the fine arts stimulate the functioning of (the anterior cingulate) region, which in turn develops capabilities in reading, math, and science” (p. 25). They attest that the arts pay off most expansively in basic reading skills, language development, and writing skills. In addition, they have found the arts tend to strengthen abilities such as focus and concentration, skills in expression, persistence, imagination, creativity, and “inclination to tackle problems” (Lufti & Respress, 2006). The development of these skills can be applied to many areas of learning, which can help with education in subject areas in addition to the arts.

This cross-curricular benefit of the arts can be especially helpful for students who are identified as at-risk or otherwise struggle in other subject areas. Dr. Jeffrey Wilhelm is a professor of English Education at Boise State University and the founding director of the Boise State Writing Project. According to Wilhelm (1995), “There is strong evidence that indicates that students who tend to struggle with reading can benefit from visualization of reading materials by cutting out shapes, finding photographs of objects from magazines, and illustrating what they have read” (p. 5). These strategies are examples of how the development of arts-based skills can improve the learning experience and outcomes for the students who need it the most.

Another way the arts can assist in learning across subject areas is with a visual culture based curriculum. Paul Duncum is a professor of Art Education at the University of Illinois and a former lecturer at the University of Tasmania, Australia. Duncum (2002) explains how many art educators are enhancing their curricula by including aspects of visual culture along with traditional examples of fine art. According to Duncum, a Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) can be extremely effective in promoting awareness of

social and historical concepts to young learners. He says, “Because VCAE places great stress on examining images in their contexts, and one of the major contexts of image is the history of images; this history is a vital component of a visual culture curriculum” (2002, p. 8). He explained how VCAE can also be considered cross-cultural because the visual imagery is considered by the students in terms of how it is viewed in other cultures as well as their own (Duncum, 2002). In summary, the above authors related how the arts have potential to provide many experiences that can assist students, including those who are labeled at-risk, in their learning in other subject areas. This cross-cultural education is beneficial to students not only from a cross-curricular perspective, but also when considering social and emotional development, as it can allow for the growth of empathy and understanding towards others (Duncum, 2002). The next section discusses other ways in which a visual art education can support and influence students’ social and emotional development.

Benefits of the Visual Arts Related to Social and Emotional Development

As children transition into young adults, we teachers are aware that they are faced with many situations that help to shape their social and emotional responses and understandings. Emotional intelligence is identified by Howard Gardner as one of his seven intelligences (Gardner, 1983). Emotional intelligence has been defined and studied by Dr. Peter Salovey of Yale University and Dr. John D. Mayer, a postdoctoral scholar at Stanford University. Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” Dr. Jill Aguilar is a professor at California State University.

She, along with artistic director Chris Anthony and Dani Bedau, professor at San Diego State University and founder of the nationally recognized Will Power to Youth Program, collaborated on research that offers examples of how community-based arts programs can benefit a student's emotional development. As explained by Aguilar, Bedau, and Anthony (2009), a student who is socially informed and emotionally intelligent is in a better position to learn and become a competent member of society. Emotional intelligence can be tied to cognitive development in that it can "1) increase flexibility in future planning and problem solving, 2) support inventive thinking, 3) direct or re-direct attention, and 4) motivate and sustain persistence at challenging tasks" (Aguilar et al., 2009). Eisenberg (2000, in Aguilar et al., 2009) explained, "Adolescents who can regulate their emotions, or recognize, pay attention to, and control their emotions and stress, also exhibit more prosocial behavior, more social competence, and better moral judgment" (Aguilar et al., 2009). Lufti and Respress (2006) would agree since,

Social scientists have postulated that students who participate in the fine arts tend to experience greater academic achievement and are less likely to have social, emotional, or behavioral problems....(Participation in the arts has shown to) reduce stress, improve learning outcomes, enhance intrinsic motivation, regulate brain chemistry, augment body memory, and literally rewire neural pathways (p. 24).

In order to successfully navigate through adolescence into adulthood, youth need to develop a healthy social and emotional framework. The following paragraphs will provide examples of how incorporating the visual arts into education can impact this development.

Aguilar et al. (2009) studied the benefits of community-based arts programs using an example from the city of San Pilar's Summer Arts Project for youth and from the Will Power to Youth (WPY) Program. One of their fundamental observations stated that successful youth programs in the arts can create environments where young people are safe to make strong connections with others. Bickley-Green & O'Thearling (1996) noted the importance of strong connections with others considering that increasing number of students who are dropping out of high school; students cite personal problems and feeling alienated from formal schooling as part of their reasoning. They found the arts allow students an opportunity to work with others in ways that can develop skills like teamwork and empathy; students can relate to each other through their expression and interpretation of visual images.

In addition to the ways in which the arts contribute to how youth can develop relationships with others, Bickley-Green and O'Thearling (1996) found evidence of how studies in the visual arts can enhance positive feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). Art can help define self-worth because "if a child creates an object that he considers to be valuable, he often transfers that value to himself. He begins to see himself as the maker of worthwhile things" (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996, p. 23). The arts also allow students a chance to reflect and be self-critical (Bickley-Green & O'Thearling, 1996). Similarly, Fowler (1996) notes that when students are allowed safe and guided opportunities to self-correct, they also learn discipline and how to handle frustration in pursuit of goals. Bickley-Green & O'Thearling (1996) and Fowler (1996) agree that these learning opportunities help students to develop a stronger understanding of their abilities, even when faced with a

challenge. The development of creative problem solving skills is a related benefit of the arts that is introduced in the next section. This section reviews the impact that visual art experiences in education can have on students. This information will be compared to the data collected in my study to determine if it aligns with actual student opinions.

Benefits of the Visual Arts Related to Creativity and Problem Solving

The arts are generally associated with creativity, so it is not a huge leap to consider the idea that participation in visual arts classes could enhance the development of creative problem solving skills. According to Fowler (1996), art classes generally encourage divergent, independent thinking and creative problem solving, which creates a feeling of ownership over the learned information. Fowler (1996) explains the creative requirements of the arts stating,

The arts usually do not demand one correct response. In this way the arts break through the true-false, name-this, memorize-that confines of public education. For every problem there may be many correct answers. This kind of reasoning is far more the case in the real world, where there are often many ways to do any one thing well. An effective work force needs both kinds of reasoning not just the standardized answer. (p. 5)

In summary, the arts offer many learning opportunities to students who are navigating the educational system. The educators and researchers in this chapter show the variety of ways that the arts can have an impact on students through various learning experiences. One should note that there are also those who challenge the evidence presented as having a relationship of correlation rather than causation. What is sought for this project, however, is not the opinion of art educators, researchers, theorists, nor the general public.

I wanted to discover how students who are labeled at risk value their studies in the visual arts and make connections to some of the ideas presented in the research by others in this review of literature. In this chapter I have investigated literature related to the topics of students who are labeled at-risk and the impact of art education for these students. In the following chapter I will explain the plan for conducting this research, including methods and means of analysis, along with the population I have chosen for conducting my research.

Chapter III: The Design of the Study

Introduction

A variety of research currently exists that assesses the various effects of the visual arts, however little information exists regarding the value of the visual arts from the stories and perspectives of students. This study seeks to uncover the stories of students who are labeled at-risk regarding their perspectives of, and experiences with, visual arts education. The central question of the study asks what the stories of high school students who have been labeled at-risk can reveal about their visual art experiences. The sub-questions seek to discover the various and more specific ways in which the students think about their experiences. For example, I would like to know how students who are labeled at-risk perceive the value of their art education. In addition, I investigate the personal, social, and emotional development of students who are labeled at-risk regarding how they perceive these aspects are influenced by their participation in visual art experiences. I will also collect the stories of students that include their opinions regarding how visual art classes might impact the way they think about and approach challenges. Concluding my investigation, I attempt to discover how students think visual art classes have an impact on how they view or rate their overall educational experience (considering factors of motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm). Apart from the information I will be pulling directly from the students' stories, I will also be looking to discover what I and other teachers can learn from a study on how students who are labeled at risk think about their visual arts education. To reach all of these goals, I will need to consider the context and all related background information accompanying these topics. The next section will discuss the information needed prior to conducting this study.

Information Needed

In order to properly study the research questions, I first needed to gather information on several related topics, which included exploring the definitions of and contextual understandings of the at-risk label that is used to identify students who experience challenges to their education. I also needed to find out the identified or previously researched impacts (including academic, personal, and motivational) of student experiences in visual arts education. Lastly, I needed to know how to successfully interpret and derive meaning from the stories of students when using a qualitative narrative research approach. The review of literature in Chapter II explores research involving students who are labeled at-risk as well as the various benefits of art education. The information in Chapter II serves as both background information for me as the researcher, but also as a point of comparison to the information I uncover from the findings of this study. In this chapter, I will present the design of my study, including the method of inquiry.

Method of Inquiry

After exploring the various options for gathering data, I chose to utilize a qualitative approach focusing on narrative research. According to Merriam (2009) using a qualitative study focuses on “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). An approach that falls within the qualitative genre is narrative research. Narrative analysis uses stories as data, and according to Merriam (2009), these stories should be first person accounts that are detailed and thorough. Merriam (2009) explains how the stories are analyzed for meaning, stating that the meaning(s) are interpreted and

deciphered from the way the story is constructed, the linguistics used, and the cultural context of the story. I chose to start gathering information by way of interviews in order to begin eliciting the stories that my student-participants have to tell. Later in this chapter, I will describe in detail the specific approaches I used when conducting my interviews.

I believe a qualitative narrative research approach is most appropriate for this study since the central goal is to gain a more thorough understanding of the perspectives and beliefs of individual students based on their interpretations of their personal visual art experiences. Next I will explain the theoretical framework used as the foundation of my research.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

What is a theoretical framework? Merriam (2009) likens a theoretical framework to the structure or “scaffolding” of the study. According to Merriam (2009), adopting a theoretical framework allows the researcher to make more clear and reasoned decisions regarding both how and what data should be gathered. She explains in her earlier writings that working within a theoretical framework is a way to maintain consistencies in the definitions, concepts, and theories within a literature base because the entire process is “theory-laden” (p. 48) and theory effects every aspect of the study, from determining the problem to knowing what to look for and making sense of the data (1998).

In the previous section I explained how I will be using narrative research with an emphasis on interviews as the main method of gathering data. Roulston (2007) identifies six conceptions of interviewing, with each fixed in a different theoretical framework.

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework of Postmodernism and can be described by Roulston's postmodern conception of interviewing. According to Roulston, a postmodern approach to interviewing describes that the aim of the interview is not to come up with a single perception of the self because there is no essential self (2007). In Postmodern theory, reality is based on our interpretations of what the world means to us individually; there is not absolute truth, as realities are plural and relative (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002). This belief aligns with the topic of this research since the goal of the study is to uncover the various truths and/or realities of individual students based on their visual art experiences. The site in which the students gain their experiences related to this research is described next.

Site of the Study

I chose to conduct this research within my own classroom at Park Ridge Middle-High School. Not only do I teach at this school, but I am also an alumnus, so I feel confident in describing my understanding of this district. It is important to remember that familiarity can also breed bias, so throughout this study I have attempted to stay aware of the fact that, although beneficial, my familiarity could also be problematic if I neglect to confirm all of my personal beliefs with legitimate data. To validate and add specificity to my own descriptions, I utilized the demographic information provided within the district profile made available on the school's website to fill any gaps in my own personal knowledge.

Park Ridge Middle-High School (PRMHS) is a rural district located in Western New York. Park Ridge MHS is located in a small, one stoplight town of approximately 5,000 residents. The school is surrounded by cornfields and located on an 80-acre

campus north of the village of Park Ridge. The town of Park Ridge and the surrounding area is known for its agricultural communities. Two of the largest farms in the state are located within the district. This fact may become evident to those passing through the area, as they experience through multiple senses the telltale signs of farm life to which the residents of this town have grown accustomed (including the town's distinctive aroma, courtesy of the cow population). Park Ridge is a small, quiet town that is a far cry from the fast-paced bustle of city living. In fact, if you live in Park Ridge you have to get used to moving very slowly, as it is a common occurrence to be stuck driving behind a tractor on any given road.

The rural agricultural setting describes the lifestyle and implies the values of this small town. The community is very close-knit, and many of the students are related to each other or have close family-like relationships. The average graduating class size currently in the district is approximately 60, which gives the students plenty of opportunity to get to know their peers very well. By middle school, most students not only know every one of their classmates personally, but could also (in most cases) tell you the names of their siblings and hobbies as well. The families in this town utilize the open spaces of their community fully and pride themselves on "country living," which is evident in the strong hunting, fishing, and snowmobiling pastimes of many of the students. The country living theme is even integrated into the curricula of the school at times, with square dancing lessons during physical education classes every winter being one of the most anticipated traditions of the year.

The population of the district is predominately white, with minimal racial diversity. Out of the entire district there are only a few students with racially or

culturally diverse backgrounds, which are mainly Hispanic, African-American, and Native American. The majority of the families in this district have low to middle class incomes, and 43% of the students are on free or reduced cost lunch programs. Park Ridge has an 89% graduation rate with around a 12% drop out rate (based on 2010-2011 school year).

To obtain permission to conduct research at this site, I submitted a request and received a letter of approval from the principal of the school. Further permission was granted from the students I selected for this study, as well as from their parents. I also received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the college's Research Foundation. In the next section, I will describe the selection process for the participants in this project.

Participants and Participant Selection

In order to be considered for participation in this research study, the subjects had to be currently or recently enrolled in one of my high school art classes at Park Ridge. I chose a total of six students to participate in this study. Three of the subjects are either identified as at-risk or facing significant challenges that may interfere with their education (Bulger & Watson, 2006). The remaining three students are those who generally have success in school, with no identifying factors of being at-risk. The inclusion of both groups of students was to limit the possibility for the students labeled at-risk to feel singled out or different as a result of being chosen for this study. In addition, I believed that collecting data from both groups of students would be helpful in terms of having two sets of data for comparison. After coming up with a preliminary list of participants in the category of students labeled at-risk, I consulted with the counselor

and principal for their opinions in order to find the most appropriate candidates for this study. Merriam (2009) refers to this type of sampling as non-probability purposeful sampling, which she explains as “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.77).

Once I had received confirmation from the counselor and principal regarding their agreement to my choices, I narrowed the list by carefully considering who I believed would best respond to the study’s main data collection process of interviewing and story-gathering. I tried to choose students who would be willing and able to comfortably articulate their personal narratives regarding their art experiences while also allowing for variation within the needs and challenges of each participant selected. When choosing the remaining students (those not labeled at-risk), I also used a non-probability purposeful sampling method starting with a list of students currently enrolled in my classes. I attempted to choose students who each exhibited different strengths and interests in terms of their educational participation to obtain three unique and differing perspectives within their stories. In Chapter IV, I will further introduce each of the individual participants. Next I will discuss my role as researcher in this study.

Role of Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) would describe the role I played as researcher as that of a participant observer, meaning that as the teacher of the students being studied, I participated in the group as their educator. My observational methods and procedures were conducted both during my daily teaching routines and also after the school day

ended. During the school day I observed students in their classes and recorded field notes. I collected documents produced by the students such as journal entries and reflection statements in which they wrote about the artworks they created, a practice that is part of our regular classroom routine. I conducted interviews with the students both during and after the school day. In the next section I will explain my data collection methods in more detail.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure that the data I collected was as thorough and accurate as possible, I employed three separate research methods which would allow me to triangulate my findings (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). The combination of observation, interview, and document analysis techniques allowed me to compare the data that each research method provided in order to validate the findings and come to more thorough conclusions. Merriam (2009) supports the use of multiple research methods writing, “Observation is a major means of collecting data in qualitative research. It offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam, 2002, p. 136). In this section I will review each of the research methods I used, beginning with observation.

According to Merriam (2009), observations should take place in the location where the phenomenon actually occurs. She writes, “Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the topic under study” (Merriam, 2009). In conducting my observations, I took detailed field notes

that described the atmosphere of the environment as well as the conversations, actions, and interactions of the students.

In conducting my interviews, I used a mix of semi-structured and unstructured or informal interview approaches. Merriam (2009) discusses these approaches in her writings, and explains that a semi-structured interview approach begins with an interview guide that includes a list of questions that the researcher plans to ask. Along with using an open-ended questioning approach, I also took great measures to keep the interview exploratory and the interview atmosphere casual and conversation-like (Merriam, 2009). I continually encouraged students to answer honestly and descriptively, as the goal was for students to answer interview questions in a manner that would allow their responses to develop into stories or a story-like format. This approach is described by Merriam (2009) as a phenomenological interview. She explains that phenomenological interviews attempt to uncover the essence of an individual's experience by focusing on "the deep, live meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105; as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 93).

Document analysis was the third method I employed to build upon the data I gathered from student's stories. Merriam (2009) describes the various types of documents that can be used in qualitative research, including personal documents, visual documents, and researcher generated documents. While conducting this study, I analyzed documents within each of these categories such as student journal entries, written responses to questionnaires, and student artworks. I also reviewed student records that provided contextual information regarding the students who have been labeled at-risk

such as diagnosed learning disabilities, cognitive disorders, and emotional disturbances. Because of the privacy required, student records were not used as part of the data to be analyzed within the research, only as a guide to assist in selecting the student participants. As a teacher I have a responsibility to review confidential documents, such as Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and 504 plans in order to adapt curriculum and instruction to my students' needs. However, this information was not included in this research report in order to maintain the confidentiality of the student records.

As I gathered data using each of the methods described above (interview, observation, and document analysis), I made a conscious effort to keep an open mind and be receptive to any new information that came my way, even if it was not anticipated or in line with my own beliefs or preconceived notions. This effort was one I combined with a variety of additional measures I took in an attempt to maintain the ethical integrity of the study. In the next section, I will review additional ethical issues that had to be considered throughout the duration of the study.

Ethical Issues

When conducting any research, one must consider the many ethical issues that inevitably arise. Bresler suggests an approach for conducting an ethical study. She says, "In the quest for ethical conduct, it is often a process of prioritizing rather than following a perceived right answer" (Bresler, 1996, p. 141). Throughout the study, I made a continuous effort to identify and work towards changing any biases that I may have had. When conducting interviews, I avoided using leading questions or using any other form of questioning that would result in my students feeling uncomfortable or unable to answer honestly. In conducting observations, ethical dilemmas can also occur regarding

the participants' awareness that they are being observed. I chose to inform my classes that I would be observing them in class, and I assured them that the recordings made from these observations would be confidential. Ensuring validity in both the collection and interpretation of data was another consideration of importance in maintaining the ethical integrity of the study. In conducting my literature review I collected data from well-respected and peer-reviewed publications, and when implementing my own research, I asked participants whether I interpreted their actions and comments correctly to cross-check their stories (Merriam, 2009).

Maintaining confidentiality was an important consideration in all aspects of this study. Pseudonyms were used for all identifying names of people and places involved in this study. In addition, assent forms were completed by every participant, as well as consent forms by the parents/guardians of each student-participant. I obtained permission from the principal of the school to conduct research within my classroom and this student population. Obtaining IRB approval was the final step I took in order to receive permission to conduct this study.

Reciprocity refers to the idea that the participants may benefit from the research along with the benefits I gain as the researcher. Bresler (1996) describes reciprocity as, "increasing the benefits and minimizing the hurt" (p.142). Through participation in the study, students had opportunity to voice their opinions regarding their educational opportunities. They had a chance to reflect on the experiences they have had, which allowed them to develop a more evolved understanding of their wants and needs as students. Another potential benefit of this study is the contribution of knowledge about what works in the field of art education. This knowledge can be used by educators to

improve strategies, benefiting both teachers and students. Now that I have reviewed the steps I took in planning the implementation of this study, I will next discuss how I managed the data throughout the research process.

Data Management Plan and Analysis Strategies

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained procedures and organizational techniques to ensure that the information was properly catalogued and secured. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in entirety. In anticipation of equipment failure, however, I also took notes to record my own thoughts and feelings during the interview as suggested by Creswell (2007).

My observations were thoroughly described in field notes. The field notes contained detailed information about all aspects of the environment including, “portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of dialogue, a description of the physical setting, [and] accounts of particular events, or activities” (Creswell, 2007, pp.181-182). In a separate column (so not to confuse my interpretations with observed facts), I recorded my personal thoughts including “speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1996, p. 121; as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 182).

All of the notes, transcriptions, and documents I collected over the course of the study were organized into binders under tabs of relevant categories. I used color coding to identify emerging topics and themes. As the study progressed, I identified patterns among categories and allowed the findings to emerge. To avoid being overwhelmed with information at the conclusion of the data collection process, Merriam (2009) recommends beginning to analyze the data as it is being collected. This allows the researcher to begin

to identify themes and categories as they emerge, making the data easier to manage once the research is complete and the final analysis begins. Merriam (2009) also recommends the constant comparative method of data analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for grounded theory. She explains that this method's approach of constantly comparing data gathered from various sources may lead to tentative categories that are then compared and refined until a grounded theory develops. Merriam writes, "Since the theory is grounded in the data and emerges from them, the methodology is called *grounded theory*" (2009, p. 200).

I organized my data by utilizing coding techniques suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2007) within the writings of Merriam (2009). I began by tagging any and all data as it was collected that I thought to be relevant to the study. This is called open coding (Merriam, 2009). I then progressed to axial coding, in which I compared emerging categories together in order to refine them into a more concise scheme of relevant information (Merriam, 2009). Finally I used selective coding, which allowed me to develop core categories from my findings (Merriam, 2009).

Conclusion

I conducted a qualitative narrative study in order to discover the stories that students have to tell about their experiences with visual arts education. I used purposeful sampling to choose six students for this study, three of whom were identified as at-risk . The three additional students were chosen to protect the students from feeling alienated, as well as to gather stories for comparison. I collected data for this study within my own classroom in a rural school in Western New York. As a participant observer, I was first and foremost a teacher and completed my duties as researcher along with my teaching

responsibilities. My main form of data collection was interviewing, which allowed me to elicit stories from the students, although I also used observation and document analysis to triangulate my findings.

Prior to collecting my data I obtained consent from the student participants, parents, and principal of the school involved in the study. I submitted my plan for the study in advance to the IRB, and began data collection once approval was confirmed. I collected data through interviews, observation, and document analysis, and continually analyzed, categorized, and cross-referenced information to allow meanings to emerge. In this chapter I outlined my approach in planning, collecting, managing, and analyzing data for this research project. Chapter IV will describe the findings from these various data collection methods.

Chapter IV: The Data

This qualitative study began with its aim at uncovering the thoughts and perspectives of students who are labeled at risk on the value of their experiences in visual art education. Research in the past found that visual arts experiences can benefit students in a variety of ways, from helping them to better perform in other classes to improving their self-concept. Some of this research is critiqued as confusing correlation with causation in regard to these benefits. Adding another dimension to the existing research, this study looked at what six of the students in my art classroom had to say regarding their perspective on the impact of participating in visual art courses. In this chapter, the data collected over 10 weeks of interviews, observations, and document analysis is presented. The following sections describe the setting where data was collected, discuss the information presented by the students via their stories (gathered during interviews and observations) and artworks, and introduce this information within categories of emerging themes.

Setting Description

Driving through the town of Park Ridge, the first thing one may notice is how empty it seems. Noticeably little bustle or traffic can be seen, except for the occasional child riding a bike or someone walking a dog. Unless you happen to be driving through town when students are walking to and from school in the morning and afternoon, you may not see anyone at all.

Signs of life do exist, in the presence of the town's few but thriving businesses. Driving through the town towards the school the local pizza shop comes into view, which brightens up the surrounding predominately brown and gray town with bold stripes of

red, white, and green along the siding. Opposite the school campus, another restaurant stands out. As a relatively new construction, this building is a rarity in this quiet town.

Approaching the border of the village, moving past the single stoplight, the school campus comes into view. Situated on a sprawling 80-acre campus, the elementary and middle-high school buildings are sandwiched between a cornfield and a large and beautiful, but dilapidated, old Victorian home. Both single-story buildings are long, narrow structures with brick exteriors. The middle-high and elementary schools are separated by a large parking lot that is reserved for student and staff parking, and a single shared digital sign that welcomes visitors and flashes reminders of upcoming events.

The art room itself stands in stark contrast to the monotonous design of the building's exterior. This particular room is located in a wing that is a relatively new addition to the middle-high school, which was completed in the late 1990's. Upon entering the room (aside from its vast size) the first thing that hits you is an almost shocking brightness. Walking through the classroom door and looking to the right reveals the source of the brightness, a row of four 8'x 5' windows along the back of the room which floods the space with natural light. Looking up, the natural light is enhanced by row upon row of overhead lights that helps to reveal all the bright color and clutter that this nearly 1,500 square foot room has to offer.

Opposite the wall of windows is a scene of semi-organized chaos. A series of sliding white boards are covered with images held up by colorful bar magnets. These images range greatly in size, color, and material; with some being as simple as magazine cut-outs ranging to fully executed mixed-media artworks. Anchored at the center of the display of images is a SmartBoard, which, unless it is being used for a demonstration,

displays the essential goals of the day for each individual class.

The room is informally divided into two sections. The front half, which you walk into as you enter the room, has two rows of large square wooden tables, which is the primary working environment for the students. There are six tables in total, which are surrounded by black and gray stools for the students. The tables have built in drawers from which the students can easily access their artworks, folders, and materials. The walls surrounding the tables are plastered with posters and hanging artworks. There is very little exposed wall, and the various colors and designs of the displayed images adds to the brightness and business of the room, which seems to overflow with artworks despite its' open concept and large size.

A station with four sinks serves as the unofficial divider of the room from front to back. Behind and to the right of the sinks sit two large metal tables that are covered with a variety of ceramics tools, glazes, and student works. To the left of the sinks the walls are lined with three electric and two kick wheels, also for the ceramics class. In the far left corner, a door leads you into a room containing several cupboards for storage and a kiln. Framing the back half of the room is a long white countertop, which is piled with materials, student artworks, art tools, and various other odds and ends such as backpacks and art smocks that students often leave out when they plan to return to the room throughout the day.

As you scan the room, there seems to be one organized area in the middle of all the clutter. The wall in the back to the right of the windows displays a sea of examples of projects that are created throughout the various courses in a school year. These examples include drawings, paintings, collages, and photographs that are hung salon

style, covering the entire wall from ceiling to just above the countertops. The size of this display alone will catch a viewer's eye, but it is the variety within the images that often leaves people staring at the wall for several minutes as they examine each artwork.

Taking a second scan of the room, after you adjust and look past the artworks and examples displayed across the walls, other items begin to emerge from the brightness. A table in the front left corner of the room next to one end of the white boards holds a desktop computer and several stacks of binders and papers containing various handouts, worksheets, and writing prompts for the students. On the other end of the whiteboard sits a tall wood cupboard filled with various art materials. Dozens of soda cans are perched on top of the cupboard, which almost serve as a history of design due to the variety of logos of the past emblazoned on each can. Three airbrush stations sit immediately to the right of the cupboard, only they currently are more reminiscent of caves, as they are the only dark area of the room and are filled with books that are piled and stacked with some sort of organizational strategy that is not easily identified at a glance. Rounding the corner of the room sits an entrance into an adjoining room which is the teacher's office. The office is like a miniature version of the classroom in that its walls are plastered with papers and images with piles of books and materials covering every open space.

Within this setting I conducted research with six of my students. All information was gathered from observations in the classroom and interviews in the adjoining office. In the next section, I will review the specific procedures used throughout this process and explain how the data will be presented within the remaining sections of Chapter IV.

Review of Data Collection, Analysis, and Organization Approach

The information presented in this chapter has been collected from a triangulation of interview, observation, and document analysis techniques. The data gathered from the interviews served as the main source of information, since narrative research is focused on finding meaning in stories and personal responses. I used field notes recorded from my daily observations of students to back up and enrich the interview content. The main documents used for analysis are artworks created by the students. This was also done as a way to confirm the information in an attempt to triangulate the data for accuracy.

The data is organized and categorized in this chapter by each student case individually. The individual sections for each student begin with an overview of how and why the student was selected. I will then describe background information for each student, providing an overview of the student's home life and academic history. The concluding sections for each student will provide specific examples of the conclusions resulting from the findings of this research, utilizing direct quotes, specific observations, and photographs of student artwork that can be found in the appendices.

This chapter will close with a summary of the findings outlined within the various student sections. Commonalities and variations within the data will be discussed, providing specific evidence explaining how the emerging themes were identified. Finally, this chapter segues to Chapter V, in which I will discuss my overall conclusions, as well as how the data revealed by this research connects to the existing data from the review of literature in Chapter II. I begin by discussing the data gathered from the three students were identified as at-risk.

Student Participants who are Labeled At-Risk

Jessica. I started my research by interviewing and observing Jessica, one of my student-participants who has been labeled at-risk. Jessica is a senior in high school, and I chose her for this study because she has always been very enthusiastic about her work in Studio in Art class. She was also confirmed to be a student who could be considered at-risk due to academic and personal reasons. The high school guidance counselor, Mrs. M recommended Jessica as a student who might be appropriate for this study. According to Mrs. M, she considers Jessica to be at risk because she has struggled academically in the past (she has a history of multiple failed classes, particularly in her sophomore year), due to the struggles she has within her family. In conversations with Mrs. M, I learned that Jessica regularly deals with a lack of academic support from her parents. Jessica receives little to no encouragement from her family, which is something that Mrs. M and I have both noticed that she thrives on. Mrs. M stated that Jessica's dad treats her very poorly, and that Jessica regularly receives verbal abuse from him. Mrs. M said there is no confirmation, but she has also at times suspected physical abuse. Regarding Jessica's mother, Mrs. M's main assessment is that she is often discouraging and not supportive of Jessica's education. When Jessica was in her junior year, she had not yet accumulated any math credits as a result of consistently failed those classes in years prior. When the school provided her with summer school support, Jessica did not show up and her parents did not return multiple calls and voice mails from the guidance office. Mrs. M said that Jessica's parents did not even respond to the school when they expressed concerns about her not being able to graduate on time.

Background information.

Observations. One of the first things I observed about Jessica when I met her is that she does not put much effort or concern into her outward appearance. She often comes to school in her pajamas and does not wear any make-up; her hair is usually in a messy ponytail. Although she puts a great deal of effort into our class projects, she often outright ignores or fails to complete smaller class requirements such as weekly sketches or journal assignments. I have noticed that Jessica tends to ignore work that does not meet her immediate interests. She takes a lot of pride in the work she does choose to do, and takes her paintings home almost daily. Jessica has taken on additional projects of her own, such as landscape paintings, a painting of a giraffe for a friend, a painting of a deer for her father (see Appendix H), and a painting of a rose for her mother. She comes to my classroom every day for office hours (a period of the school day reserved for students to meet with teachers for extra help), and she works on her various art projects during this time. Jessica does not hesitate to seek my assistance with her work in class or her personal art projects.

Every day, Jessica calls me over to her station frequently (approximately every 5-10 minutes) to check her work because she has a fear of “messaging it up.” However, she displays confidence through the way she talks about her finished work and takes on challenging projects. Jessica told me that her other teachers want to see what she is doing in art class, which leads me to believe she talks regularly about her artwork in her other courses.

Jessica spent nearly two months on the painting of the deer for her father. She started this painting in mid-February, and said she was starting it so far in advance (with

plans of giving it as a Father's Day gift) because she wanted it to be "perfect." One particular day, she asked me to help her because she thought she "messed something up" with the deer head and eye; she wanted me to tell her what she did wrong. I sat down and studied her work, and eventually informed her that I could not find anything wrong with her drawing; it just needed to be developed further for it to "look right." I expected her to protest or not believe me, but she just said, "Okay, I'll keep going," and went back to work. She showed it to me again a few minutes later and I commented on how much the additional details helped. I held up the canvas to show it to her, and she looked pleasantly surprised with how it looked and agreed that the extra work did help to make it look better. She also acknowledged that it helped to see it from a distance, with me holding it up for her. She then started mixing every single color so that she could have them ready and "perfect" in advance. While she was preparing her paints, Jessica told me that she was "so excited" to be working on this project. She was late leaving class because she was so insistent on getting everything done so she could work after break. Almost every day, Jessica is late leaving my class because she waits to the last minute to clean up.

In early March, Jessica asked if she could use class time to work on her deer painting instead of our assigned project. I agreed to let her do this because she had spent a lot of time outside of class already on the assigned project, and I was happy with her motivation on the deer painting. She did, however, continue to complete the regular coursework on Wednesdays, which are class days dedicated to working on 40 minute sketches. On one particular Wednesday, she seemed frustrated by the assignment. Halfway through the class she crumpled up her paper and started over. Once she changed objects, she did much better and finished up the class in a better mood. I noted this

because it was one of the rare times that Jessica exhibited a lack of patience with her work in my class.

In addition to her motivation for her personal projects, Jessica was always eager to help me manage the materials in class. One particular day she noticed my white paint dispenser needed to be refilled. After discussing how difficult it is to get paint out of the jugs once they almost empty, she suggested cutting the jug open so we could scrape out the remaining paint from the inside. I decided it was a good idea, so after experimenting with a few saws and other cutting devices, I managed to cut it in half. She seemed to have a great time with this, even saying “I’ve never been so excited in my life!” The success of her problem solving and contribution to the art environment was very pleasing to her. She completely abandoned her project to help me cut open and clean out the rest of the paint jugs. Her urgency to work on her painting faded quickly once she realized we could spend the day working on the paint containers with me.

On another particular day during office hours I was setting up to paint the background set for our school’s upcoming musical performance *Cabaret*. The music teacher asked me to paint large black panels and splatter brightly colored paint over them. Jessica immediately dropped what she was doing to help when she saw what I was doing. Without hesitation, she got down on the floor to start painting the black background. She and another student, Peter (who is also labeled at-risk) were very helpful and diligent in painting all four panels completely black, which was not an easy task since it involved crawling around on the floor and reaching long distances to get everything covered. After helping to choose what colors we used to splatter and she, Peter, and I completed the entire task within a 30 minute time frame. I expected this to be a project that would take a couple of days, not one class period. Throughout the period, Jessica mentioned

several times how much fun this was, and her enthusiasm for the task was very apparent by her smiles, motivation, and many suggestions on how and where to place the paint.

Jessica's motivated and optimistic attitude was not always consistent. Some days she would be more sullen and be easily aggravated. On one particular day, without my bringing up or prompting her, she said "I love being in this room, I wish I never had to leave and could stay here all day! Actually I would love to be an art teacher, but I hate people!" She followed up by making comments about the other students in her class, and expressing how she didn't understand why they would always want to leave before the bell rings, and how they "bother" her. (Even though they do not ever do or say anything that is directed towards her, she seems to become annoyed simply by their presence.) While cleaning up on another day, she made a comment about the "little ones" (her younger classmates) being "so annoying" because they got into a debate about what kind of music we were going to listen to for the day. On another occasion, Jessica complained about how much they "get up and move around" and mentioned how distracting she thinks they are. Jessica's aversion to her classmates is also evident because she usually sits alone and comments regularly her annoyance at the conversations and actions of others.

Around mid-March, Jessica started to show frustration with how the landscape of her deer painting was coming out, I showed her how to use a palette knife to paint with more texture. She was very unsure at first and it took her several minutes to decide if she wanted to use that technique for her painting. Eventually she decided to go with it and left class optimistic about how it would turn out. She mentioned several times how excited she was to have this new technique and that she was happy about how it was

turning out. She even showed off her work to some of the other students in the room, and looked proud upon hearing their reactions.

Approximately two months into the data collection process, I was asked to refuse Jessica permission to come to my room for office hours. I received an email from the principal letting me know that Jessica was being asked to go to other classrooms because she was failing basic Geometry and PE . She started coming back as soon as she caught up on her work, and when she returned about a week later she seemed pent-up with information about her family that she wanted to share with me. She told me that her brother was on probation and that he has drug and alcohol problems. Jessica expressed fears that he will “mess up” and go to jail, leaving her niece without a present father.

During our interview (described in the following sections), Jessica said that she has two brothers, but she did not go into any details about either of them. However from observations in class, I am aware that her younger brother Ned has severe cognitive impairments. He is in the life-skills program through the local BOCES, a program for students with special needs that render them incapable of following the traditional academic path. Ned occasionally comes into the art room to work on personal projects, and when that happens, Jessica often shifts gears when he is in the room. She watches him very closely, seems very protective, and aids him regularly to make sure he stays on track.

The information presented in this section was analyzed alongside the information Jessica relayed to me during the interview. Next I will present the data from our interview sessions, organized into categories starting with information about her personal background.

Personal information obtained from interviews. I started every interview by asking each participant to describe themselves. Jessica began by telling me that she is 18 years old, and that although technically a senior in high school, she will not be graduating this year due to failing too many classes in the past. She, like many other students in the district says that she enjoys hunting and fishing as a hobby. She also works about 10-15 hours a week for a dog kennel on a nearby reservation. She says that she enjoys her job and that it is “fun on some days, harder on others.”

Throughout the interview, Jessica went back and forth between speaking fondly of her family, and describing the challenges she has at home. In addition to her two brothers, she also has an older sister. She has one niece, who she adores and whom she mentioned her often throughout the interview. Her parents are married, although she admitted that sometimes she wishes her mother would leave her father. Jessica also addressed the difficult relationship she has with her father. In her words,

Me and my dad didn't get along. We still don't get along. He's with my mom, we're still in one household but...some days I feel like she should divorce him, some days I think she should stay with him. Like, a couple days ago, I don't know if you noticed but I was in a very grumpy mood and that was because my dad said to me, 'You wonder why I hate you.'

And I don't like my dad, I never have. He accuses me of everything.

Knowing about the tumultuous relationship she has with her father, I asked how she thought her father would respond to the deer painting she was working on. She said, “He might be happy; he loves deer, so....I'll be very upset if he's not, if he's like 'I hate it!' That might be a moment where I'm like... 'Fine!' (and give up.)”

Even though Jessica admits her family life is difficult, she says she tries to keep it in perspective. She told me, “Compared to some people’s.....my issues are like nothing. I am blessed in that I still have both my parents and that they are still together. Some days I don’t want them to be, but it’s better that they are ‘cause we’re complete I guess.”

Jessica also told me a long story about a woman, Debbie, who she described as “a family friend, kind of like a second mom.” She told me that Debbie committed suicide about 7 years ago when Jessica was 11 years old. According to Jessica, Debbie often used art to express herself and help her through her various challenges in life, which were both physical and emotional in nature. Jessica told me that she often thinks of Debbie when she is working on her art. She said, “I still miss her all the time, and uh, the painting has like inspired me too...I’ve always wanted to learn how to paint like she painted. She was the main reason I took art in ninth grade.”

This information reveals the challenges that Jessica faces in her personal life. Her tumultuous relationship with her father, combined with having a sibling with special needs and losing a mother figure has contributed to her status as a student labeled at-risk. However, these struggles have also strengthened and encouraged her participation in the visual arts. The next section will introduce the findings regarding Jessica’s perception of her education.

General education information obtained from interviews. “I am a good student now...but not in the past.” This quote summarizes how Jessica perceives her educational path in school so far. She describes her current performance in school by saying, “I was doing really good...then I was absent a couple days. My English grade is like a 40. Never been on honor roll...my grades throughout the years have kind of been C’s. I’ve

never really failed, just 10th grade year I was failing things.” Jessica then told me about her experiences during sophomore year. She said she failed all of her classes and acted out regularly:

Tenth grade year, my grandma died. I was okay in the beginning and then she passed. It was all awful. I was a very grumpy kid. I didn’t like anything my tenth grade year. (They) did everything they could think of to help me, but I was just...I had ISS (in-school suspension) all the time, I had detentions all the time. I had issues with other things, but...it was just, (losing) grandma was the worst.

She then explained that the death of her grandmother strained her already tense relationship with her father, saying, “It was his mom that died, so his rage was higher. Everyone was in arguments.”

When asked about her general opinion on school, she said “I tolerate it. I don’t hate it. I don’t like sitting in classroom and learning and writing.” One of her biggest critiques about most of her core classes is that “you just don’t get to pick what you want to do. You don’t get that option...you just don’t.” Jessica has a particular difficulty with math, and she told me that it took her three years to pass Algebra saying, “It’s mainly I don’t understand it. I’ve never been good at math and I don’t have a lot of patience for it...ugh, it’s boring; just numbers.”

Jessica told me that her favorite parts about school are when she gets to see her friends, and her favorite classes are Studio in Art, PR Pride, and MST (Math, Science, and Technology). In MST she learned that she likes circuits and that has led her to want to be an electrician. She explains, “We did an electrical circuit, which gives you power.

It was fun. I was going to do art, but then my mom was like, ‘That’s not going to get you anywhere.’” Throughout the interview, Jessica also talked a lot about a class called PR Pride, which is a new elective that was offered this year designed to highlight aspects of the school community. She explains why she enjoys it, saying,

We get to get out and it’s not just strictly notes and writing, we’re doing a bunch of stuff. We go out and we decorate things. It’s fun, I get to make my own posters, so I get to use my creativeness in that aspect.

Jessica explains that a lot of the time, for her school is “just all the stereotypical sitting in a classroom. I don’t like sitting either, I think it’s boring.” She describes herself as a visual and kinesthetic learner saying:

I’m visual and I also like to do things hands on. I like looking at things but I am also wanting to touch things. I have to touch it to understand it and stuff like that. Like with visual I like seeing the changes in things; it’s fun. Those are the only two ways I learn. I’m not one for sitting and writing.

Jessica explained that she prefers non-traditional modes of assessment saying, “I’m not a good test-taker. I’ve learned that. I hate it when I hear people flipping the pages, I think I have to rush and.... Yeah, it’s the pressure of everyone going so fast, I think I’m gonna run out of time.” Jessica explains that she prefers alternate methods of assessment such as having the opportunity to write essays or complete projects, where she can work more in her own space and at her own pace. Throughout the interview, Jessica mentioned several times the she often gets migraines brought on by harsh

transitions in light, specifically mentioning instances when she has to take notes off of a Smart Board or projector.

Perspectives on the value of visual art experiences.

Art experiences, environment, and atmosphere. After describing her other classes, Jessica concluded by saying, “then I come to Art and that’s my favorite thing to do out of everything.” Jessica is taking Studio in Art for the second time. She said she wanted to take it again this year because “I wanted to; I love drawing. I wanted to take ‘Drawing & Painting’ but it didn’t fit (in my schedule.)” Jessica talked about her first experience taking Studio in Art saying, “I liked it, but not the way he was teaching it. He gave us A’s on everything and I didn’t like it. I wouldn’t like the project at all and he would just give an A.” She then explained another negative experience she had during her first time taking Studio in Art:

“With (Mr. Thomas) - the portraits....aghg. Self-portraits. It was the way he made me do it; because I saw the way I wanted to do it differently. And the way he saw it...when it was done it did not look like me at all. And it bothered me so much, it looks horrible. And he made us do a color, like the one side of our face, he made us do in color. Like not on our face, but behind it. So he made us do this blue color and it was just not appealing at all. He made us choose that color because he said it was the ‘best’ color. It was just ugh.”

Regarding her experiences in Studio this year, Jessica explained, “I have definitely widened my understanding on art. Like grid drawing I never realized how to do it.” When asked if there were any aspects about the Studio in Art class she did not

like, she said, “I can’t really say there’s anything about it I don’t like.” She followed up her answer with talking about how she has had the opportunity to make changes to assigned projects that allowed her to create artworks that challenged her and suited her interests more specifically. As an example, Jessica talked about the first time she was allowed to develop her own assignment, which was a fall landscape painting inspired by Debbie, the woman she considered a mother figure:

Well for the first (painting) was a tree, a fall tree. It was the orange colors and the leaves falling. The ground was all orange because the leaves were on it. Um, I just had to draw it first, and it was a very close up tree, so all of the branches you could see and it definitely took like 10 layers of paint to get the right color to look like a tree. And it looks like leaves and how we defined like the shade behind them, I never would have realized that, that you would need that color to make that look like that. I definitely like painting.

Jessica also discussed how she enjoyed being able to complete extra work and experiment with new techniques: “I also learned how to paint during office hours from you. I come in to do my painting for class and also to do other things, to learn more.” This shows a motivation for learning that she did not express for the majority of her other courses. She followed up with explaining how this extra learning time has led her to one of her favorite achievements in art so far, painting with a palette knife.

I was very skeptical at first because I thought you were crazy when you first showed me actually! But now it makes sense, I see what it can do. I love the way it looks, I love the way it feels. Everybody pats my canvas

because of the texture of it. That's exciting. And it's different; I've never seen anything like that before. When you see something different in art is pretty cool."

Jessica also discussed how she values other new techniques learned in art classes and added, "Like with the charcoal, the shading. I've never been able to use charcoal before. And it's cool, I like that, shadows, learning 3D stuff." Ultimately, she related the aspect of her visual art experiences she values the most when she said:

It gives me the opportunity to change things into the way (I) want it to look. You give us the option of picking what we want to draw. Like for this project we got to pick what we wanted to draw and paint. Some kids do what they really want to do and what they really like. My niece is a part of my life, (so) mine is my niece.

In summary, Jessica described both positive and negative art experiences. The negative experience dealt with the teacher not allowing enough creative freedom. The positive experiences were times when she accomplished things she had never been able to before, with the freedom of trying new things and having choice in her projects. In her words, she "would cry" if the art program was eliminated; and she attributes its importance to the fact that in art she has "the opportunity to change things into the way you want it to look" and "the option of picking what we want to draw." She says that is significant because in other classes "You just don't get to pick what you want to do. You don't get that option. You just don't."

Emotional connections. During the interview Jessica touched on how art has had emotional connections for her in several ways. One of them is how she has used drawing

to relieve anger. Of these drawings she said, “I don’t understand them half the time. Like there are things I draw where I don’t understand what I decided to draw, how I got the image in my head, things like that.” Despite “not understanding them,” she believes it is helpful to her because “it’s a relaxing thing to do, just to draw; and some kids have a lot of stress and it’s a way of relieving it. I get my anger out; or if I’m frustrated I try to relieve it by painting.” Jessica said that the act of drawing and painting often calms her down. She attributes that to the level of focus she puts into her work. Jessica said that she knows that her artworks will not turn out if she doesn’t focus, so she will put the negativity out of her mind in order to be successful. She explains that this also benefits her in the long term, because along with calming her down, having a successful artwork “just makes me feel better about myself, because people like my stuff.” This statement reveals that Jessica recognizes her talent and that her efforts are noticed by others, something that has helped to improve her self-esteem and motivation.

Jessica also told me a story about a specific memory she with art that impacted her emotionally in a multi-faceted way:

Um, when I took photography with Gordon (the former Photography teacher), which was last year. We got to take pictures of things, and I took a pictures of an art brush; and I didn’t think it was gonna look good at all. Thought it was gonna look like crap. And it looked good and I was impressed with myself. I like stuff like that. And then we did another one outside and I took a picture of a tree that was blowing leaves and the ways the leaves were blowing I could see the motion in it. I don’t have it anymore, it’s depressing. It got water damage. My sister dumped a glass

of water on it. It was upsetting because it was like my best picture ever. I never took anything like that before.

This story relates how art has allowed Jessica to exceed her own expectations of herself, but also how she has had to deal with disappointment when she lost something precious that she created and valued. Even though she described losing her photograph as “depressing,” she said she is still glad she had that experience since she can carry the memory of her success with her. Also, she said, she now knows she has the skills to create something of beauty like that again. This reveals that her participation in the visual arts have provided her with an experience that has helped her learn to deal with disappointment, while also giving her confidence to continue her efforts despite her loss.

Jessica believes that art has also helped her connect with and understand others who also enjoy art. She explained, “A lot of kids like me are into it. I guess I mean, like, some kids are like me; they don’t like sitting in classroom and learning and writing.” She went on to explain how by watching and working with some of these other students, she has learned how people can successfully create artworks from different approaches and in varying styles. Jessica’s comment also reveals how she does not link her experiences in the art room with what she considers “learning.” It appears that although she values the opportunities and experiences of art, she does not understand them to be learning opportunities in the educational sense.

Jessica also acknowledged that through the visual arts she feels she can stay connected to Debbie. Jessica describes how she often thinks of her when she makes art. Jessica says that watching Debbie take her own life has helped her appreciate how

valuable an art experience can be, because she thinks that creating artwork was a coping mechanism for Debbie before her eventual suicide.

In summary, Jessica touched upon several ways art experiences have impacted her emotionally. She has learned to deal with loss and disappointment, but also had experiences that built up her self-esteem. In addition, she has seen how art can be a way to connect with others, both through a shared love of art and through a new way of understanding artistic approaches.

Attitude toward learning. “I’m actually trying and I want to get better.” Jessica revealed with this statement that often in her education she has not always tried or cared about being successful. She said she appreciates the opportunity to take art classes “because I’ve done it (drawing) for so long, and I guess I want to learn more. Because it is something I like and something I want to do. It’s definitely a class that you have to learn from.” Jessica also feels that art is an important subject to offer in schools because it allows an opportunity for choice, control, and variety within a system where much of their schedule is planned out for them. She explains, “You have so many forms of art in this school now, there is photography and ceramics, there are so many of them that you can pick from. And I think it his helpful because you have that choice.” At this district in particular, there are limited options for elective courses within other subject areas, so art is one of the few areas that allows them to choose from a variety of options based on their interests.

When asked to consider how her participation in art classes has impacted how she views her overall educational experience, Jessica stated that art has had a positive influence. She said that art classes “make me want to come to school. I used to never

want to come to school. Mainly I want to come to finish my paintings and I want to be a better painter.” Her experiences in art, along with her desire to be a better painter have inspired her to try new techniques, such as her latest attempts at painting with a palette knife described earlier. When I asked her if this has led her to be willing to try more new things that are outside of her comfort zone, she responded with an emphatic, “Yes!” She then told me how she has started searching online to research different styles and techniques of painting that she would like to try.

When asked if her participation in art classes has ever had any cross-curricular benefits, Jessica took time to think before she answered. She said there has never been any specific moment in a class where there has been a crossover of information from art. But she then added that art “helps me in PR Pride because of my creativeness.” She followed up with adding, “It’s taught me patience, and I’ve had more patience this year for math than any other year. I can see how math helps me with art now (referencing scale and proportion).”

To summarize, Jessica believes that by participating in art classes, particularly this year, she has had more motivation to attend school and to expand her mind to new learning opportunities. She credits her art experiences with helping her with creative challenges in other classes, such as those presented in PR Pride. She also realized that there is a connection between art and math, particularly when dealing with aspects of scale and proportion. Finally, she feels that her persistence with her painting projects has improved her overall patience for challenging tasks, particularly in math. This newfound patience can also be considered a trait that helps her in other areas of life. Next I will

discuss how Jessica believes her enhanced patience and other life skills have are connected to her participation in visual art classes.

Life skills. The patience Jessica referred to in the previous section also extends to other areas of life beyond the classroom. She explained that the way she thinks about and approaches challenges has changed since she went through these significant art experiences saying, “It basically teaches you to slow down; don’t just rush through it. Because if you rush through it, it could come out like crap.” She added “They (the lessons she has learned from painting) make you go back and think about (the challenge) more slowly and more rationally.” Jessica then reflected and explained her realization from watching others in art that sometimes one person may need to try harder than others to achieve the same results. “Some people can draw really fast and it can turn out perfectly. But that’s just the way you are I guess. (For me) it’s fun, but it takes time, and it’s a lot of layers....(I) need patience.” Understanding that there will not always be a level playing field in regards to the skills and abilities of peers is an important life lesson that Jessica has started to come to terms with through her art experiences.

Jessica also discussed how she has learned to work methodically in order to construct an accurate drawing. In her words:

Some people see a straight line and to others they see a curve....(Art) teaches perspective. It’s definitely taught me my lines. I’m one where if someone tilts their head, I want to do it straight. And it bugs me because if they are looking that way, everything has to be going that way; it can’t just be straight, because it isn’t gonna work. It’s all jumbled. So, it’s definitely taught me that.”

This quote explains how Jessica has learned that she has to closely observe something to truly understand it instead of just drawing it the way she “wants” it to be. She admits that it is more challenging that way, but the results are worth it for her, and she understands that the short cuts do not always pay off.

Jessica also talked about how art has revealed that it is okay to look at things differently, and how certain elements, such as color, can be interpreted in different ways. She specifically mentioned a painting she was working on at the time, in which she was using a multi-color technique within a grid system. She said,

Now I’m learning the shades (of various colors) and where to put them and how to look at them differently. Because sometimes I don’t see the shades that other people will see; but that is okay, and it can work in more than one way.

In closing, Jessica feels that through learning how to draw, she has also learned how to carefully observe the world around her. In addition, she also recognizes that there are multiple ways that things can be represented through art, and that no matter what, perspectives and abilities can vary from person to person. She has come to accept that there are times when taking the easy road or short cut does not always pay off in the long run, and that by being patient and working methodically she is setting herself up for better results.

At the close of Chapter IV, I discuss how the data obtained from my research with Jessica aligns with that of my other student-participants. The next section introduces the second student-participant who was labeled at risk, Brian.

Brian. Brian is a tenth grader who was also identified by the school guidance counselor as a student who is considered at-risk. According to Mrs. M, Brian has an identified learning disability and has been in special education programs since elementary school. She recognizes that Brian is a hard worker, but also stated that he requires frequent guided study halls with a special education teacher to help him understand and complete his coursework. Mrs. M believes that Brian is no longer in danger of not graduating, and she credits his guided study halls for keeping him on the graduation track. Mrs. M admitted she does not know much about Brian's personal background, and referred me to the school psychologist for further information regarding Brian's at-risk status.

Mrs. D, the school psychologist was able to reveal more on Brian's background when explaining why he is considered at-risk. She said that he has come a long way since Brian was diagnosed with a learning disability and could possibly be declassified. However, she feels it is best to maintain his special education support because he is lacking in academic help and motivation at home.

In Mrs. D's opinion, Brian has actually been quite successful in school considering his family circumstances. Both of his parents had very limited educational success and did not graduate from high school. Brian's older brother also did not graduate, and his younger brother, while a bright student, only shows a minimal commitment to his schooling. Brian has attendance issues, and Mrs. D believes that most days Brian has to take responsibility on his own to get himself to school. His parents rarely stay in contact with the school, and do not attend meetings with the Committee of Special Education (CSE). The CSE meets regularly throughout the year to organize

individualized education programs (IEP) for students in need, such as Brian. From her experience, Mrs. D has not witnessed a lot of parental guidance, direction, or support for Brian's education.

Mrs. D seemed very impressed with Brian's commitment to self-improvement despite these challenges. She said he is required to meet with her weekly for counseling, but he even stops in addition to her their scheduled appointments when he has concerns about his progress. She states that Brian has tremendous coping and adapting abilities and that he is very resilient, especially compared with his brothers. She proudly added that she believes he will be the first in his family to graduate from high school.

Emotionally, Mrs. D expressed concerns about his temper anger management. She said she has seen a lot of growth over the years, and she has witnessed him putting a lot of effort into this area. Mrs. D added that the adults in Brian's family do not always model appropriate behavior, and they have been known to use physical aggression to solve problems. Despite this, she describes Brian as being "very, very loyal - almost to a fault" to his family. She explained that he was recently in a fight to defend his little brother. Brian, she said, normally seeks to avoid physical confrontations. However, he has gotten caught up with them more than once because of his family associations.

I chose Brian for this study because he has the opportunity to offer a unique perspective to this study. He is the only male student included in this research, and he is the only one with a diagnosed learning disability that contributes to his at-risk status. He is also the only student I interviewed who receives regular support from the school psychologist. Now that I have introduced my reasons for choosing Brian for this study, I

will begin the next section with presenting what I have learned about Brian from observations in my classroom.

Background Information.

Observations. Brian is enrolled in my Photography, Ceramics, and Digital Art classes this year. I have learned a lot about Brian from observations throughout the year, both formally for my research and informally as his teacher. Brian is an extremely soft-spoken and shy individual. He is sometimes difficult to understand when he speaks, which is in part due to his quiet tone, but also because of a significant lisp. When walking through the halls, Brian often has his head down and seems hesitant to make eye contact. His rosy, often flushed cheeks seem to reflect his level of apparent discomfort during class discussions or large social situations. Brian has thick, wavy, shoulder length hair that he covers with a backwards Cookie Monster baseball cap whenever possible. Although students are not allowed to wear hats in school, he often tries to wear his anyway. Despite this act of defiance, he is always quick to remove it and apologize when a teacher asks.

In class he either sticks to himself or close to a trusted friend. He is a very artistic student, and has a talent for drawing in particular. Brandon is respectful and polite, however I have noticed him associate with peers who tend to be much louder, sometimes rude, and do not show the kind of positive behavioral attributes that he does in class.

Despite the sometimes negative behavior of his friends and classmates, Brian sticks to his work and stays quiet during the school day. Brian is diligent in class and consistently produces above-average work, particularly in Photography (which concluded at the end of the first semester.) Brian also started off very strong in Digital Art, which

began at the start of the second semester. For the first assignment in Digital Art, the class learned to digitally render spheres and then place them in an environment of their creation (see Appendix H: Spheres in Context). Brandon was incredibly focused while working on this project and repeatedly muttered phrases such as “cool” and “awesome” when shown all the ways he could enhance his spheres digitally.

Brian completed two artworks for the Digital Spheres assignment. He was only required to do one, but he finished early and began another, something I had suggested as a way of optimizing his chances for success. Both projects were done with a high level of technical accuracy and creativity, and he continued to show a lot of enthusiasm for working with the software as I showed him more features. During one class I brought iPads in for the class to use, which Brian seemed to like. He asked questions a few times about how to use the various applications, as this was his first time using an iPad. I was not able to see what Brian worked on that day since he was called out early to attend an class meeting for his grade level before class ended.

A few days after I interviewed Brian, he came into my office and spent his entire lunch period talking to me that day. He originally came in to ask me to print out a copy of his Digital Spheres project, since we were having trouble getting the computers to open it during the previous class. When I pulled out the work, Brian immediately looked happy with it and proceeded to tell me about all the various filters and techniques he used when making it. He talked about how he put outer and inner glows on the spheres, and how he liked the way the colors looked together from applying those filters. Brian said that he definitely likes the class, and mentioned examples of specific “tricks” that he thought were especially “cool.” Brian explained that he has learned quickly from “doing” all of these tricks (as opposed to just being told about them). He also mentioned

that he has frequently offered to help the student who sits next to him in class. The opportunity for Brian to be helpful and share his knowledge with other students may provide him with a sense of accomplishment, particularly since in many other areas he is constantly on the receiving end of assistance in the classroom.

We talked about several other things over the course of this time period, such as gardening. He gave me several tips about how to make sure the water distribution is even when watering plants. We talked about how he is excited about a friend coming in from out of town. This led Brian to tell me that he has started to separate himself from some of his other friends that he has realized are not good influences on him. Brian seemed to appreciate the fact that he could speak openly with me, and I noticed that his quiet tone gained a more confident volume as we spoke. I believe that my willingness to open my office to students has had a positive impact that carries over into the art experiences of my students.

The following week, Brian had a particularly quiet day in class (even more so than usual). He does not normally speak up in class, but he does raise his hand for help occasionally when he needs it (although sometimes he seems hesitant to even do that.) I had recently introduced a new project requiring students to experiment with five ways to create emphasis within a digital artwork. Brian did not talk at all during the lesson nor did he ask any questions. My thought at the time was that he was just trying to pay attention to learn the new techniques. He also did not come into my room that day during lunch, as he had been since we had the long talk the week before.

The next day I found out Brian had been suspended for two weeks for getting into a fight. Brian's classmates provided me with conflicting reports about what actually happened, some said it was over a girl, others said it was because one of the boys was

“talking” about the other. At that time, Brian was slightly behind on our “Emphasis 5 Ways” project in Digital Art. I had told him not to worry about it as long as he could turn in everything by the upcoming Friday. He had been working very diligently in class on his project so I was not bothered by his work being late because it was not due to lack of effort.

I was able to briefly speak to him about this when I ran into him in the school office where he was waiting to meet with the principal. He claimed the fight was self-defense, but didn’t go into any details about what the fight was about. He expressed concern about being suspended for a long period of time, and promised me that he would get his Digital Art work in to me somehow, despite not having a computer at home to use.

Unfortunately I was not able to observe Brian as closely during the final stages of the research process. Since Brian has returned to the school from his suspension, he has been absent several times. Two weeks went by that he was only in school for a day or two. As a result he fell behind in class and was not able to catch up on his work at the time my research concluded.

Personal information obtained from interviews. I was nervous for Brian when we began our interview. I had concerns about how talkative and open he would be given his shyness. I ended up very impressed with how thoughtfully and carefully he answered each question, and he seemed very honest in his responses, though they were very brief in comparison to those of the other students.

We started by discussing his family. Brian told me he has three brothers, and his parents separated when he was six. He lives with his mom and sees his dad on the

weekends. Brian explained being “okay” with his family situation (although “it could be better”), and told me that he has a good relationship with his brothers.

Brian listed hobbies such as deer hunting, gardening, and listening to his favorite music that he describes as “heavy rock,” naming the band *Disturbed* as an example. He said he used to play football, but is no longer involved with any sports. Although he sometimes struggles in school, Brian is confident in his intelligence. He explained, “I’m very understanding. I can understand things very easily. I’m a good talker with some things. Um, I know how to build stuff. I know how to fix some engines, even though I don’t take any classes, my family teaches me.”

Brian told me that he likes art and enjoys drawing. However he spoke in the past tense when explaining this saying, “I used to want to take art. I used to be able to draw really good.” He told me that he no longer draws as much as he used to. When I asked him why, he sounded sad when he whispered “I don’t know.”

Moving onto the topic of friends and peers, Brian admitted that sometimes other students give him a hard time for the special assistance he receives in school, but said “I think people can say what they want. It won’t hurt me at all, I don’t care.” He then added, “Yeah, a lot of people don’t like me....because I’m not like them. Well because they do...they drink. And they do other stuff. I don’t do any of that.” He concluded that that many of the students think he is “no fun,” but he segued into talking about how his real friends know his true personality. “I can be really loud and funny. It’s just that I need my actual friends around; I need to be comfortable. I’m shy.” Brian believes he performs better in classes when a friend is also enrolled, because it helps him to feel comfortable.

Although Brian said that the other students don't bother him, he acknowledged his tendency to let emotions build up, which often results in negative outbursts. Brian has been learning how to control his temper, although he acknowledged that it is a continuous struggle. Brian stated that he will "most of the time mess up things." When I asked him to elaborate, he explained that he often does things with good intentions but has a hard time anticipating the outcome; and even though he means well, he does not always do the right things (referring specifically to a situation with an ex-girlfriend). In Brian's words, "Well, I'm trying to do something good. Like trying to keep doing the thing that is good. And it turns out that it was also affecting someone in a bad way. Like Allison." Allison was Brian's ex-girlfriend, who ended their relationship after she moved to another town. Brian explained that many of the things he would try to do to make her happy were not always well-received, something that he was not aware of until they broke up.

General education information obtained from interviews. During the interview, Brian walked me through his school day and told me about his classes. Gym is his favorite because being at the start of the day (first period), "It's just fun...makes me awake." Other than Gym, the part of the day he says he looks forward to the most is office hours because he gets to be with his friend Michael. He says he doesn't like math because the "teacher is boring....she is not mean or bad, she just talks a lot." When an excessive amount of information is presented to Brian verbally, he finds it frustrating when trying to learn. Brian told me that "hearing" is his weakest way to learn things, and he does not remember things well when just being talked to. Brian explained that he learns much easier when teaching strategies focus on hands-on and visual approaches

instead. Brian believes he is a good learner when the information is “visual” and that “doing it...sometimes” helps him understand the content more than lecture and notes. Brian feels “okay” with Environmental Studies and the teacher, who “can sometimes talk a lot too,” because “we go the greenhouse, grow some plants.” He explains that “I like to grow stuff. I grow my own garden during the summer.” Brian does not like English and admits having a difficult time with writing saying, “(the teacher) makes us do a lot of work. Critical Lens (essays)...I hate those. Writing. I don’t have neat writing.” This, Brian says, is very frustrating for him.

When I mentioned that his opinion on classes seemed to be heavily influenced by his opinion about teachers, Brian responded with a very emphatic “oh yeah!” When I asked what his favorite teachers do that is effective he said, “They like to have fun.” He added he “actually kind of likes” his guided study halls because Mrs. B, his special education teacher helps him and seems to genuinely care about how he is doing, both personally and in school. Without these guided study halls, Brian believes he wouldn’t get his work done because he doesn’t take his “stuff” home.

Although Brandon’s grades are generally not very high (he is currently failing more than one course), he has done very well on all of his art assignments and has even produced work that I used as examples for other students. When asked about his behavior in school, Brian confidently responded with “I’m the best!” He seemed to take pride in that answer, knowing that he puts effort into being a respectful student.

Now that I have provided contextual information regarding Brian’s personal and academic background, I will introduce the findings regarding Brian’s thoughts on his art experiences.

Perspectives on the value of visual art experiences.

Art experiences, environment, and atmosphere. Although Brian said he likes art and drawing, he admitted that he did not take any of his art classes this year by choice; he was put into them by the guidance counselor. When asked why he did not sign up for an art class Brian answered, “Well, I didn’t really think about it.(long thoughtful pause)...but if I had known that Ceramics was here I would have chose that.”

Brian says he looks forward to Ceramics because he likes to mess around with the clay and “build stuff.” He spoke about a memorable learning experience saying,

Well, on the throwing wheel, how you have to stick your thumb in the hole to make a hole - I thought that was pretty cool. How you can just let your thumb slide, and then just start pressing - that was pretty awesome.

And then you start pushing outwards, and it makes a pot.

Brian said in general, he just enjoys his time working in ceramics. “The wheel is pretty fun....if it doesn’t get all over ya. This one time I got splattered with it!”

Another learning experience that Brian enjoyed was building a sculpture of a pyramid in Ceramics. He enjoyed it because it was a project that he started while just playing around, and the idea developed for him while he worked. Brian expressed enjoying that level of freedom and openness in an assignment. To him, that takes the pressure off, allowing him to work more comfortably and creatively.

Brian admits that Photography was “not my thing,” but explained that was in part due to some of the students in his class. In Brian’s opinion, some of his classmates were very distracting because of their behavior, thus the overall experience was less enjoyable. Based on my observations, Brian seemed most comfortable in class when was working in

the darkroom with only a few people or when he was on a photo shoot by himself or with his partner Rick (who Brian also sits next to in Digital Art.) The open structure of art classes are often difficult for some of the more unruly students to handle. Without formal instruction, there can more opportunity for students to get off track or find opportunities to misbehave. Unfortunately, this aspect of the art environment had become a discouraging factor at times for Brian. He appreciated the opportunity for creative freedom, but found the response of his peers to that freedom to be distracting.

Brian also told me about a successful experience he had in Photography when a picture he took with a pinhole camera “came out perfect.” He especially enjoyed it because in regard to the others that worked with the pinhole cameras that day, “theirs turn(ed) out a little darker.” Brian’s comments regarding this experience reveal how he created work that he was proud of in class, but that he also held resentful feelings towards some of his classmates when they did not act in ways he felt was appropriate.

Brian expressed an appreciation for the unique opportunities his art classes offered him. Because of these experiences, he believes that art is “one of the best” in comparison to his other classes. He then added, “...so far. Because it’s fun to do and to play with the clay and everything. And in Photography you get to take pictures. That (is something) I’ve never done before” (referring to 35 mm photography and working in the darkroom).

When asked if art is something that he believed should be required in schools, Brian responded, “I think you should take more to get like more experience. Because one year - you just have to take the one year - I don’t think that’s enough. And some people might actually enjoy it.”

In conclusion, regarding his experiences in art classes now and in the past, Brian said he liked the opportunity to work with his hands and having the ability to build and create. His most memorable art experiences seemed to provide him with these types of opportunities. Brian also appreciates the freedom to be creative and develop his own ideas. On the negative side, Brian also had experiences where his enjoyment of the class was limited by the behavior of others in the classroom. Overall, Brian believes art education is important because it is a learning experience that can be fun and enjoyable. In this section I have presented Brian's thoughts about the art environment and the experiences it has provided for him. Next I will introduce how Brian believes art has influenced his emotional development.

Emotional connections. When asked about his opinion on the importance of art education, Brian concluded that drawing was the most valuable aspect of art education, "because you can draw your feelings onto paper sometimes. And it's like a stress-reliever. I know because I do it, sometimes." Brian then explained why this is so important for him:

Well I can get very angry, but I can take in a lot, but eventually if I take in so much and I don't express the feelings, I use them on my family or somebody else. And I'm a very good fighter. Even though I might not look it, I've been in a lot of fights."

This topic led us back to art when he said it "helps me get rid of my emotions and get them down on a piece of paper and draw them....Instead of eventually doing something bad." Brian believes that having art included in his school day helps him to escape from things that are bothering him. Brian believes that schools

should not cut art programs because “(not having art) would suck because art is like sort of the fun time of the day and like it helps take your mind off of other things.”

Brian also expressed that he can sometimes connect with his family through drawing. He said he has been trying to explain to his brother how drawing is a process and that you need to follow through with it if you want it to come out right:

I start...and lightly draw it out, and (his brother says) it doesn't look as good as it should...'cause my brother watches me draw all the time. And then I darken it, I darken the shading and then I take a picture of it and it looks really awesome. And I show my brother and he is just like 'wow'. I show my dad, my brothers, they don't know how I do it. My dad is a really good drawer. I probably got it from him. It's probably in the blood.

This quote reveals how through drawing, Brian has an opportunity to bond with and receive praise from his family. It also helps him to find common ground with his father, who shares his artistic skills. Brian stated that this has helped his personal development, because he often feels pride in his skills and will sometimes even identify himself as an artist, depending on his mood.

Brian's sense of pride can also be seen in how he has started bringing in some of his drawings from home to show me (Appendix H). This sense of pride was also expressed when he talked about his successes in Photography. He noted a specific project when he took photos of the generators outside of the school. He believes those photographs “came out perfect” which made him feel “pretty good!”

In summary, Brian believes that the most important impact art has had for him deals with the opportunity for emotional expression. He believes having the opportunity to draw and express himself is a useful tool to help him control and manage his temper and emotions. He also has found success through drawing, which has helped him to bond with his family and enhanced his self-esteem. Successful experiences like these in school can often impact one's attitude toward learning, which is presented in the following section.

Attitude toward learning. According to Brian, much of his time in school is spent “just writing and listening.” He believes that in school, “people (teachers) should do more, show people how to do it more often instead of talking. And then maybe they will get...I don't know how to say it, they will get how to do it.” Brian told me that art allows him this kind of learning experience, which helps him to enjoy school more overall. From Brian's descriptions, art provides him with variety in his day, as well as some control over how he gets to complete his work, which can often make him feel more motivated. However, when asked if participation in art classes has had an impact on how he feels about school overall, he said that it has no impact; that he does think he would like school any more or less if he had never taken an art class. Brian explained that he likes to draw and that he often prefers his art classes over others, but he considers art to benefit him more outside of school than in. He then added that for others, specifically some of his friends, he believes art classes play a major role in their appreciation of and motivation for school. Next I will introduce Brian's thoughts on how art has played a role in the development of life skills.

Life skills. Through art, Brian believes he has learned perseverance. He said he used to give up on drawings when they did not look “right” to him immediately. Now, he says, he understands that if he applies time and dedication to his work (both in art and other classes) he can achieve more than if he gives up.

Brian also learned through art that if something does not come out exactly the way he planned, he can still find value in the result. He specifically recalled times in Ceramics saying, “Yeah, some of (my pots) kind of cracked because the bottom was too thick. But oh well.” He admitted that it bothered him “a little, because they were pretty cool. But I still liked them a lot.”

Regarding life skills that he feels he has acquired through school in general, Brian says he believes that the Small Engines class is one the most important ones offered because “you definitely need that because you need to run your car and lawn mower and everything.” Although Small Engines is a class separate from art, Brian believes there is a similarity in those classes because of the “building” and hands-on skills that both classes require. However, he did say one of the biggest reasons that art education could be considered *not* important was because “you don’t really need it for life.” A statement such as this shows a lack of understanding Brian may have regarding the way art is integrated into the American culture. Incorporating more visual culture into the art curriculum could help Brian to understand the role art and design play in everyday life.

Brian did say that art has helped him to feel more comfortable approaching challenges because he knows he has art as a coping mechanism if things go wrong. Brian said that he no longer feels as apprehensive prior to stressful situations because he knows he can use drawing as an outlet to relieve tension afterwards. Brian also said that from

his successes with challenging art projects, he would be more willing to try new or challenging things in the future.

In closing, Brian's opinion on the value of art was a little less elaborate than Jessica's. He was, however, very clear in expressing how art has helped him to manage stress and express his emotions. He also appreciates the variety in learning experiences that art offers, since he feels he adapts better to visual and kinesthetic learning experiences. Brian's experiences in art have allowed him to feel closer to certain friends and family members. Brian feels that the freedom of the art environment can allow him a chance to be creative and develop his own ideas, but it also can be distracting when the freedom of the art environment is taken advantage of by others in class who are not as diligent with their work. The pride and happiness Brian has felt due to his success in his art classes was expressed in the interview as well as observed in the way he shows off his successful works. The next section will introduce Chrissy, who offers a third perspective from a student labeled at risk.

Chrissy. I chose Chrissy to participate in this research for several reasons. Chrissy is unique from the other student-participants who were labeled at-risk because she does not have a history of struggling academically. In fact, she has been actively involved in advanced classes and does not appear to have issues with learning content across any subject area. Chrissy's at-risk status was determined primarily because of the extreme challenges she faces outside of school.

According to Mrs. M (the guidance counselor), Chrissy is a very capable student. In fact, she was very impressed with how well Chrissy has been able to perform in school over the years, since her family has moved very frequently. Mrs. M relayed to me that

there have been gaps in Chrissy's education over the years because her family would not always enroll her in school right away after moving to a new district. For this reason, as well as others, Mrs. M said that Child Protective Services (CPS) has been involved frequently with Chrissy's family.

According to Mrs. M, a lot of tension is in Chrissy's household that comes from several sources. Chrissy's father is believed to be an alcoholic and has been unemployed for the past several years. Chrissy lives with her father, stepmother, and 5 other children, who are a combination of full, half, and step-siblings. The entire household is supported by the stepmother's disability checks. This inadequate income has frequently left the family with no heat, and Mrs. M mentioned that she had heard several times about how the kids have had to boil water for bathing. Other aspects of their living environment were also documented to be inadequate, with the bedrooms in the house infested with bug beds and fleas. As a result, all the children in the home began sleeping downstairs in the living area of the house without beds. There was also another incident with CPS after they were given information about the stepmother keeping drugs in the house.

According to Mrs. M, Chrissy's biological mother does provide some relief from this living environment, but it has been infrequent. Chrissy's mother has been "in and out of her life" regularly, and the difficulty of that has been made worse by Chrissy's father, who allegedly tells his children that their mother "abandoned" them. (Chrissy's father is the main and legal caretaker for her and her siblings.)

On top of all these issues, Chrissy's family does not have a car, making transportation to and from school difficult. This challenge ultimately put Chrissy in a position of having to switch schools when she was within months of graduating because

Chrissy's family moved to a neighboring town. Chrissy's younger siblings had to withdraw and enroll in their new district. Chrissy did not want to switch schools during her senior year, so she arranged to stay with a friend so she would not have to move. The district knew about this arrangement, and agreed to allow Chrissy to continue attending at Park Ridge as long as she held up her end of a "contract," stating that she would be on time and present in school on a daily basis unless she had a legal excuse for her absence. Unfortunately, Chrissy was repeatedly late and started missing school frequently without always having a note to explain her absences. After being warned several times that she would have to transfer if the tardiness and truancy continued, Chrissy was significantly late to school one last time in March. She was told by the school that their original agreement to let her graduate in Park Ridge would no longer be an option.

Chrissy had to transfer to her new school about halfway through my data collection process. I began interviewing Chrissy, but we were not able to finish in one sitting because we ran short on time. We made plans to sit down and finish the interview after school the following week, unfortunately she had to withdraw from Park Ridge before that date and I was not able to see her again. Although I was not able to complete the interview or observe her as much as the other students, still I collected a sizeable amount of data. The information I will present regarding Chrissy comes from three sources: interviews, observations of Chrissy directly, and conversations with those who were close with Chrissy, such as her friends and Mrs. M.

Background information.

Observations. Chrissy has a very striking appearance that is intensified by her decisive and hard-edged style. Chrissy has thick red hair and on most days she is dressed

in dark clothing with eccentric accessories such as a black leather bracelet with metallic spikes. She rarely smiles (and actually often appears to be scowling), and she walks in an almost boyish manner that gives off an impression of toughness. She does not speak up a lot in groups, but also does not appear afraid to voice her opinion when she has one that she feels strongly about. She was very quiet in Ceramics class, and talked mainly to Brian and me when she did speak up.

Chrissy took Ceramics during the first semester of school, and even though classes ended in January, she continued to come into my room every day during office hours. Shortly into the second semester, Chrissy asked me if I could help her with some painting projects. (She had noticed how Jessica and other students were doing projects outside of class and asked if I would be able to help her with some as well). Chrissy completed two paintings and had started on a third when she transferred out of the district. All of these paintings had themes related to music and her favorite bands. The following is an excerpt from my field notes while observing Chrissy working on her final painting before she left Park Ridge.

Chrissy is working on what I believe to be an album cover from one of her favorite bands. She said she wanted to do a “real” painting, since the ones she has worked on before were more like posters with graphics and phrases – all dealing with music, which seems to be her theme when choosing topics for artworks. She asked me several times to check her work because she told me she is very concerned about making it “look right” She asked specifically about which value changes she should be focusing on outlining for her preliminary drawing. She has been using grids for all of her work, something she requested to do after seeing other students in my Studio and

Draw/Paint class use grids. She expressed nervousness about working on the background, which has a few buildings with a hazy fog near the bottom. She asked how she would be able to do it and if it was going to be really hard. I explained the process of layering paints and how I thought it would not necessarily be hard for her, but more of a slow, meticulous process. I have noticed that Chrissy is more productive and seeks my advice more on these independent projects than she does on class projects. Today she appears very self-motivated and is really putting a lot of thought and effort into her work. She really seems to have a more focused and determined demeanor when working on projects of her own choosing.

The above selection for my field notes describes how Chrissy has worked very well on her painting projects that she does on the side with me, but she does have some issues with completing assigned work if it is not what she feels like doing at the time. For example, Chrissy was very successful in terms of technical skills in Ceramics, however she did not always complete projects as they were assigned. She discovered a strength in throwing on the wheel, so she completed many wheel-thrown pieces while avoiding other assignments. As the teacher, I try to constantly modify my curriculum based on my students' needs and interests. In my experience, I found that some students, regardless of motivation or punishment, will refuse to work at times when they do not feel the task is interesting or "important." I believe that by allowing students with this mindset to explore their own interests and pursue tasks of their own choosing, they tend to work more diligently and find more meaning in the outcome. Once a student finds and sets their own goals, I will then try to weave some of the original learning goals into their

work so they will still receive the intended curriculum, which is what I was trying to accomplish with Chrissy's situation.

Based on both observation and conversations, I noted that both Brian and Jessica were upset and sympathetic with Chrissy when she was asked to leave the district. According to Brian, Chrissy was always late to school due to issues out of her control (transportation) and Chrissy's parents were never awake in the morning to write her a note. It was Brian's understanding that Chrissy had written her own notes all year long. Brian told me that her parents "party all night and sleep all day" (a comment that was echoed by Jessica during a separate conversation), and commented that it would "suck" to have parents like hers saying, "I would hate for them to be my parents." Jessica also said it was unfair because Chrissy did have a note the day that she was asked to transfer out of school, but she did not mention whether the note was written by Chrissy instead of her parents. These conversations gave me more insight into the challenges that Chrissy has been facing all year. Chrissy was also able to give me her view on this topic during our interview session, which is presented in the next section.

Personal information obtained from interviews. I wasn't sure what to expect at first when I sat down to interview Chrissy, because she often gives off a "tough girl" vibe. She has never been very open or talkative with me in class, so I wasn't sure how expressive she would be in the interview. The impression of the interview that stuck with me, however, was that she was very passionate and decisive in her opinions. When we hit upon a topic that Chrissy was particularly passionate or opinionated about, was very apparent in her tone and expression while talking.

As with the other interviews, I started by asking Chrissy to tell me about herself to provide context for her opinions to the more topical questions she would be asked later. When asked to describe herself, Chrissy responded by simply stating that she is seventeen years old and that her “passion is music.” She told me that she likes all kinds of music, except for country and rap. Her main preference is rock, and she plays guitar and drums as a hobby. When I asked about her family, she said “they are okay I guess. We are not really that close.” She later did say that she does get along with her younger sisters. Chrissy told me that her parents are split up and she lives with her dad. She said, “There are eight people that live in my house. Most of them being my dad’s girlfriend’s kids.” Chrissy said she does not talk to her dad, and “ever since he got a new girlfriend we just never hang out.” Chrissy said that she has a great relationship with her mom, but only sees her every other weekend because they live about an hour apart.

I asked Chrissy about her future plans and career aspirations. She said, “Well my original plan was to go into music. Like music therapy or understanding it. And, um...that that kind of died out...” When I asked why, she said “My dad told me I couldn’t go for it...he just told me I wouldn’t be able to do it.” Chrissy is now thinking of doing something “somewhere along the lines of science hopefully.” She specifically cited pharmaceuticals, but also is also “thinking of trying to become a teacher...I’d just have to get over my fear of public speaking.” Chrissy’s information shows how some parents still do not appreciate the value or opportunities that the arts can provide. Jessica had also mentioned in conversations how her mother tries on occasion to discourage her from pursuing the arts as a career choice. Ultimately, this forces the student to decide if they should ignore advice from their parents, or the field that truly holds their interest. I

believe that this can create both internal and external family conflicts for the student regarding these crucial life decisions.

General education information obtained from interviews. When discussing what the school day is like for Chrissy, I found out that she has very strong feelings about most of her classes. She does not particularly like English, mostly because they rotate teachers every quarter. Chrissy did not like the heavy reading they had to do, but she did admit that things are better this quarter because of the teacher she currently has. Chrissy likes this particular teacher because “She can relate to kids...if you are doing something wrong she won’t scream and yell at you.”

Chrissy is also enrolled in both Physics and AP Chemistry this year, something that separates her from the other two at-risk students in this study. When I asked why she is taking those classes (sciences) she said, “Well it kind of just comes to me naturally. I just figured I’d take a shot at it.” She said that science comes easy to her and that it is “common sense,” however, to her it is “boring.” She elaborated on Physics saying that she doesn’t really “learn that much. The teacher is not great or anything. It gets really, really boring. It feels like the longest class of the day.” Chrissy prefers her AP Chemistry class saying “I’m actually really good at chemistry....It comes to me naturally. And I get it, it makes sense to me.” She explained that there are only three students in that particular class, which she enjoys, saying “Oh yeah it gets fun and it’s easy to learn because we all get it and nobody’s asking questions.” She explained that it would be “so much better” if every class were small like that.

Continuing the conversation onto other classes, we started discussing PR Pride, a course for which she said students “take on projects for highlighting things” around the

school community. Chrissy said, “At times it can be really, really fun, and at other times it can be stressful.” When I pressed for details about what is stressful, she explained that the deadlines can make her feel scrambled and rushed “but if you are ahead of time, like if you are going well with the schedule then it is pretty fun.” When asked to explain what was fun about it she said “Oh, just printing things out, cutting them, pasting them, making posters. And it feels cool because you get to recognize people.” This information, combined with how Chrissy described some of her other classes, shows how Chrissy values opportunities to work hands-on and creatively, but also to take on projects that have meaning for her.

Discussing Economics class, Chrissy said that she would not take it if she did not have to because “we do stuff that’s just common sense and it’s so boring. It’s all stuff we already know and we just go over it, and go over it, and go over it, and it’s just so repetitious and it’s boring.” She did admit that every now and then they do projects such as “a Facebook thing...It was fun.” Chrissy expressed believes that if they had more opportunities to develop and work on projects instead of traditional notes and test-taking, she would like the class better.

Regarding gym she says, “It’s alright, normally I don’t play. But I work out after school to make them up.” She chooses not to participate because she does not like “the kids in there” because they are “so competitive, I just don’t like it.” She admits that she is making her life harder by not participating, but the teacher makes deals with her to make up the classes after school saying “sometimes he will let me off easy with gym.”

Regarding school in general, Chrissy says, “Um...I do like seeing my friends, because I live in Eastville now I’m not here very often. Um, it’s something for me to do,

I get a good benefit out of it, you know what I mean?” Chrissy’s grades fluctuate between 70’s and 80’s in most of her classes. I asked if she tried hard for her grades and she said “it’s just what I get” and admitted trying harder in classes such as English, Economics, and AP Chemistry because she believes “those are the things you need to get by (in life). Especially politics.”

While discussing her dislikes about school, Chrissy said, “I do not like math. I haven’t taken a math class in two years. I hated math so much. It was just so boring. And physics, it just seems like the longest class of the day.” When asked if there were any similarities between physics and math that could explain why she did not like them she answered,

Boring. It’s just skeletal notes...I don’t like skeletal notes, it’s boring.

And I just, he’s kind of like, I don’t know, he doesn’t describe things the way...he doesn’t go into depth with it. He just kind of slaps an equation on the board and he tells you how to do it and you are just supposed to do it.

The information provided in this section provides context for the opinions Chrissy expressed regarding her art experiences. Chrissy is an intelligent girl, although she does not always put effort into her work if she finds it to be boring or less important to her. She has many personal challenges in her life, mainly surrounding her family and life at home. Although she does not express a passion for school in general, she recognizes that there is a benefit to her by attending, and she enjoys being able to see her friends while in school. The next section presents the findings regarding Chrissy’s opinion on experiences with visual art education.

Perspectives on the value of visual art experiences.

Art experiences, environment, and atmosphere. “I’ve always taken art class. Just since I was in high school, like every year. I really like it.” In contrast to the many classes Chrissy describes as “boring”, she expressed an intrinsic interest in her art classes. When asked if she had always liked drawing, she said, “I always used to sketch and stuff, I think it’s cool.” Chrissy says that she comes to the art room every day for Office Hours because “I just, I like the atmosphere. I work on stuff, and my friends come here.” She described the atmosphere saying, “Well, it, it’s just happy. We listen to music. It’s not that strict. We can talk and it’s not quiet. Everybody is moving. It’s like an upbeat atmosphere.” When I asked her about the personal painting projects she started working on during Office Hours she explained, “I just like the concentration, and like...I listen to music while I’m doing it and everything around me just seems to go away. It’s weird.” I asked her if she liked art more for the process or the product and she answered, “Both, actually. I like working on it though, just imagining what it’s going to be like once it’s finished. And when it’s finished it’s just like, ‘Oh cool!’”

Discussing art classes, Chrissy said she signed up for Ceramics this year because “I figured it would be fun” and said that looking back “It was very fun. I had a great time.” She explained “I liked seeing the results of what I made.” She also added “It was super fun, I like it a lot. Getting to choose what we did. There was like leeway in what we were able to do. That was pretty cool.” Her statements show how Chrissy responds positively to my adaptable curriculum approach. Asked to reflect on her abilities she said “I think I was pretty good. I hope so.” One of her favorite aspects of the class was “throwing on the wheel. That was really fun...that was really fun.”

According to Chrissy, one of the biggest benefits of taking an art class is “being able to see if you can actually....if you are artistic at all or if you are you could probably take to somewhere.” The ability to explore one’s potential, along with the creative freedom of an art class are two of the greatest benefits that Chrissy believes art has to offer. However, what she repeated over and over throughout our conversations was the aspect of “fun”. Chrissy seems to truly enjoy just being in the art room and being involved in the act of creating and producing, whether it is painting, drawing or working with clay. Next I will present what Chrissy had to say about art in terms of the social, emotional, and personal implications it has had for her.

Emotional connections. Chrissy appeared nostalgic when she told me about an art memory that stands out for her:

When I went to Eastville, when I lived there the first time (with) my teacher Mr. X, I was taking Studio in Art and Drawing and Painting in the same year. And um, we were doing portraits, like self-portraits. And I just remember him helping me on it, and my sister, cause you know how they just recently moved, she has Mr. X and he put up my portrait, my self-portrait, and he’s had it hanging up as an example.

I could see the pride in her face as she told me that story, and she confidently explained how she had thought “it came out pretty good.” at the time that she made it. Chrissy could not contain her smile when she revealed that it has been used as an example over the years, something that appears to have made her happy and proud of herself to this day, even though it was an accomplishment from her past.

Regarding how she feels art has influenced her on an emotional level, Chrissy appreciates art because “you can express your feelings through it and everything like that. And um, just a place to relax. You don’t always have to...you don’t have to be working every single second. You can talk to people, get their view on what you are making.” Not only does this quote reveal how she values art for the opportunity to express her feelings, but it also has provided an opportunity for socialization and getting to know others.

When discussing school budgets and funding challenges, I told Chrissy that art is a subject that could potentially be cut completely or reduced in schools, because it is not always a required subject, depending on location and grade level. I asked how she would respond to that happening in our school. Chrissy had a very passionate (based on her tone and facial expressions) and immediate answer saying “I would think that is ridiculous. I don’t understand why they would do that. And even in kids (elementary age) it’s important, because that is how they express themselves too, through art and drawing.” She said she has personally used art to express feelings and ideas “plenty of times” and that:

It helps, it helps a lot actually. It just, when I’m mad or sad or happy....like sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes I will just sit and draw and whatever comes out I will be like ‘oh that’s pretty cool’....and you know what I mean? Depending on my mood.

Art has also helped Chrissy to understand differences in the abilities and perspectives of others. She expressed this when I asked her if she thought anybody could be artistic or if it was something only some people had. She responded by saying “It

depends. Um, depending on what you are good at. Like some people - it looks crappy to some people, and to other people it's abstract and it looks cool. Yeah, so it depends."

Another way she has connected with others through art is that she has given a lot of her work to friends and family for Christmas presents. According to Chrissy, "they liked them a lot" which made her feel "pretty good."

Overall, Chrissy expressed a very strong opinion on the value of art for its emotional benefits. She believes that the opportunity to express one's thoughts, feelings, and ideas through art is one that is important for students of all ages. Chrissy also has been able to connect with friends and family through her art experiences, via conversations in the art room and by sharing her artworks with people she cares about. Her art experiences have allowed her to experience a sense of pride and happiness over the years. Next I will introduce how Chrissy's art experiences are connected to her overall opinion on learning and education.

Attitude toward learning. I asked Chrissy about her opinion regarding how some people do not think art is as important as other subject areas because it is an elective. She responded vehemently with:

I don't think it is (a blow-off class) at all. I take it seriously. I take it pretty seriously. I like it. I tend to get ahead in it, I don't know why....definitely not, I think that it is a great class. It should be treated as an academic.

She explained that she thinks it is important "Because people should have at least a little bit of artistic skills in them. Or, they could at least try. And...not just blow it off like gym," which she said with a sly smile.

The interview ended with a question asking what she would think school would be like without art and she said “I would probably like it less.” She explained, “Sometimes I wish I really wasn’t in school...It just...drags on some days...” She followed up with adding that she does get more excited about school when she has “projects” to work on, such as the Facebook project in social studies and the art projects she works on during Ceramics and Office Hours.

In conclusion, despite the lack of time I was able to spend interviewing and observing Chrissy compared to the other students, she still was able to convey her opinions about the experiences she has had from participating in the visual arts. Her art classes add an element of fun to her school day that improves her motivation and appreciation for school in general. She feels the arts offer an emotional benefit of expression and has experienced feelings of happiness and pride from creating art and sharing it with others. Finally, it provides an environment that she finds to be relaxing, upbeat, and a place to socialize and have freedom of creativity and choice. The following section will review the information gathered from my interviews with students who do not have the at-risk label. This information will later be used as a source of comparison to the data obtained from the students who are labeled at-risk.

Student Participants Who Are Not Labeled At-Risk

To add context to the data collected regarding the opinions of students who were labeled at-risk, I also studied three additional students. These individuals are *not* identified by the district as having any significant challenges that would impair their abilities to be successful in school. When selecting these additional students, I chose from those who are currently enrolled in one or more of my art courses. I used a selective purposeful sampling method; for which I made my selections based on who I thought would be able to provide the greatest amount of breadth and depth of opinions to this study, while also being candidates that I felt would be honest in their discussions with me. I attempted to choose individuals with varying personalities and academic histories to allow for a greater chance of varying perspectives. When working with the non-at-risk student participants, I began with Kayla, the student I was most familiar with of the three.

Kayla. After interviewing and observing the three student participants who were labeled at-risk, I was very excited to see how Kayla's answers would differ as a student who does not have that label. I chose Kayla because I thought she may have a perspective that would offer some new insights into this topic. She did have several differences in perspective from the other students, but they also had areas in which they appear to agree as well.

Background Information.

Observations. Kayla is often in my art room several times a day. She comes occasionally for Office Hours, sometimes during her lunch, and twice a day to attend Ceramics and Photography/Digital Art classes. I have also taught Kayla in Studio in Art.

Sometimes I see her even more when she comes into my room to drop off and pick up art projects before or after school.

Kayla is a 16 year old junior, who some may describe as mousy. She has slightly frizzy reddish-brown hair that falls just below her shoulders. She is about average height for a girl her age, but is extremely skinny. She has braces and very thick glasses, and she is usually seen carrying a large pile of books and binders very close to her body when she is walking through school. She has a very quiet demeanor and is soft spoken. Kayla participates in the Friends of Rachel Club (a group of students who make it their goal to spread positive and inspirational messages throughout the school), plays Volleyball and is the Secretary of her class. Kayla is not “popular” but she appears to be liked and respected by her classmates. Despite her awkward appearance I have never seen or heard of her being picked on, and it seems that her classmates respect her quiet kindness.

Although Kayla is quiet and somewhat shy, she is not afraid to take on challenges or work with others. Kayla has on several occasions been an “assistant” to me as the teacher, helping to catch up kids who are behind or need extra help when I am busy.

Kayla exudes a gentle honesty that I (and I think the students as well) respect. This year Kayla was accepted into the National Honor Society (NHS). To get into NHS, Kayla asked me for a letter of recommendation and sought my advice for the interview.

Personal information obtained from interviews. The first major difference I noticed while interviewing Kayla had to do with her perception of self. Kayla seemed to be more confident while describing herself than the others saying, “I like to draw, I like to write. I guess you would say I’m smart because I do good in class and stuff. I pay attention, I’m independent, I have a job.” In describing herself, Kayla focused more on

her positive attributes than just hobbies and basic descriptors, something that immediately set her apart from the students labeled at-risk.

Kayla also described her family as close, and said that she had no complaints or challenges regarding her home life. My first year teaching I got to know Kayla fairly well even though she was not in any of my classes. She came in almost daily to work on drawings for her family. She regularly uses the art room, materials, and assignments to make things about or for her family, with whom she seems very close.

General education information obtained from interviews. Kayla was also the only participant who specifically said that she likes school, a fact she mentioned on her own without being directly asked about it. When I asked which aspects about school she looked forward to, she said “I just kind of like, I guess I like school. I guess that could be considered a nerd kind of thing, but...I guess I like it. It doesn’t really matter.” My three at-risk students had different answers regarding what they liked about school, with seeing their friends being at the top of their lists. Kayla provided another interesting answer when asked about what she has looked forward to about school: “Well, like that National Honor Society interview. I like the interview kind of thing because it makes me nervous, but I get excited about it and then I get nervous again.” I felt this answer revealed a lot about her character, and confirmed what I had always thought about her based on observations; that Kayla enjoys challenges and pushing to be her best. Kayla also differs in what she identified as the challenging part of her day. For her it is “Probably having study hall and then lunch because it is two breaks in one and you get all (slumps down).” Kayla said she prefers to keep things moving and stay busy.

When describing her school day, her comments showed some differences from her at-risk peers, but there were also many similarities. She mentioned not liking certain classes because they were “boring” (such as Social Studies), but also talked about classes she enjoyed because she was successful in them or liked the teacher (citing Chemistry and Ceramics, specifically). Gym was the only class she mentioned that she did not like solely because of the content, commenting “Who likes to run?”

Another notable difference was that she discussed being enrolled in certain classes this year because she is planning for college. She paid tuition to take Spanish as a college course so she can “get it out of the way” (regarding college requirements), and she enrolled in a combined Algebra II/Trigonometry course as a requirement to receive an advanced diploma. Kayla clearly sets goals for herself, and is not content with only doing the minimum to get by.

In regard to learning, Kayla said she learns easily in a variety of styles. She stated that she is fine with taking notes, reading, writing, and giving presentations, which differed greatly from the answers of the at-risk students who mentioned specific approaches that they preferred or disliked.

A similarity among all the students so far is an aversion to Math, which Kayla admitted in the interview. She feels that much of it will be little to no use to her in the future asking, “When are you ever going to use logarithms?” In her opinion, only the basics such as adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing are really “important” for life and the rest is unnecessary. Despite this view, she continues to take math courses to earn her advanced diploma.

Perspectives on the value of visual art experiences.

Art experiences, environment, and atmosphere. Kayla says that she signs up to come to my room for Office Hours “because it is relaxing here. You can do what you want and you don’t have to worry about homework and stuff.... Sometimes I do homework, sometimes I draw. Some days I just sit here hang out, look around.” Kayla’s description of the art room as relaxing is something that has been a commonality among all of my research participants.

Another similarity is her reason for why she enjoys being in art classes, she says, “I like them because you are laid back...You don’t yell at us. You let us do what we want kind of thing.” Having freedom to make choices was also mentioned by all three of my at-risk students. Kayla mentioned how the previous art teacher did not always allow for creative freedom, and that interfered with her enjoyment of the class.

I liked it up to an extent. Because he was harsh. You had to do it, and you had to do what he wanted. You let us do whatever we want. You give us a baseline and we can kind of go off of that. He would give us something and tell us that we had to do that thing....you tell us, do what you want kind of thing. You let us go in our own way. You lead us and help us, but you don’t do it for us.

When asked what art has taught her that she thinks is valuable in addition to the atmosphere and creative freedom, Kayla mentioned technical issues such as blending colors and procedural skills such as using a grid system. Next I will present how Kayla feels art has impacted her social, personal, and emotional development.

Emotional connections. When asked to reflect upon memories of her art experiences, Kayla talked about all negative experiences, something that was different from the students at-risk. She talked about a clay leaf she made in elementary school that exploded in the kiln, a pumpkin shaped coil pot she attempted in ceramics that broke four times before she eventually gave up on it, and on a self-portrait she did in middle school that she did not like because “It looks nothing like me. He (her previous art teacher) colored our eyes in with it, he wouldn’t let us do it. So he did it. And if we needed help he kind of just did it for you. He didn’t really *help* you, help you.” She did, however, follow up those stories with the lessons she learned from the experiences, like being proud when she made a replacement for her leaf that survived the kiln firing, and how to deal with disappointment when things don’t work out.

Kayla did not mention art for any benefits related to emotional expression or stress-relief, such as the students who were labeled at-risk did. In her opinion, art helps more with one’s personal development because it “gives you a sense of character and it shows how you feel about things, how creative you are and stuff.”

Attitude toward learning. Responding to a question regarding how art can be considered a “blow-off” class, Kayla said:

I agree at some point. Because it is like you can blow it off from your other classes because they are hard and you have homework in them. And in art you don’t really have homework, you can just do it (the work) there. It’s like a relaxing class where you don’t have to do anything. So like you kind of can but you can’t at the same time... If you blow it off so much,

like you don't really do anything, you are going to fall behind, your grade will be real low and it's just not going to work out.

Following up, I asked her if she considered art less important than other classes, to which she answered "I don't think it is as important but it is still kind of important I guess. So you can't really blow it off all the way, you can slack off a little bit. Because it does not really count for as much unless you are going to go into an art major." Kayla's answered revealed how she primarily considers the importance of her schooling based on grades. I confirmed with her that "count as much" was referring to the impact on her grade point average (GPA). However when I asked her to rate art as if it did have the same impact on her GPA as other classes she said, "If it did then it would probably be one of the most important," citing again how it helps to develop character and creativity. All of these answers offer a different dimension into how one can think about art. The at-risk students gave answers that were mainly focused on the environment, freedom, and expression that art offers. They did not at all mention grades and they all disagreed with art being a class they could "blow off" in any way.

Her response was similar to the at-risk students in terms of how she would react if art no longer existed in school, saying, "I probably wouldn't like school because I like art. It's a relaxing place to go when you need to just, take a break. It's like a break in your day kind of thing." I did notice that although her answer was similar to the other students, her voice had less passion and emotion in it. The lack of emotion in her answer leads me to believe that she does not place as much of a value on art as the other students in the study. It is also possible that she constructed her answer based on what she thought

I wanted to hear, resulting in her making statements that she did not truly believe personally.

Life skills. In her words, one of the most important things she has learned through art is that it teaches you “To never give up. Because if you give up you will never know what you could have done.” Kayla, more than most of my students, chooses to take on particularly challenging tasks and very rarely will give up, even when she gets frustrated. Kayla said this has helped her learn to follow through with her work. She then added that this is also helping her to learn how to really evaluate her skills before taking on such challenging tasks so that she can take on projects that are appropriate and “do-able.” This, Kayla is hoping, will reduce the frustration she sometimes feels from taking on too much and will allow her to be more aware of her abilities.

In conclusion, Kayla’s opinion on the value of art has both similarities and differences when compared to that of the students at-risk. Like the others, she enjoys the freedom and creativity the arts allow, but she did not say that she values them for stress relief or emotional expression, which was a common theme among the students labeled at-risk. Kayla also tied the “importance” of art education to the impact it has on one’s GPA, something that was never mentioned by the other students. Perseverance and patience are also two common themes mentioned both by Kayla and by the students labeled at-risk.

Kayla also had a bit of a contradiction in her answers. In an answer to one question she said art could be blown off because other classes were “hard” but in a separate question she said she thought art was harder than other classes “because you have to try expanding yourself to the stuff you don’t normally do and don’t know how to

do. In math they give you notes and science they give you notes to do it.” It is because of these possible inconsistencies that multiple students were selected to participate in this research. Next I will introduce the Sadie to add to the perspectives of students who are not LAR.

Sadie. Out of all the students participating in this study, Sadie is the one I have known for the least amount of time. However I have been able to learn a lot over the year from working with and observing her. I chose Sadie to participate in this study because she has a bubbly and outgoing personality that differs from that of the other student-participants, which I hoped would offer a new perspective. Overall Sadie’s answers were very interesting to me because of her unique position in this study. I found out that she has many of the experiences and challenges of a student who would be labeled at-risk but with a unique and positive perspective that has reduced any apparent risk of her not being able to succeed in school.

Background Information.

Basic observations. Sadie is a senior in high school and is enrolled in Studio in Art. Sadie is 17 years old and almost always has a smile on her face. She is a cheerful and pleasant person who seems to get along with everybody. She has long wavy light brown hair that she usually wears down. Sadie is short with a heavy build, although she is very active and participates in both varsity swimming and volleyball. Sadie is considered a model student that always follows directions and puts forth a lot of effort and thought into her work.

Sadie comes into class every day ready to work and actively participates. Sadie seems to thoroughly enjoy being in class, and is regularly laughing, conversing, singing,

and sometimes even dancing in her seat while she works. She is in the same class as Jessica, however she does not seem bothered by her classmates or consider them to be annoying. In fact, Sadie is one of the few people Jessica talks to and will ask her for advice if I am busy with another student.

Sadie is always attentive and hard-working in class. Her sketches are always mentioned as one of the “favorites” during sketch critiques, specifically due to her technical accuracy and unique choices in subject matter. (For example, she often chooses challenging objects to draw, such as glass or transparent items, or decorative objects containing a lot of detail.) Sadie takes direction very well and asks for help when she needs it. She also works well independently, so I often have to check in on her to ask if she needs help, because she can go long periods of time without asking for assistance. Sadie is late leaving class almost every day and she delays cleaning up until the last minute because she wants to “just finish this one part first!” Usually when she does leave, she (cheerfully) complains that she does not want to go to her next class and that she wants to keep working on her projects in art.

One particular day Sadie came into my room after school with her father. She dragged him by hand around the room, pulling out her projects and showing him proudly what she has worked on throughout the year. Her father appeared amused at Sadie’s enthusiasm, told her that he was impressed and complimented her on her work.

Personal information obtained from interviews. Sadie, like many of the other student-participants, lists hunting as one of her hobbies, and she also talks about enjoying reading, drawing, and music (she plays flute in the school band and participated in chorus until last year). Many aspects of Sadie’s interview were very revealing. The biggest

surprise was about how challenging her home life has been for her. Her parents are divorced, she has a brother that has passed away, her mom used to physically abuse her, and she was raped as a child by her cousin. Sadie revealed all of this information on her own without my prodding or asking for it, and talked her way through it even though I could tell at times it was emotional for her to discuss it. Despite all of these challenges, Sadie talks about how she makes an effort to not let those experiences hold her back and she credits her grandmother for teaching her how to cope saying,

My grandma has helped me evolve from it so much because her mom was very abusive to her, well worse than my mom. She just helped me learn new things and concepts to help me grow as a person. So I'm glad I have my grandma there.

Sadie said that despite her challenges she doesn't consider herself to be a student at-risk "because I try not to think about the bad things that happened. I look and say, 'Hey, I have a good life.'"

General education information obtained from interviews. Sadie does very well in school and unlike the other participants; she had nothing negative to say about any of her classes. She enjoys them all, particularly Math, which she admits she is good at and comes natural to her. Sadie does not identify herself as any specific type of learner. When discussing the various ways that information can be presented in a classroom she said, "I need a mix. Cause I need to get it more than one way in order to retain it."

Sadie did offer some unique critiques of her classes and how they are taught. For example, regarding her Social Studies classes she says:

(Mr. P) is a really nice teacher, he is just so jumpy. Half the time we don't even do actual, like, notes – cause I like skeleton notes and I like looking and writing them down because that's how I remember easier, but he does like projects and stuff like that. But it's like the PowerPoint projects, I don't really like those. And he does, what's the other project we had to do...we had to be an entrepreneur. And it was okay. We had to make a poster on it. It's just, sometimes I think he takes the class too fun instead of learn something, kind of.

This quote shows how Sadie tends to prefer a more traditional approach to instruction, at least for core subject area classes. She also discussed how she enjoys science but does not like her AP Biology class as much as she could because of the teacher's inconsistent methods and teaching style.

Perspectives on the value of art experiences.

Art experiences, environment and atmosphere. Other than Math, Sadie lists art has her favorite class. Sadie's descriptions of what her art experiences have been like for her typically bounced back and forth between talking about the new techniques she has learned and the opportunity art provides for creating something that is personal. Regarding art being something she considers to be a personal experience, she made an argument for why art should not be considered a class to “blow off” saying,

Because you have to be more in-depth with it because it is more of an experience, rather than just an elective. Like, ‘Oh hey look, I took technology and we built this.’ It's more of, you have to put yourself into your work. Every time you make new piece you are leaving a piece of

yourself behind it in. Because it's something, you have your own take on it. So you are leaving a piece of yourself in it because it's how you want to do it.

In contrast to the students labeled at-risk, Sadie did not mention about how she valued art for the relaxing atmosphere. Instead she focused on it being an opportunity for her to take on projects that allow for personal growth. The above quote also shows how she is much more eloquent in her thoughts and descriptions. Her comments touched upon similar ideas of the students labeled at-risk, regarding opportunities for creativity and freedom, however she was able to convey those ideas in a manner that was specific to her personal feelings that did not rely only using those generic terms. She continued this very personalized form of expression when discussing how she feels art can connect to concepts related to emotional development.

Emotional connections. Sadie did not really talk much about how art is good for expressing feelings or as a coping mechanism for herself, as the at-risk students did. However, she did mention several times how art is something you can “put yourself into.” A description such as this could be a variation of how one can experience creation in the arts. While the other students used phrases that described getting something, such as an emotion, out, Sadie's description was more encompassing of a holistic experience in art. It is possible she values art more for how she can explore and represent her personality, beliefs and interests through the development of an artistic idea, rather than using it as an emotional release. Sadie said that one of the most important lessons she has learned though art is that

Your emotions show on the outside. No matter what you are doing, somebody will be able to see it. Like just in a painting you can see ‘hey look this person was angry that day because look at the brushstrokes’ or something like that.

This quote shows that although Sadie personally does not value art necessarily for the opportunity for stress-relief or as a coping mechanism, (which was a common theme expressed by the students labeled at-risk), but for how it can allow others to see and understand the emotions of the artist, something she appreciates as the art-maker and the viewer.

Attitude toward learning. Despite enjoying school and being a good student, Sadie admits that sometimes the only reason she wants to come to school on some days is for art class. She explained that if the art program was cut from the school.

I would tell them to get rid of something else instead. ‘Cause it means so much to people. Even those people you don’t think it means a lot to. Like Chrissy, look at her. She comes from a bad family, and art gets her away for a little bit. Stuff like that, it helps people. It’s kind of like a cleansing or purging of emotions.

In the previous section, Sadie talked about how she personally feels art has emotional connections due to how one can view it and connect with the emotional state of the artist. This quote shows how she also understands that it is also valuable for expressing feelings and stress-relief, but she phrased it in the context of a benefit for others, specifically mentioning Chrissy. As a student in a small district, Sadie is aware of many of the challenges Chrissy faces. From her own personal observations, Sadie believes that

having art in schools is beneficial particularly for those who are in need of an expressive outlet.

Sadie says she values art classes more than her other classes because “with my other classes I understand the stuff we are doing and...some math things I do once and I get it for the rest of the week or whatever. But with this it’s like changing every day.”

The variation in learning experiences is also a common thread expressed among the students interviewed for this research.

Life skills. Sadie was most emphatic when explaining how art has taught her to see things from a new perspective. She said,

It makes you look at objects a different way, like, how you make us think a different way and look at things a different way. And it’s a nice perspective. Because usually we just look at things based on color or something like that, but you make us think about, ‘hey when you are actually looking at that ink cartridge over there, if you move a little bit you actually do see the tints, tones, and shades. It’s kind of cool. I’ve learned a whole new perspective. And like reflections back, metallic surfaces - it’s kind of neat. And I’ve never thought about it that way. It just brings to light.....just little things I’ve noticed. My mom’s friend got a new house. When we went to her new house, almost all of the walls were white. But, you could see like, the shadows and it kind of made it look pretty cool. And I was surprised at it.

Sadie continued on, discussing how everyday life for her now has become more “beautiful” because she appreciates the details in ordinary objects that she used to

overlook. She believes she has become more observant and she “just understands better” why many things look the way they do.

To end the interview, I asked Sadie to finish the sentences, “Art education is important because...” and “Art education is *not* important because...”, and her answer to the latter (not important because) was very interesting:

There is not answer for that. Because it is important. Basically by saying it is not important is like saying that it’s not important to breathe. Because you never know who you are going to teach or who is going to get the concept. Think about it. Picasso, his teachers or something like that, probably never even thought of you know, ‘Hey we are just going to teach you a little doodle or something’. They probably didn’t know he was going to become this famous painter. Or some of the other painters, you know, like the one who is still painting even though he can’t really hold up his hand? (Chuck Close) Think about it: he could have accidentally stumbled across it when he was in high school. It’s one of those things you could just stumble across and be the next big hit.

This quote reveals that Sadie believes that anyone can have the potential to be successful in art, and because of that everybody should have opportunity to be exposed to it in school. Overall, her opinions regarding the value of art were about having personal experiences that can help people to explore their internal and external worlds. Next I will introduce Sara, the last student-participant I interviewed for this research.

Sara. Both Kayla and Sadie are both individuals who are considered model students within the district. I chose Sara specifically because although she is not labeled at-risk, she is not exactly a model student either. She is very open with me, so even though I may not witness it, I am aware that she does not always make positive choices (such as drinking, smoking, and skipping school on occasion) and Sara does not always put her best effort into academics. I thought choosing Sara would allow for a different perspective because she seems to fill the gap between the levels of effort and academic success exhibited by my other student participants.

Background Information.

Observations. Sara is 18 and a senior in high school. When I first met her two years ago, my first impression of her was that she seemed to have an attitude of discontent with school. She did not actively participate very often in her Studio in Art class when we would have group discussions or critiques, and she often did not look happy to be there in general. As I have gotten to know her that perception has changed, something I attribute to both her getting older and to my increased understanding of her personal affect.

Sara is a girl who is short in stature but large in personality. She stands at about five feet tall with a thick build and striking blue eyes. She usually wears her light, shoulder-length brown hair straight and parted down the middle of her head framing her face. When Sara is not engaged in conversation, her facial expression often exudes an impression of being angry, however that does not appear to be intentional. She often wears thick black eyeliner that intensifies her bold features.

Sara likes to surround herself with friends, and as a result can tend to fall behind in her classwork due to her constant socialization. This year Sara has made up for this lost time by coming into the art room during study halls and office hours, and she generally spends that time working on Ceramics projects. The recent improvement in her effort was one of the many things I discussed with her during our interview, which is presented next.

Personal information obtained from interviews. As with the other interviews, I began by asking Sara to describe herself to me. In her attempt to answer, she was not able to identify any hobbies or interests that she thought were significant. She has an older brother, and her parents are married. Sara said her family gets along pretty well for the most part and she has no complaints about her home life. Sara aspires to one day own a business, although she does not know what kind yet, probably be “some kind of a boutique.”

General education information obtained from interviews. Sara, as a senior, has an interesting schedule because she is allowed to leave after sixth period since she does not *need* any additional credits (right now she is only taking four classes, she had five last semester with Ceramics.). I know other seniors who are in that same position, however they chose to fill their schedule by taking elective classes that they wanted to fit in before graduation. Sara admits that she did not have the motivation or desire to take on more work. Describing her classes, she says English is easy because she is “a reader” and usually finishes all the books ahead of time. Sara added that she does not have the same ease or desire with writing, however. She is also in Environmental Studies, a science class that Sara had to take this year to finish up her science credits since she had failed in

the past. Sara considers that class easy and fun because it is hands-on and they do things like work in the greenhouse and visit the nature trail. Sara likes gym, “for the most part.” and she has two study halls, which she liked in the beginning of the year, but not as much now because they are getting boring. Sara comes to my room for one of the study halls, something that she requested so that she would have more time to work on her Ceramics. Sara has also recently started a painting project; something she wanted to take on after seeing other students take on personal projects in addition to their class assignments.

Sara comes to my room every day for office hours because “it’s like relaxed and chill.” She also participates in chorus which she likes for the most part, despite not always like the songs. (Interestingly enough, when asked what she would rather cut from a school budget in place of art, she answered “chorus” without missing a beat.) Her Economics class is “not bad actually. It’s pretty easy with Mr. P. He does stuff so you don’t have to take notes all the time.” Sara did say that she does not necessarily mind taking notes, but likes having more activities to break up the day. Sara looks forward to Economics the least because it is the only “real work” she has to do all day saying “it is the only period where I really pick up a pen, even though it is not that often.” A statement like this shows that Sara’s concept of “work” is associated with traditional classroom activities such as writing and note-taking. It was unclear if Sara was alluding to the idea that her other classes are not work because they do not require effort, or if they just do not *feel* like work because she does not have to “pick up a pen.”

Sara explained that she did not sign up for Ceramics herself, it was just added to her schedule by the guidance office to help fill her day. Sara said that has happened to

her a lot over the years (getting classes she did not sign up for), and that she usually drops those classes.

Sara feels she learns well in a variety of ways, but hands-on is learning is most effective for her. She believes it is helpful to have “teachers that are realistic about it, like they give you a real life example. They need to be down to earth. I like more informal and laid-back (teaching) so I feel like I can bond with that person.” I had not yet heard a comment like this yet in the research, although the other students did mention having “favorite” teachers. Another original comment Sadie made is that she thinks, in general, school does not place the right emphasis on the right things. She explains, “I feel like we don’t learn anything for like, real life. Like how to balance a check book or how to put a down payment on a car or house or anything. But we learn trigonometry! (laughing)” It appears that Sara does not yet understand the value or purpose of some of the aspects of her general education. Teachers should strive to help students make the connection between what they learn in the classroom and how to apply those skills to everyday life. In doing this, students may have a greater appreciation and motivation for their formal education.

Discussing her academic history, she admits she has struggled in the past but admits that to be her own fault due to lack of effort, not ability. Sara quit her BOCES cosmetology program after her first year. This year her grades are in the 80’s and 90’s, but said in the past she was always in summer school because of failed classes. She explains her poor academic showing in the past by saying that “in middle school it was like the ‘cool’ thing to do, and then in high school I was just behind from not paying attention in middle school.” Sara’s lack of motivation was confirmed in a different line

of questioning when I asked what parts of school she looked forward to the most. She responded, “Study halls. And leaving.” Now that I have introduced Sara’s perspectives on her other classes, the findings regarding her opinions on art will be presented.

Perspectives on the value of art experiences.

Art experiences, environment and atmosphere. One art experience that Sara feels was especially important was when she learned shading with Mr. Thomas, because she thinks the “basics are good to know.” She appreciated learning to throw pots on the wheel, for the same reason. Sara prefers ceramics to drawing or painting, explaining “I think it’s the 3D thing, because on paper I have never gotten anything exactly how I want it....and with the clay I can.” The opportunity to pursue different media and techniques allowed Sara to discover her interests and strengths in art. Her comment here also exemplifies how student aptitudes can vary in a manner similar to learning preferences.

Sara said that at first she thought she was terrible at Ceramics, but she realizes now that she was just getting used to it. She explained, “Once I got the hang of it, it was awesome. I really liked it because, I don’t know, I like hands-on stuff.” Sara said one of her most memorable moments was the first time she threw on the wheel. She was not expecting to do well, but “it came out really good and I was really happy about it.” Sara also described many other moments where she struggled but persevered. For example, she an owl-inspired ceramic box that kept falling apart on her. She described that struggle as being “horrible!” Sara said it was very frustrating, but for some reason it did not discourage her. She continued and finished that particular project; however she admitted that if it were for another class she probably would not have kept going with it. Sara explained why she did not give up, saying “because I liked it.” When asked to

elaborate, Sara explained how she not only enjoyed the process of creating her owl, but she also liked the idea of her final product. The idea of process versus product is one we discuss in class on occasion, particularly when students express enjoyment for the procedures but have less enthusiasm for the finished product (and vice versa.) Sara said there was nothing about Ceramics class as a whole that she did not like, even when things went wrong.

Overall, her opinion on art in school is that, “I value it. It’s a good way to get stuff off your mind. And you can express yourself. It makes me happy. I enjoy it....it’s fun.” She explains why she enjoys it saying, “Because there is freedom. You give us guidelines but we can go outside of those guidelines. And the music helps. It’s a good atmosphere to be in.” I asked if she would still like it if I more strict with my classes, and she said, “I would still like it, but it would be harder to enjoy.” Sara liked the laid-back structure of the class and choices about when and how they completed their assignments. Compared with other classes she said she thinks her art classes have been “A lot better. I just like the freedom of it, kinda. All the other classes are like, you have to do this, you have to do that. This one is like, you have this kind of goal, but you can make it your own.”

Sara admits that she does not think art is more “important” than other classes, but rather she “personally finds it more enjoyable.” I asked her how she would feel if the art program was eliminated and she said “I would be really disappointed. Cause it’s fun. I really enjoy coming here during the day.”

When asking the “devil’s advocate” question about art being a blow-off class and her opinion on whether she agreed, Sara said, “No. I mean on some days if you want to

just chill for like a period, yeah, it's a good one to choose. But I personally enjoy doing it, so it's what I do when I want to chill." She explained her comment about it being a "good one to choose" by saying, "Well it's just like, you can always catch up. You are not really putting yourself behind if you don't do anything for a day" (because in that particular class everyone works at different speeds and sets their own pace.) Sara admitted that normally she wouldn't think twice about blowing off a class, even if it impacted her grade. She quickly followed that comment with, "I mean, I wouldn't care if I got a bad grade in art class, but I wouldn't want to."

Emotional connections. Wrapping up the interview, Sara said that she believes art education is important because "It lets you express yourself. Kind of like your emotions and everything." She believes it could also be helpful for kids who struggle, saying "because if they are angry you could just give them a piece of clay to punch. They could get their emotions out and at the end they might have just made something really cool." Sara said it has also been personally therapeutic, recalling a specific day when "I got so mad and I came in here and made a pot....and I was almost better (laughing)". Sara said art has helped her understand the value of focus and concentration. She explained that the level of concentration she achieves when working on her art projects helps to improve her mood when she is upset.

Sara has given a lot of her work to family as gifts and started making doubles of some of her projects so that she would have one to keep when she gave the other away. She explained that she likes that "I can make stuff for myself whenever I want. My mom gets all sappy with that kind of stuff, so it makes her happy. Makes me happy to make her happy."

Attitude toward learning. Without art, Sara's overall rating of school would be "like a three," but with it, it is "like an eight." If art was not part of the school system anymore, she believes, "That would really suck." Sara said having an art class to go to makes it "a lot easier to come in every day. I mean if it wasn't here at all I think (school) would be so boring." Sara now considers herself an "art person" saying,

I always wanted to be. When I was younger I always wanted to draw well. I think that's why I started taking art classes because I wanted to learn. Now I just love it. I'm excited to go to college for it.

Sara said art is a good example of a class that allows her to learn in a way that best suits her. She has time to discuss with me what she wants to do for each project, and as a result we have gotten to know each other better. She said that she now feels comfortable to just "sit and talk to you (me), you are like a friend" which for her makes school more enjoyable and easier to learn.

Life skills. Despite her personal interest, Sara believes that art could be considered *not* important because "you don't really need it for life. It's not going to help you drive your car." She followed up by saying art has helped her become "more patient and I have not had much patience whatsoever...until that owl." She explained, "I think it really helped with the trees (a later project) having the owl crumble all the time. Because then I was like, well the owl worked, so the trees are going to work!"

Socially, she feels it is helpful because her friends also come into the art room a lot and it gives them a new branch of conversation to talk about. Sara also improved her relationship with another teacher when she made a Hello Kitty sculpture for her in Studio

in Art. She also likes getting to know others in the art room saying, “Even if I’m not doing anything for myself, I like to see what other people are doing.”

In terms of life skills gained through art, Sara has learned “just to keep going at it. I mean you are going to end up with some cracks in the situation every now and then but it will still be together.” After making this statement, Sara recognized that her comment could be applied as a greater generalization toward the various obstacles life presents. When approaching challenges now, Sara said art has helped her to “just keep going with it. Hopefully it will eventually work out. I mean I’ve never really made anything in here that hasn’t come out looking good, except for my first few pots but I was just learning then.” Sara’s statements here show that she has developed a strong grasp on the importance of perseverance, particularly with artistic challenges. Many students want to give up as soon as their work starts to not look the way they think it should. Sara understands that it takes time to build up one’s skill level, and that even when things go wrong, they can still be fixed or found to be valuable.

Overall, Sara’s experiences in the visual arts helped her to define the path she wants to follow in life. It has had some therapeutic and expressive benefits, and has also taught her to follow through and have patience with her work. However, she does not believe that art is important for everyday life, such as driving and bill paying. She enjoys the atmosphere of the art room and the opportunities it provides her to socialize both in a personal and academic way. Now that all of the student stories have been presented, the next section will review the emergent themes from the data.

Commonalities and Variations among Identified Themes

For this study, the stories of three students who are labeled at-risk were sought in order to discover their opinions regarding visual art experiences. Three additional students were also asked to participate in the research, to reduce the risk of feeling singled out for the students labeled at-risk, but also to provide stories for comparison. When comparing the stories, there were many overlapping themes that formed from the data amongst both groups. There were also a few concepts that had a stronger presence within the group of students labeled at-risk than with those who were not labeled. This section discusses these commonalities and variations, and a chart of these findings can be viewed in the appendices.

One of the themes that was present throughout all student participants, regardless of identified labels, was the concept of freedom. Each student expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to choose and have a sense of control over their learning experiences. The students each discussed variations within this theme, such as freedom to choose subject matter when producing artwork, freedom to work at their own pace, and freedom to choose from a variety of art courses. Along related lines, each student also mentioned or alluded to an appreciation for the opportunity to be creative, a direct benefit of the freedom provided by their art experiences.

A second theme that was universally agreed upon by all the participants was an appreciation of the opportunity for emotional expression within their art experiences. Although this was an idea touched upon by every student, those who were labeled at-risk described this more as benefit related to stress and anger relief or a coping mechanism. For the students that were not labeled at-risk, their responses were geared more toward an

appreciation for the opportunity to express themselves and their personalities in general, such as when Sadie described how she liked the opportunity to “put yourself into your work” or Kayla’s comments about how art helps to “create your character.”

A third concept that was common among all of the research participants was how the arts have allowed them an opportunity to connect with others. For Jessica, her art experiences helped her to feel close to her deceased friend Debbie, and also allowed her to create an artwork that she is hoping will help her gain appreciation from her father. Brian enjoys sharing his drawings with his family and feels a genetic connection to his father because of their shared skill. Chrissy expressed appreciating the social environment created in the art room and how she enjoyed talking to others about their work. She also talked about how it made her happy to be able to share her artworks with others. Kayla also uses art regularly to make gifts for her family. Sadie feels that through looking at the art of others, she can understand more about them and how they felt when they created each piece. Sara has also used her art experiences to create items to give to others, and also discussed how she has discovered new avenues of conversation she can have with friends who also appreciate and participate in the visual arts.

Each of the student-participants, in their own way, discussed how participating in the visual arts have allowed for an increased appreciation and/or motivation for learning and school. Brian’s thoughts were the most divergent from the group on this topic, as he said that he does not believe his participation in art classes has necessarily increased his motivation or appreciation for school, but he believes this to be true for friends of his.

There were also themes that were more strongly tied to the students labeled at-risk than the others. For example, the idea of the arts providing an opportunity to enhance

one's self-esteem and pride was expressed more often within the group of students labeled at-risk. Jessica, Brian, and Chrissy all told stories and explained that they have been happy and proud of themselves as a result of the successes they have had in the visual arts. While Sara mentioned this briefly as well, it was not a point brought up by Sadie or Kayla.

Another theme that was more present within the answers of the students labeled at-risk was the appreciation for the variety of learning experiences that the arts offered. Jessica, Brian, and Chrissy all critiqued one or more of their classes as being "boring" or too heavy on traditional instructional practices such as reading and writing. They each expressed an appreciation for the "change in pace" that the arts added to their day, especially appreciating the opportunity for hands-on working experiences. They all, both in the interviews and observed in the classroom, expressed how they have found their experiences in the art room to be "fun," and not feel as much like work as some of their other classes.

Each of the students interviewed, regardless of label, expressed an appreciation for the art environment and atmosphere. Each of the students labeled at-risk mentioned that they found being in the art room "relaxing" and/or "calming." Kayla and Sadie also echoed these sentiments. There was also a bit of a distinction between the two groups in that Sadie and Sara also added that they also described the art room to be a positive environment in addition to relaxing and calming. As a teacher, I have observed this to be true; that many students who struggle in school seem to be more relaxed in the art room than in other areas of the school. Perhaps this is because the learning experience is different in the art room, with more opportunities for student control and independent

learning. In addition, I make it my goal to keep the art room a friendly and calm environment. I encourage students to come up their own versions of my assignments and allow the students the opportunity to take turns choosing the music we listen to during studio production times.

In addition, there were many findings from this research that appeared to be distributed randomly among the student-participants regardless of label or status. For example, Brian and Sara were the only two students who admitted a lack of value in the arts because it is not a “need” or requirement for everyday life. Jessica and Sadie both mentioned in several ways how art has provided them with a new outlook and perspective when observing the world around them. The theme of patience and perseverance as a skill enhanced through art experiences was expressed by Jessica, Brian, Kayla, and Sara, but not Chrissy and Sadie. Interestingly, Chrissy and Sadie were also the only two students who did not cite learning new techniques as one of the most important things they have gained through the arts. Jessica was the only student who made a specific cross-curricular connection through art and math. When considering if their art experiences have had an impact on the way they think about and approach challenges, Jessica, Brian, and Sara each credited art with positively influencing them to try new things, both in art and other areas of life. See Appendix F for a chart displaying these findings.

Chapter IV Conclusion

The participants in this study were each studied individually, although they were categorized into two separate groups based on who was considered by their school district to be at-risk. Each student was invited to share stories and opinions on their

visual art experience during a semi-structured, informal interview. In addition, each student was observed over a course of four months to gather data that would support and add to the information obtained during the interviews.

Each of the participants had various opinions on the value of their visual art experiences, which were often backed up with personal anecdotes or stories that offered insight into how these opinions were formed. Using this data, Chapter V will discuss how the insights of these students align with the existing research on visual art education. Chapter V will also offer my insights for future research on this topic.

Chapter V: Results and Recommendations

As an art educator, I was interested in finding out how students think about their visual art experiences. As a former student who experienced success in my education, I had a particular curiosity regarding the opinions of students who have identified challenges to their personal and academic success. My study sought to find out whether the stories of students who were labeled at-risk could add any new data to the existing research on the impact of visual art education. I developed several research questions to serve as a guide. The central question asked what the stories of high school students who have been labeled at risk reveal about their visual art experiences. Under the umbrella of the central question, this study sought to understand how the students perceive the value of art education and how they believe their participation in the arts may influence their personal, social and emotional development. Additional goals of the research were to discover how students believe art experiences effect the way they think about and approach challenges and how participating in art classes influence their perception of their overall educational experience. Finally, I wanted to discover what I and other teachers could learn from a study on how students who are labeled at risk think about their visual arts education. Using data presented in Chapter IV, Chapter V discusses how my understanding of student perceptions regarding their visual arts experiences has grown.

Connections and Contradictions to Existing Research

Cross-Curricular Learning. In chapter two, I presented the work of Respress & Lufti (2006), who explored how exposure to the arts can contribute to “whole brain learning.” They postulated that students who participate in the fine arts experience

greater academic achievement across various subjects. The students I researched did not offer a lot of specific data to support that theory. Jessica was the only student who expressed any recognition of cross-curricular links when she acknowledged the link between math and art concepts dealing issues such as proportion. Two of the students labeled at-risk, Jessica and Brian, added that they believe the patience and perseverance they have developed through their art experiences have also carried over into other areas of their schooling. Kayla, one of the students not labeled at-risk also echoed this sentiment. The perseverance they have gained can be viewed as an indirect benefit to their overall educational performance. However, it is notable that there was only the one minor mention of a specific cross-curricular connection. Their answers did not provide for any quantitative measure of the significance of this impact. In summary, the opinions of the participants did not reveal that the arts have a significant impact on their success in other classes, other than helping them to become more patient and persistent workers overall. Now that the findings regarding the connections between art and other subjects have been addressed, next I will discuss my conclusions about the students in terms of motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm.

Motivation, Engagement, and Enthusiasm. In Chapter I, the problem statement proposed that “Students who are labeled at-risk, in particular, do not always have an opportunity to express what they believe is important about their education, and the decisions about what courses they need are often made by others.” The findings from my research supported this idea. Brian and Chrissy discussed being placed in their art courses despite not registering for them. In addition, Sara and Kayla expressed critiques of the educational system, stating that much of what they learn is not important or

necessary for life. However, Julie expressed an appreciation for the control she feels she has when she has the opportunity to choose from the variety of courses offered in the arts. Two of the students not labeled at-risk also echoed this sentiment, appreciating the many avenues offered within the visual arts.

While the students may not always be able to have control over what classes they are required to take, all six of the students expressed an appreciation for the level of freedom and choice they are given within their art classes. The open-ended aspect of their assignments gives them a feeling of ownership over their work, something that has helped them to stay motivated throughout the process of artistic creation.

Gainer (1997), described a belief that traditional educational systems may neglect intelligences that were not the traditional linguistic or logical. Lufti & Respress (2006) expressed their belief that as a result of this, students with atypical learning styles have increasingly struggled with “boredom, underachievement, and discipline problems.” All three of my students labeled at risk described themselves as learners that were not linguistic or logical, rather they identified themselves as visual and kinesthetic. The data I was able to collect from my students echoed this sentiments of Lufti & Respress; as all three of my students labeled at-risk complained of many of their core classes being “boring.” Jessica and Brian explained that they appreciated that their art classes offered them variety and a change in pace from the traditional instructional norms that they experience in their other classes. This directly aligns with Lufti & Respress’ (2006) view that the fine arts helps to alleviate issues of boredom and disengagement with one’s education.

Lufti & Respress (2006) also attested that participation in the fine arts provides students with environments that are positive, nurturing, stimulating, and encourage action and interaction. One student labeled at-risk in particular, Chrissy, discussed a great appreciation for in the art environment, describing it to be happy, upbeat, and full of activity and music. While Jessica and Brian did not comment on the art environment being stimulating, or an appreciation for the “action” in the way that Chrissy did, they did attest to the increased level of enjoyment they experience while working on their projects, as well as describing the experience of being in the art room as “relaxing” and “calming.”

Results of the HEARTS project, described by Lufti & Respress (2006) showed that arts-integrative strategies in core subject areas promote increased school engagement, promote a more internal locus of control, promote adolescents’ academic achievement, and discourage school disciplinary problems. Each one of my students labeled at-risk commented that they have felt more engaged in their other courses when they were given the opportunity for “projects” that utilized their artistic and creativity-based skills. For example, Chrissy stated that she felt most engaged in her Economics class when they were asked to design posters in the form of Facebook walls to reflect the ideas and platforms of the presidential candidates. Both Chrissy and Jessica expressed an appreciation for their PR Pride class due to the creative and production-based nature of the work required in the class. Brian stated that it was easier to overcome the high level of discussion and lecturing in his Environmental Studies class because they also were able to get out of the traditional classroom environment and grow their own plants in the greenhouse. All of this data supports the idea that the arts and activities that are based on

creativity and production help students to feel more engaged and motivated in their learning.

Catterall (1997) cited the work of Shirley Brice Heath when stating that providing education for low income youth allowed them to be four times more likely to have high academic achievement and three times more likely to have high attendance. Five of my student participants each stated participating in art classes improved their motivation to attend school. With the exception of Jessica, they did not mention any specific examples of days when they chose to come to school because of their art classes, but they all expressed the opinion that it helped them feel more motivated to attend on days when they otherwise would have wanted to stay home. Brian was the only student who did not believe he was more motivated to attend school because of his art classes, but he also made clear that he feels that many of his friends have increased motivation for school when participating in art courses.

Dwyer (2011) summarized the findings regarding the quality of total educational experiences from the Committee on Arts and Humanities, writing, “There’s a pride and collegiality in an arts-integrated school. Learning seems more fun, students and teachers are more engaged, and the whole school seems more creative.” The concept of increased engagement and fun being tied in with arts activities was consistent amongst the findings from the students labeled at-risk. Both Chrissy and Jessica cited their PR Pride class as one of their favorites in addition to art, and they described that PR Pride as a project-based course with the task of uniting the school through creating displays that highlight the achievements of the school and local community. They believe that this arts-integrated course has been well-received throughout the school and has increased the

decor and feelings of unity throughout the school. As Chrissy described, participating in PR Pride has benefitted her in that “it feels good because you get to recognize people.”

Mason et al. (2008) believe that students who are actively involved in creative methods to derive answers to problems begin to view the learning process as personal and hands-on, not an abstract and vague concept. According to the students I studied, relevance was often a problem in their core subject areas. Each of the participants, with the exception of Sadie, expressed concerns that much of what they learn in school is not relevant or important for them know. However, all of the participants viewed their work as a personal endeavor, which allowed them to recognize the meaning and value in the process.

Hopper and Miller (2010) found that art helps students to develop better habits of learning and more flexible ways of thinking through problems with the result being that students tend to feel that they have ownership of what they have learned, heightening their perception of academic achievement. This was a recurring theme I observed throughout my student interviews. Each student commented on their appreciation for the level of choice they are offered within their art experiences, and how that has helped them to persevere through difficult art tasks and increased their patience and persistence with tasks. Julie, Kayla, and Sara all cited poor responses to art tasks that eliminated that feeling of ownership due to limitations in creative freedom with their former art teacher. All six participants expressed feelings of pride when they were able to work through challenges they encountered while working on their various artworks. By being able to work their way through these challenges, they were able to feel more ownership and ultimately a greater perception of the significance of their achievements.

Personal Growth. There were several occasions throughout the data collection process that I noted instances of personal growth associated with the arts. Lufti & Respress (2006) discuss how some youth arts programs are being used across the country as effective crime prevention tools. They also state that participation in the arts are attributed to stress-reduction. Brian discussed specifically how he has, and continues to use, drawing as a coping mechanism to calm himself down when he feels he is about to lose his temper. Brian has a documented history of getting into physical altercations, and he cited instances where he has been able to avoid confrontations by using drawing as an expressive outlet to calm himself down rather than choosing a more destructive manner of expression. All three of my students labeled at-risk were very clear and emphatic in their opinions that they have found their involvement in the arts to be calming, relaxing, and an outlet to release stress and other emotional tensions.

Aguilar et al (2009) also stated that emotional intelligence can be tied to cognitive development because it helps to improve planning and problem solving skills, as well as “motivate and sustain persistence at challenging tasks.” An increased level of persistence and motivation was confirmed through interviews and observations to be true for five out of the six participants. Sadie was the only student who did not mention noticing an art benefit of persistence or perseverance, nor was I able to observe any instances of her attributing her skills in this area to the arts.

Lufti & Respress (2006) believe that the arts tend to strengthen abilities such as focus and concentration, skills in expression, persistence, imagination, creativity, and “inclination to tackle problems” Chrissy and Sara both specifically mentioned that they valued how specific art tasks have allowed them to feel an improved level focus and

concentration. In addition, Jessica, Brian, and Sara all stated that they will be more willing to take on new challenges, even outside of the realm of art, due in part to the successes they have felt from achieving success in the arts.

Bickley-Green & O'Thearling (1996) state that art can help define self-worth because "if a child creates an object that he considers to be valuable, he often transfers that value to himself. He begins to see himself as the maker of worthwhile things" (p. 23). All three of my students labeled at-risk discussed specific instances in which they have made things that they have deemed to be valuable. As a result, they all agreed that such successes have helped to improve their self-esteem and have allowed them to feel self-pride.

This section has reviewed how the data from my research aligns with the previous research related to this topic. There were some variations and discrepancies in my findings to that of the existing literature, particularly in the area of cross-curricular connections. However, much of the existing literature was either confirmed or enhanced by the findings from this study, as specific students were given the opportunity to back up their opinions with specific examples and explanations.

Recommendations for Future Research

During both the data collection and analysis process, I encountered instances that led me to define areas in which this study could be expanded or improved for future research. Working within a small district limited the cultural diversity within my student population. It is my belief that the inclusion of a culturally diverse student population would allow for a greater variation in student perceptions and opinions. In addition, the narrow time frame for this study was another factor that significantly limited the ability to

collect a fully extensive amount of data. I found this to be especially significant due to the challenges of working with an at-risk student population. My access to Chrissy and Brian was significantly less than that of the other students due to the numerous days they were absent from school. This made it particularly difficult to schedule times for interviews and limited the amount of data gathered from in-class observations. I feel it would also be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study to see how the student opinions can evolve as they develop into adults and complete their high school experience.

Another suggestion for future research would be to further explore and possibly refine the use of the term “at-risk.” I found the existing definitions to be broad and inconsistent. Based on Chen and Kaufman’s (1997) descriptions, a student could be identified at-risk if they had one of the following factors: low socioeconomic status, coming from a single parent family, having an older sibling who dropped out of school, changing schools two or more times, having an average grade of “C” or lower from sixth through eighth grade, and having repeated a grade (Chen & Kaufman, 1997). This definition would identify some of my non-at-risk students as being at-risk. I have also found that although a student may be labeled at-risk, they may have “outgrown” their label, which often follows them around even after they have shown an increased potential for success. The district in which I conducted my research considers each individual’s personal background, when determining if they consider them to be at-risk, something that I believe to be possible due to the small student and community population. For future research, I would suggest defining one or two specific at-risk indicators, and selecting students that fit those criteria in order to obtain information that is more specific and conclusive, and can be connected back to a more unified contextual background.

Using the generic term at-risk, I believe, allows for an un-ending list of indicators that could apply to a majority of the student population, thus rendering the term almost ineffective in defining a unique or specific group of students.

A final suggestion for future research would be the use of student surveys. While I made every attempt to reduce the risk of students providing me with anything less than their honest opinion during interviews, there is always a risk of students feeling compelled to alter their answers to fit what they may think is the “right” or “appropriate” answer when being interviewed by their teacher, someone who is in a position of authority over them. By offering the chance for students to respond to surveys anonymously, I would be able to collect data in a manner that may allow for more detailed or honest responses.

Chapter V Conclusion

Based on the triangulation of data from student interviews, observations, and documents such as artworks, I was able to answer each of my research questions. I was able to form some basic conclusions regarding what student stories can reveal about their thoughts regarding visual art experiences. Since this research was grounded in postmodern theory, I was not looking for one unified conclusion based on the stories of six individuals. Postmodern theory states that there is not one truth, but multiple truths or versions of reality that can be considered from varying perspectives (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002.)

While organizing the data I was able to find commonalities among the three students who were labeled at-risk, as well as recurring themes among all participants regardless of their label. Ultimately however, I was able to arrive at an overall

conclusion that each student valued their art experiences for reasons that were personal and intrinsic to the individual. Each student had their own story that expressed how their appreciation for their art experiences was in some way connected to their personal development; whether it was related to emotional expression, an opportunity for creativity and freedom within an otherwise structured school day, or the ability to use art to connect with others. These were themes that were consistent among the student participants, but unique to the contexts of their lives. The stories of students who were labeled at-risk revealed that they value opportunities of freedom and control over their learning. The resulting benefits of this creative control allowed them to have experiences that they believe has resulted in heightened self-awareness and pride, increased levels of persistence and patience when completing tasks (in art as well as other areas of education and life), and an ability to enhance personal relationships through the act of sharing their work with others.

As a result of this study, I have learned that students appreciate a personalized curriculum. Most of my students respond positively to aspects of an art environment such as the freedom to interact with peers and listen to music. I have learned, however, for some students this environment may allow them feel that it is acceptable to misuse class time. I have also learned that the presence or absence of a label such as “at-risk” does not define a student’s potential, nor is it always an accurate way to define who is facing challenges in their personal or academic life. Connecting on a personal level with each student helps me to understand the needs of each individual student, while also encouraging students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

For the field of art education, I hope that this research encourages educators to develop open-ended curriculums that allow students to be expressive and creative. Federal and state legislation such as NCLB and New York State's Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) has increased the focus on testing as a means of evaluation. This year was the first time I was mandated to administer exams to my students as a part of the APPR process, which evaluates my success as an educator. In my opinion, the success of art students and teachers is not best assessed through tests and overly structured evaluations. I believe that the student stories gathered for this research echoed these sentiments. Based on the data and my own experiences, it is my understanding that the value of the arts is in the experiences they provide for students. The stories told by my students revealed that art classes offer unique learning experiences that add fun and variety to a sometimes monotonous education system. It is my hope that the results of this research will encourage educators and legislators to focus on providing meaningful experiences for students by providing nurturing environments that support individuality and student initiative through means of visual expression.

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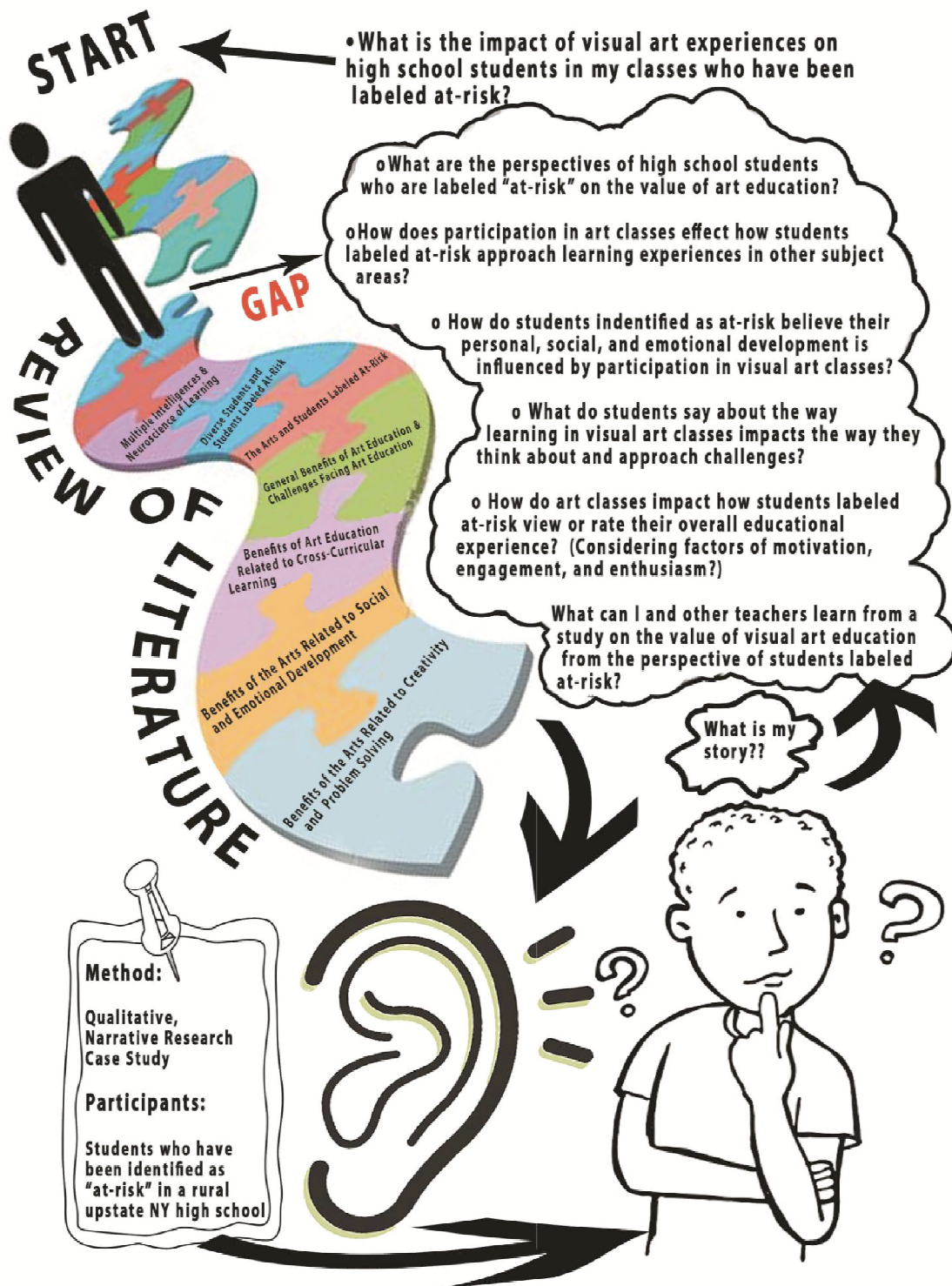
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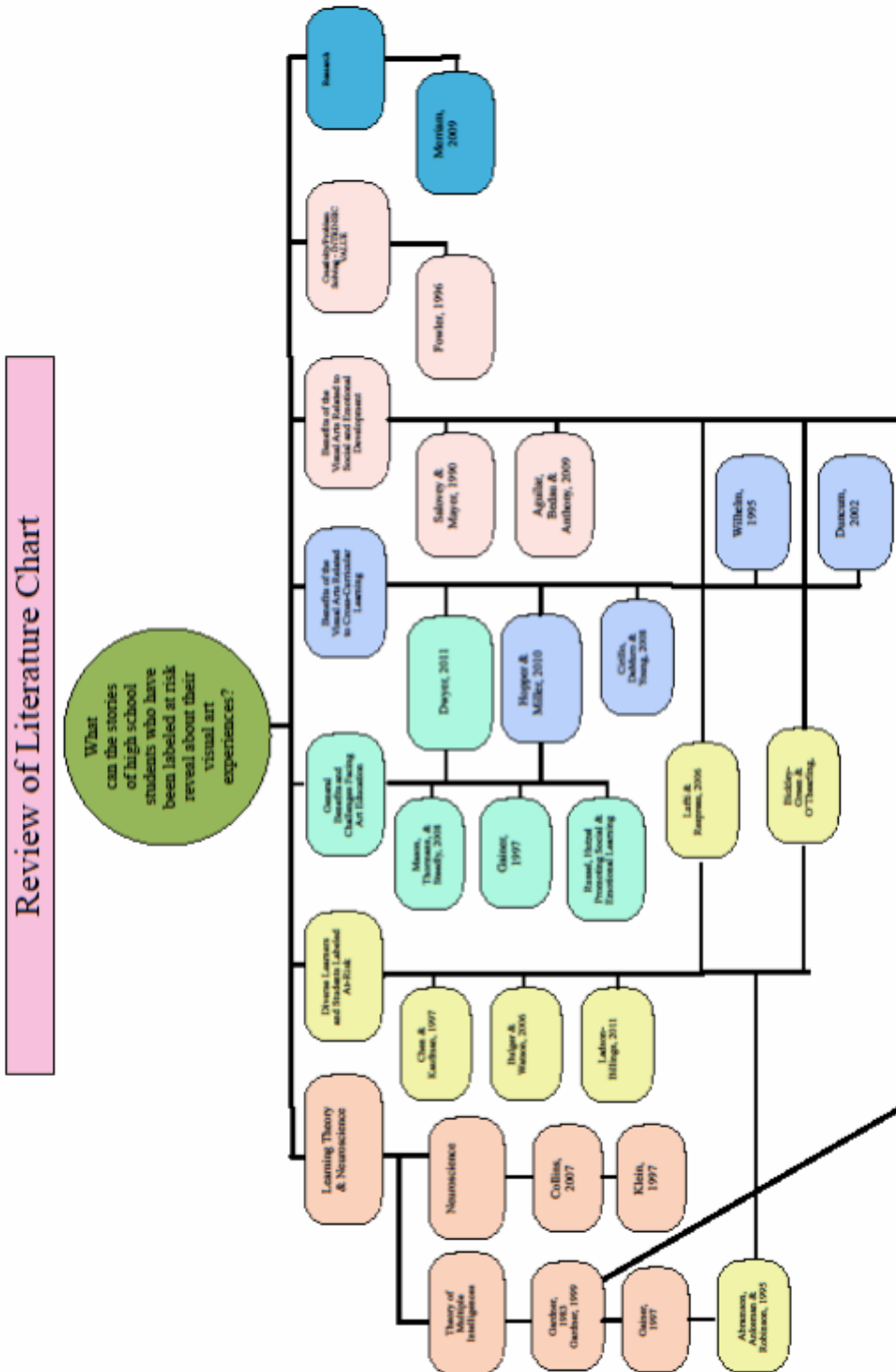
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Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C.1

11/5/12

Dear Parent or Guardian:

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the perspectives of high school students regarding the impact of visual art experiences. This study intends to explore how students value their art education experiences, as well as to gain an understanding about how these experiences may impact their lives personally, socially, and academically.

I will collect information from teachers and students through observations during class time, informal interviews and conversations during classes, photographs of student artwork, and audio recordings of stories students tell me about their art experiences.

Your child's participation will be helpful to my research project and is completely voluntary. There are no major risks as class will be conducted in its normal manner. All information will be confidential and used for educational research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect your child's identity and that of the teachers and the school in the final project report.

You may withdraw your student from the study at any time. No penalty will result if your child does not participate, however, I would certainly appreciate your child's participation in this research study to further knowledge on this subject matter.

Please complete the bottom of this letter and return to me by 11/19/12. You may contact me at any time per the e-mail address or phone number below. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Leah Peca
585-948-5211
Lpeca@oahornets.org

I, _____, agree upon these terms and **allow my child permission to participate** in the study described above.

OR

I, _____, do not agree upon these terms and **I do not allow my child permission to participate** in the study described above.

Guardian's Signature: _____ Date: _____

****If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you 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.2

11/5/12

Dear Student:

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the perspectives of high school students regarding the impact of visual art experiences. This study intends to explore how students value their art education experiences, as well as to gain an understanding about how these experiences may impact their lives personally, socially, and academically.

I will collect information from teachers and students through observations during class time, informal interviews and conversations during classes, photographs of student artwork, and audio recordings of stories students have to tell me about their art experiences.

Your participation will be helpful to my research project and is completely voluntary. There are no major risks as class will be conducted in its normal manner. All information will be confidential and used for educational research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect your identity as well as the identities of the teachers and the school in the final project report.

You may withdraw from the study at any time. No penalty will result if you do not participate, however, I would certainly appreciate your participation in this research study furthering knowledge on this subject matter.

Please complete the bottom of this letter and return to me by 11/19/12. You may contact me at any time per the e-mail address or phone number below. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Leah Peca
585-948-5211
Lpeca@oahornets.org

I, _____, agree upon these terms and **I will be participating** in the study described above.

OR

I, _____, do not agree upon these terms and **I will not be participating** in the study described above.

Student's Signature: _____ Date: _____

****If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you 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.3

11/5/12

Dear Principal,

As a graduate student at Buffalo State College, I am conducting a research project on the perspectives of high school students regarding the impact of visual art experiences. In conducting my research, I am seeking the stories of all students, however the main focus of the study is on the perspectives of students who are considered "at-risk". To qualify for participation in this study, students must be currently or have prior enrollment in one or more of my art courses. I have consulted Megan Hoffman for guidance in selecting students who would be appropriate for this study.

I will be collecting data through observations during class time, as well as informal interviews, questionnaires, and conversations with the students. I will be taking photographs of student artwork, and video and/or audio recordings of the interview and conversation sessions. Documents, such as written reflections on art assignments and class journal entries will also be analyzed as part of the data collection process.

The participation of students for this study is completely voluntary. There are no major risks for you or your students and all information will be confidential and used for research purposes only. Fictitious names will be used to protect the school as well as the identities of all students and faculty included in the study.

I would certainly appreciate your consideration of this request to pursue my graduate research at Buffalo State College to further my own education and that of others on this subject matter in the visual arts.

I look forward to hearing from you and setting up a time to further discuss my research project and fill out any necessary paper work to begin my study.

Thank you,

Leah Peca

_____I approve the study described above and will move forward on approving the researcher to conduct it within my school.

OR

_____I do not approve the study described above and will not move forward on approving the researcher to conduct it within my school

Administrator Signature:_____ Date:_____

****If you are unable to reach a member of the research team and have general questions, or you 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

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Describe yourself to me (Age, hobbies/interests, family, etc.)
- Describe to me what your school day is like in as much detail as possible. (Walk me through your day)
- What aspects of school do you look forward to?
- What do you find challenging as you go through the school day?
- Tell me about what led you to enroll in an art class this year.
- Tell me about how you feel about your experiences in an art class this year.
- Explain an art class or art experience you have had that was memorable to you.
 - Probe for details, follow up on answers
- Tell me about what you are doing in your art class right now.
- Some people might say that art is a “blow off” class because it is an elective.
What do you think about this belief? (“devil’s advocate” question) (possibly leading – watch carefully for student response)
- How do you view your art classes in comparison with your other classes?
- Teach me about something you have learned in an art class that you feel was significant or important.
- Tell me about something you learned in art class that you do not feel is significant or important.
- Suppose the art program was eliminated due to budget cuts. How would you react?
- Explain how you feel about your overall experiences as a student.

- How do you feel about what you are learning in school?
 - Teacher approaches, presentation of information, importance of info, etc.
- What are your thoughts on classes that are offered versus required
- What is your opinion on interactions with other students and teachers
- Describe any specific memories of your education that you feel are important or significant.
- How do you feel you learn best? (Ex – by taking notes, participating in discussions, making posters, projects, role-playing, etc.)
- In your opinion, Art Education is important because....
- In your opinion, Art Education is *not* important because.....
- Is there any way that participating in art classes has impacted the way you think about or approach new experiences or challenges?
- How has participating in art classes impacted your overall opinion on education (motivation for, enthusiasm, etc.)
- Do you feel that participating in art classes has had any impact on your social, personal, or emotional development? If so, how?
- Is there anything else you think it would be important for me to know about your opinions or thoughts regarding visual art education?

Appendix E

Research Schedule

- ☐ January 3-10 – Interview – Jessica
- ☐ January 11-18 – Interview – Brian
- ☐ January 19-26 – Analyze/Organize Data
- ☐ January 27-Feb 2 – Interview – Chrissy
- ☐ February 3-10 – Interview – Kayla
- ☐ February 11-18 – Analyze/Organize Data
- ☐ February 19-26 – Interview – Sadie
- ☐ February 27-March 31 –Interview –Sara
- ☐ April 1 – End of Semester – Analyzing Data, Writing Chapters IV & V

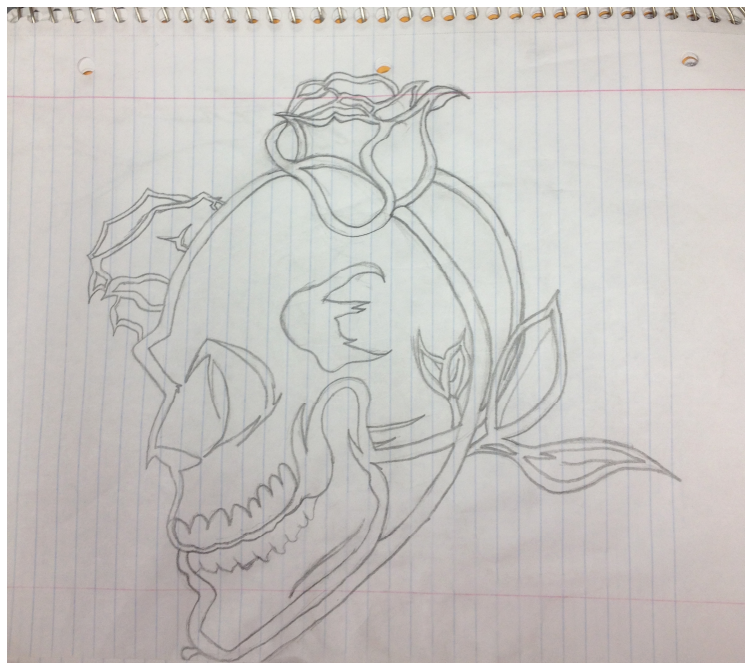
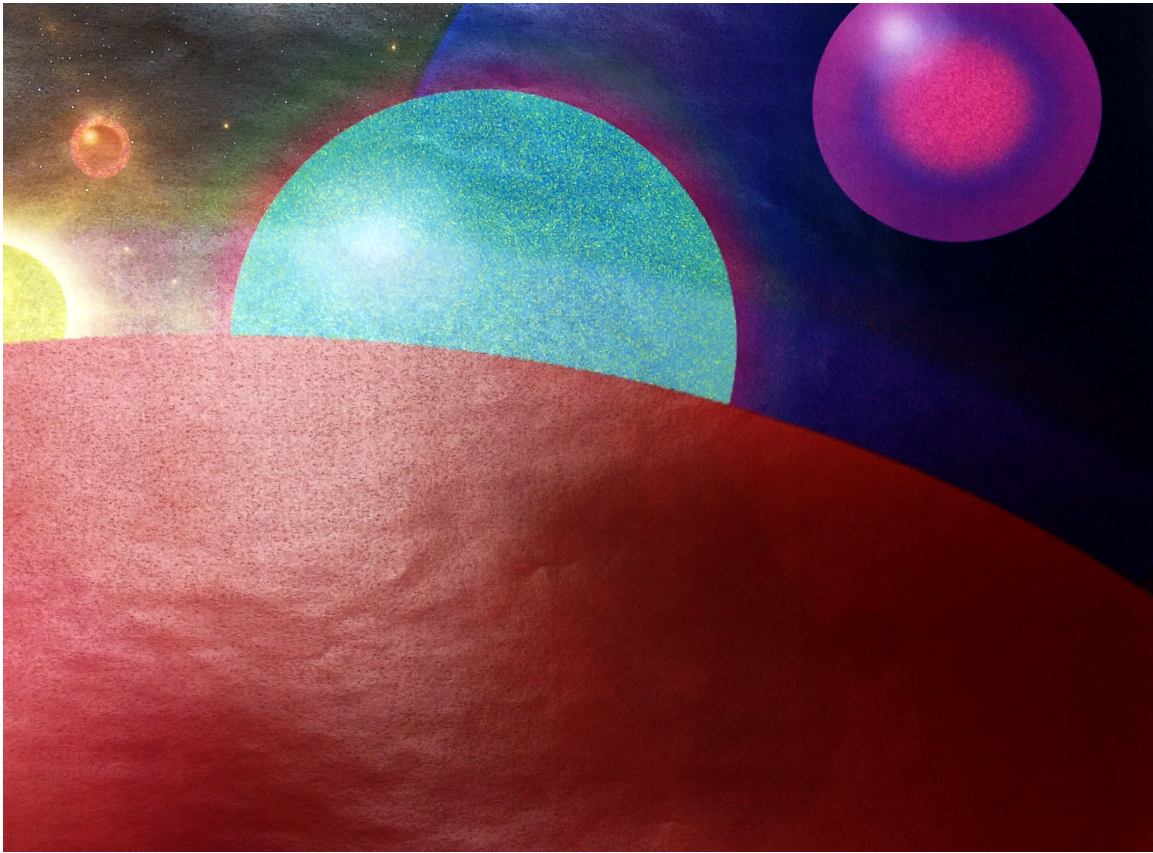
*Order of student interviews will be dependent on individual student availability and schedules. I anticipate interviewing and observing approximately one specific student per week. Observation will be an ongoing process with all participants.

**Data analysis will be a continuous process beginning with the onset of data collection.

Appendix F





Appendix G





Appendix H

FINDINGS	JESSICA	BRIAN	CHRISSY	KAYLA	SADIE	SARA
Enjoys drawing	X	X	X			X
Values learning new techniques	X	X		X		X
Freedom	X	X	X	X	X	X
Control over learning	Choice of classes			X		X
Increased appreciation for school	X	Only for others	X	X	X	X
Expressing feelings	Stress/anger relief	Stress/anger relief	Express feelings	X	Put yourself into the work	X
Relaxing	calming	calming	X	X		X
Self-esteem/Pride	X	X	X			X
Overcoming challenges/	X	finding value in mistakes		X		X
Connecting with others	Debby, Father,	family	socially, gifts	Makes gifts for her family	Understanding others via art	X
Variety in Learning Experiences	Change in pace	variety			X	
Approaching challenges	Willingness Try new things	approaching challenges - coping mechanism				X
Creativity	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cross-curricular	X					
PATIENCE	X	perseverance		perseverance		X
New perspective	X				X	
Hands-on learning	X	X			X	X
FUN	X	X	X			X
Not necessary for life		X				X
Positive atmosphere			X		X	X
Focus/Concentration	X		X			X
Working methodically	X	X		X		
Boring school day	X	X	X	X		X

 = FINDINGS UNANIMOUS AMONG ALL PARTICIPANTS

 = FINDINGS INDICATED BY SOME PARTICIPANTS

 = NO INDICATION

 = INDICATED BY LESS THAN HALF OF PARTICIPANTS

Appendix I

Executive Summary: Qualitative Narrative Research Investigating the Value of Visual Art Education Captured through the Stories of High School Students Labeled At-Risk

Background: Much of the research to date regarding the impact of visual art experiences is written from the perspective of educators and researchers. By seeking to understand what it is that students believe is significant in their art experiences, educators can adjust their curricula to address student interests. All students have their own story to tell regarding what they feel is important in their education. I studied three high school students who were labeled at risk along with three additional students to gain insights regarding the thoughts and beliefs they have about their visual art experiences.

Research Questions

- What can the stories of high school students who have been labeled at-risk reveal about their visual art experiences?
 - What are the perspectives of high school students who are labeled at risk on the value of visual art education?
 - How do students identified as at-risk believe their personal, social, and/or emotional development is influenced by participation in visual art classes?
 - What do students say about how learning in visual art classes impact the way they think about and approach challenges?
 - How do art classes have an impact on how students labeled at-risk view or rate their overall educational experience (considering factors of motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm?)
 - What can I and other teachers learn from a study on how students who are labeled at risk think about their visual arts education?

Approach and Methods

The role I play as researcher in this qualitative narrative study is participant observer. My first priority was to fulfill my duties as the classroom art teacher, while also conducting research in the form of interviews and observations. The topics studied in preparation for collecting data included: neuroscience and learning theory, cross-curricular connections in art education, social/emotional impacts of art experiences, characteristics of students labeled at-risk, challenges facing art education, and the creative/problem solving aspects of art education. This preparation along with my findings allowed me to form connections and develop reliable results.

Data Collection Methods

Observation – A research log was kept to record all findings; student participation, comments, productivity, engagement, and enthusiasm. Abbreviated notes were written in a journal throughout the school day. At the conclusion of each day, the notes were typed

out and expanded to include as much detail is possible, such as direct quotes and mannerisms of the students observed.

Interviews - Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six student participants, as well as the school psychologist and high school guidance counselor. All responses were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Artwork – Student artwork was photographed and analyzed to triangulate the findings. The presence and characteristics of the work was used to confirm student activity in the classroom and reinforce the stories and opinions students expressed when talking about their work.

Important Findings

Students find the **positive atmosphere** of the art room to be a place where they can socialize, listen to music, and move around while they work. For most, this helps them feel relaxed and is a welcome change of pace from the classrooms in their core classes.

Five out of the six participants expressed an appreciation for the opportunities of **emotional expression** offered within their visual art courses. The participants who were labeled at-risk each offered specific examples of how they have used the arts to cope with frustration, anger, and other difficulties in their lives.

All of the participants described enjoying the new techniques and skills they were able to develop through their art classes. They enjoyed the new experiences that provided by these learning opportunities, and often referred the **art activities as fun and engaging**.

Many students feel that they have a lack of choice and control within their education. Each of the students in this study expressed an appreciation for the **freedom** they have in many aspects of their visual art education. From the variety of courses in the arts they can choose from to the opportunity to develop personalized artworks in class, the arts allow students to feel a stronger **feeling of ownership** over their learning in school.

Connecting with others was a common theme among the findings in this study. Students expressed that they have used art as a way of relating to others, creating gifts for friends and family, and bonding with important people in their lives.

An improved sense of self-esteem and self-concept was identified by all of the students labeled at-risk. Their art experiences offered them the opportunity to set and achieve personal goals. By achieving these goals and creating successful artworks, their **successes were visible** not only to themselves, but to others as well. Receiving praise from family, teachers, and peers, combined with their own feelings of pride has helped each of these students gain an improved sense of self-worth.

Various **life skills**, such as patience, methodical work practices, and perseverance when confronted with challenges are benefits of participating in art classes based on the stories provided by the student-participants. The act of designing and producing artworks, combined with the reflective requirements of the courses, allowed the students to gain insight to the fringe benefits of participating in the arts.

An **increased overall appreciation for education** was expressed by five out of the six student participants. Many of the students admitted that art classes were often their main motivation to attend school, particularly when they found their other classes to be “boring.” Participation in art classes offered them an aspect of variety in their day to which they often anticipated and looked forward.

Implications

Recommendations for Future Research - Working within a small district limited cultural diversity within the student population. Working within a larger demographic will allow future researchers to gather a greater variety of student perceptions and opinion. A longitudinal study is also recommended to allow for more flexible scheduling with the students and the opportunity to observe student stories as they evolve over the years. The use of surveys would also be beneficial for addressing issues related to anonymity or students answering questions to placate. A final suggestion would be to identify one or two specific at-risk indicators when selecting students in order to obtain information that is more specific and conclusive based on a more unified set of student challenges.

Implications for Future Teaching – I have learned that students appreciate a personalized curriculum. Most of my students respond positively to aspects of an art environment such as the freedom to interact with peers and listen to music. I have learned, however, for some students this environment may allow them feel that it is acceptable to misuse class time. I have also learned that the presence or absence of a label such as “at-risk” does not define a student’s potential, nor is it always an accurate way to define who is facing challenges in their personal or academic life. Connecting on a personal level with each student helps me to understand the needs of each individual student, while also encouraging students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas.