

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF A SPECIAL NEEDS CLASS: HOW ATTENTION TO
AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS INFORMS LEARNING AND INDIVIDUAL GROWTH.

By

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Abstract

A qualitative study of a special-needs class: how attention to aesthetic considerations informs learning and individual growth.

This thesis describes a qualitative study of how attention to aesthetic considerations informs learning and individual growth in a special-needs class. The study is intended to provide an understanding of the evolving classroom environment and its influences on the individual students and myself as the teacher. The research context was a junior high school special-needs class (B111) of eleven students, one teacher and an attendant. Art-based educational research methods were used to conduct and analyze the data. Literature on aesthetics, meaning making and learning are discussed and connected to the documented comments, opinions and art works of the participants. The question whether or not a sense of belonging, if fostered through attention to aesthetic considerations, could motivate students to come to class and respect school grounds and property is addressed in the research. This qualitative study illustrates that getting to know the student population and the nature of the class and school is a crucial factor amongst others that contribute towards a healthy learning environment. This can be inspiring to administrators, educators, interior designers and architects when considering the factors involved in designing, building or organizing a school or classroom.

Résumé

Étude de cas d'une classe d'éducation spécialisée : De quelle façon l'esthétisme influence-t-elle l'apprentissage et le développement personnel?

Ce mémoire présente une étude de cas sur la façon dont l'esthétisme influence l'apprentissage et le développement personnel dans une classe d'éducation spécialisée. L'objectif est de mieux comprendre l'environnement évolutif de la classe et de son influence sur les élèves et sur moi-même, l'enseignante de la classe témoin. Le cadre de cette étude était une classe d'éducation spécialisée (B-111), située dans une école secondaire de premier cycle. Onze élèves, une préposée et une enseignante ont pris part à cette étude. Les données ont été recueillies et analysées à partir de méthodes issues des récentes recherches en éducation de l'art et plus précisément, sur l'enseignement à partir de l'art. La littérature sur l'esthétisme, sur la négociation de sens et sur l'apprentissage a servi les besoins de cette étude et les commentaires, les opinions ainsi que les travaux artistiques des participants y sont reliés. La question à savoir si l'esthétisme de la salle de classe crée un sentiment d'appartenance, agissant comme source de motivation sur l'assiduité en classe et sur le respect de l'établissement scolaire a été soulevée. Cette étude de cas démontre l'importance de la création de liens avec les élèves. La connaissance de la nature spécifique de la classe s'avère être un facteur crucial dans la création d'un environnement d'apprentissage sain et équilibré. Cette étude inspirera peut-être les directeurs d'école et les commissions scolaires, les décorateurs d'intérieur et les architectes, lorsque viendra le temps de concevoir les plans architecturaux, la décoration, la construction et l'organisation d'une école ou d'une salle de classe.

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Willingness to seek and to accept marginal change is not acceptance of second-or third-best...[it is] not minimal, not superficial, not tribal...Marginal improvements in education are actual, real, practical improvements...Marginal improvements do not deny the nature of the boundaries of their context”
Davis(1996, p. 204).

PREFACE

The following narrative represents my involvement in a qualitative study of how attention to aesthetic considerations informs learning and individual growth in a special needs class. The study is intended to provide an understanding of the evolving classroom environment and its influences on the individual students and myself as the teacher.

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In chapter one, I discuss the purpose and conceptual context of this study. I begin with my personal experience that led to an insight into an apparent problem and the goals that subsequently emerged. In chapter two, I continue with a background description of the school environment and population in which I conducted my research, together with a description of the evolution of my research question and an explanation of why I believe my research is crucial for my individual growth as an educator.

Chapter three presents an overview of literature with existing theory and prior research in: aesthetics, values, meaning making and education. The theoretical literature, largely philosophical, is augmented with literature oriented to practical applications. Literature on art based research will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

Chapter four contains a description of the methodology for the case study including the setting, participants, the materials, and a brief summary of the process and various lesson plans used. Literature on art based research is included as well as an explanation and justification of why I chose to use a qualitative study and art-based research methods. I specify how I collected data and analyzed it. I close the chapter with descriptions of the six individual lesson plans I conducted to collect data.

Chapter five focuses on the process of the individual lessons, my observation and conclusions after each lesson. I include the voices of the students that emerge from the discussions and conversations during the various lessons. I revisit some of the literature on aesthetics, meaning making and learning and connect it to this inquiry. In

this chapter I endeavor to make clear to the reader how research and reflection informs practice.

In chapter six, I point out other areas of further study that could be conducted to enhance and expand on the research in this study.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I invite you, the reader, to imagine that it is a Monday afternoon and you have been teaching the whole day. It has been a good day so far and now it is time for your students to go home. You step out of the class and everywhere you turn there is garbage. Garbage stuffed in every corner, the remains of sandwiches that have been kicked around spice up the color of the grey floors. Pink and red residue from days past are left behind on the lockers. Your students and you tip toe your way through the B hallway. Finally, the children are on the bus. You can feel the tension in your bladder; you desperately need to use the bathroom. You make your way through the sea of people now headed for the busses. At last you are in the bathroom and the first thing you see is brown mushy tissue paper stuffed in the sinks and clogged toilets. Wait a minute. What's that smell? And what is that brownish green stuff on the side of the

mirrors and grey walls? Oh no!!! Oh gosh, could it possibly be? Oh my, it is, it is Feces! Not again!

That was an actual experience of mine, one of many that led me to seriously reflect about aesthetics, learning and educational institutions.

The Junior high school I used to work at before being reassigned is actually a wonderful school of 680 pupils and 35 teachers. This school is situated in a metropolitan city in the province of Quebec. The socio- economic class varies. The school is divided into two sections, the first floor and the basement, or the A and B sections respectively. All the regular classes, sometimes referred to as “enriched” classes, are situated on the first floor. All the modified or special education classes are situated in the basement. The halls on the first floor are relatively colorful, with the girls’ bathroom painted pink and baby blue, and equipped with two full-length mirrors. This bathroom is hardly ever trashed and is usually relatively clean throughout the day. The halls surrounding the enriched classes are not normally in a bad state by the end of the day. It is in only one hallway and one bathroom where the sort of disrespect for school property, as described above, happens. This is the B hallway. It is a hallway I find to be particularly depressing even when clean. The floors are grey; the doorframes are grey and the walls white. In stark contrast to the regular classrooms, most of the classrooms here are bare with hardly any toys, educational props, posters or displays of student’s works. The B hallway and the classes in that section are what I imagine prison cells look like—the kind of prison cells that humanitarian groups would condemn. I started to ask myself

questions: How does the appearance of our classroom and hallways affect our students, if at all? Would improving the appearance of our hallways and classrooms give the students a sense of belonging? Could a sense of belonging, if fostered, motivate students to respect the school grounds and property? My intuitive response to these questions, coupled with other observations, led me to conclude that there was a desperate need for change.

Such conclusions suggest certain assumptions underlie my study: (a) A classroom or school (physical) environment influences a student's self image, learner identity, sense of belonging and agency; (b) For me to perform effectively in the classroom, it is important to understand the students' perspectives, ideas, opinions, and feelings.

This thesis, therefore, is a qualitative study of a special needs class and how attention to aesthetic considerations informs learning and individual growth. My concept of aesthetic considerations borrows from Johnson's statement "...aesthetic becomes the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning" (p.x). What better place to start than my very own class which was in desperate need of a "make over"?

CHAPTER TWO

Background

“Our world is a world of qualities—qualities of things, people, situations and relationships. Before and beneath reflective thinking and inquiry our world stands forth qualitatively.” ~Mark Johnson (2007, p. 69)

In August 2008, I greeted, with a combination of elation, excitement and fear, the news that I had secured my first teaching assignment, working with special needs students.

I would be teaching art, English and math to six high functioning autistic students, two students with learning difficulties and two students with Down Syndrome. Three days before school started the principal showed me the classroom in which I was to teach. The first thing that struck me about the space was its dull and gloomy appearance. As I walked around the grey and white class, it felt empty and in a strange way “sad”. During the first week I realized that that had to change.

The students were not happy with their environment either and it was evident from their behavior. They would suggest to me that perhaps we needed to re-arrange the tables. Two of the girls even brought in posters from home to add color to the walls. That weekend I did some research, made a long list of orders from an educational catalogue and paid the dollar store a visit. In one month we had the class re-painted to a combination of light green and white walls. Shortly after that we received a large

class-sized bulletin board. That was put up along with the art, science and English works of the students. We also received educational posters, which the students and I placed around the class to help inspire and motivate us. These additions also helped to improve the appearance of the class and create a space the students could identify with, relate to, and feel at home in. It was their space, their class, I wanted them to feel like they belonged.

These small changes made a dramatic difference. The attitude of the students changed markedly. They were now excited to come to class, proud of their surroundings and, if I may say, of their teachers. They understood that we (the class attendant and I) cared about them and wanted to make sure they were comfortable, happy and in an environment conducive to learning. They were more willing to sit and do work for longer periods of time without taking breaks. When the classroom's appearance improved, the students started to "gel". We became a little community, rather than individual students and teachers. We became a team. When I met parents for individual education plan meetings (I.E.P) they would comment on the changes in their children. I quote one parent:

"My son used to constantly ask me how I could 'make' him go to school. Now he loves coming to school, even when he is sick!! I believe this change is because he loves the new environment he is in, he feels comfortable, has made friends in the class and feels valued and respected by his teachers."

According to Freiberg (1999) school climate is the heart and soul of a school. It is about the real meaning of a school that leads a child, a teacher, an administrator, a staff

member to love the school and to look forward to being there each school day. School climate is that quality of a school that helps the individual to feel personal worth, dignity and importance while at the same time helping create a sense of belonging to something beyond ourselves. The climate of a school has the power to foster “resilience” or become a “risk factor” in the lives of people who work and learn in the school. Freiberg (1999) suggests that when students become citizens of the school, they take responsibility for their actions and those of others.

Reflecting on my experiences I realized that the aesthetics of my environment, “...the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning” (Johnson, 2007, p. x) affects how I feel and the experiences I encounter in the space. Thus, I suspected that it would also affect how my students would feel about the space they were in. I am interested in discovering, understanding and making meaning of my students’ experiences in their learning space. This would also help my colleagues and me to better understand how the aesthetics of a space, in this case a classroom, can impact student experiences and thus help us plan better how to organize and structure a learning space.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Lessons from the business sector

Studies have been done in the business sector that have related employee productivity to physical environment conditions. These studies have concluded that higher production and greater employee satisfaction is related to a better physical environment (Eilers, 1991; Glassman, Burkhardt, Grant & Vallery, 1978). Those studies led to, or recommended better ventilation, lighting, space usage, among other physical environment factors (Lexington, 1989). These studies relate not only health but also moral issues to building conditions (Eilers, 1991). If such correlations are found in business is it not safe to assume that similar effects may hold true in school environments? If adults in their work environments are affected by their surroundings, it is only logical to assume that similar effects hold true for students. Studies done by Brown (1987) and Chan (1980) have found that a school building's age and physical environment are factors that influence students' achievement and learning.

Parallels in education

“Building condition is more than a static condition. It is a physical representation of a public message about the value of education. If students perceive education as

something to be done in a poor quality facility, they may also perceive it to be of less value...”(Cash, 1993, p.83). Similarly Uline and Tashannen-Moran (2008) conclude that there is an interplay between “quality facilities, school climate, student achievement and learning” (p.13). These two researchers state that the manner in which a school is designed, managed, and maintained communicates to its occupants and the community beyond, “volumes about the value placed on activities transpiring within its walls.” (Uline & Moran, 2008, p. 13) Willower’s (1988) text also reinforces this idea.

The message sent to students about the quality of instruction, its level of importance, and the existence of genuine concern and caring among teachers and staff can be influenced through the status of the facilities and building conditions and maintenance. Therefore, one might assume that the faculty and staff of a poorly maintained school would accept or perhaps expect a lower standard of behavior and achievement; this, in turn, would adversely affect attitudes, students’ behaviors and learning experiences.

Earthman (2004) states that though inadequate school buildings and, or class rooms cause health problems, lower student morale, and contribute to poor student performance, he is not convinced that schools need necessarily be more than adequate. Contrary to Earthman’s findings and beliefs, Carol S. Weinstein’s (1979) study indicates that there is considerable evidence that the classroom environment can affect “nonachievement” behaviors and attitudes. High levels of student density in limited class space have resulted in dissatisfaction, decreased social interaction and increased aggression. “Soft” classrooms have been associated with better attendance, greater participation, and more positive attitudes towards the class, the instructor and

classmates. “Soft” classrooms are classrooms where the physical space and facilities (chairs, tables, books, and computers) in the room are enough for the number of students in the room. Soft is also used to describe classrooms where students feel safe to express their opinions pertaining to the class and subject studied. Minor design modifications introduced into already functioning classrooms have been shown to produce changes in students’ spatial behavior, for example increased interaction with materials, decreased interruptions, and more substantive questioning.

Dr. Wolff’s (2002) doctoral research studies the relationship among people and spaces. Though her research specifically looks at project based learning, it touches on the importance of the physical environment and the spatial arrangement within that environment. She examines the use of semi-fixed elements such as signs, materials, colors, forms, sizes, furnishings, and landscapes and how these communicate context and facilitate desirable behaviors.

Dr. Wolff’s (2002), C. Weinstein’s (1979) and Johnson and Maki’s (2009) researches discuss the influence of color, size, sound, light, windows and furniture in a school environment. One aspect of their findings indicates that color in a classroom, specifically the walls, can reduce off-task behavior and anxiety, as well as positively affect perceptions of learning and well-being. Russ and Wang (2008) report similar findings.

Color is one of the most important elements of the physical environment that has a significant impact on students’ lives, for it has the ability to stimulate one on a visual, physical and emotional level. The eye can distinguish approximately 2.5 million different

colors (Russ & Wang, 2008). Researchers have found that colors have certain behavior associations and when used resourcefully within the designed environment can influence the users' mental and emotional balance (Wells, Need, & Crowell, 1979).

Haggins, Hall, Wall, Woolner and McCaughey (2005) quote Stephen Heppell:

“Whereas, traditionally, we have designed for productivity, processing large numbers of children through the effective use of buildings, designing a room for learning is very complex. No one knows how to prevent (or minimize) ‘learning-loss’ when you design a room ‘pedagogically’, whereas we know lots about designing for minimum heat loss” (p.3).

Due to the fact that most people live in built environments, design professionals must become aware of human psychological and physiological responses to their surroundings. It follows that designers should consciously implement changes to the designs based on these factors (Russ & Wang, 2008). The issue of behavior psychology in design thinking, teaching and research is also discussed in detail in Tiiu Poldman's (2003) doctoral thesis. The importance for such knowledge and know-how is also discussed in Ny Lind's (2010, August 10) article.

Ny Lind reports the effects that a high school cafeteria environment may have on the number of students that choose to eat there. Ny Lind interviewed Vanessa Stroud, business manager at a school with 1,640 students. Stroud stressed that the improvement in the hot lunches is only part of the explanation for the increase in the number of students that opt to eat in the cafeteria. She explains that improvements to the dining area, its appearance and organization had an influence. Ny Lind reports that

dining areas that are too cramped, have queuing systems that students find frustrating, and slow payment systems deter students from eating in the cafeteria. She states that even if time, money and effort has been put into improving the menu, all this could be wasted effort unless school cafeterias work to improve the appeal in their environments for the children. If the cafeterias remain crowded, noisy and unattractive students will “vote with their feet, no matter what is on the menu” (p.1E).

Similarly, if changes in students’ classroom environments can positively affect students’ abilities to stay on task, their perceptions of learning, learning experiences and emotional well-being, then one can argue that it is worth investigating further how the aesthetics and spatial arrangements in a given environment impact student experiences.

Aesthetics and aesthetic considerations

Mark Johnson (2007) states two hypotheses. One: *Aesthetics is not just art theory, but rather should be regarded broadly as the study of how humans make and experience meaning.* (p.209) Two: *The processes of embodied meaning in the arts are the same ones that make linguistic meaning possible.* (p. 209) John Dewey (1934) affirms in *Art as Experience: Esthetics...clarifies and intensifies development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.* (p.52 -53)

For the purpose of this research I have adopted Johnson’s thesis that aesthetics is not just one kind of experience and it is not just about art, beauty, and taste, but

rather about how human beings experience and make meaning; aesthetics represents the real meaning of the experience itself. Hence, aesthetics in this research paper “concerns all the things that go into meaning – form, expression, communication, qualities, emotion, feeling, value, purpose and more” (Johnson, 2007, p. 212).

Meaning making and learning

John Dewey’s view, as presented by Johnson (2007) is that it is primarily in the aesthetic dimensions of experience that we encounter complete human meaning. Johnson argues “that meaning is not just a matter of concepts and propositions, but also reaches down into the images, sensorimotor schemas feelings, qualities and emotions that constitute our meaningful encounter with our world” (p. xi). Johnson goes on to state that the mind and body are part of one organic process. And all our meaning making, thought and language emerge from the aesthetic extent of this “embodied activity”. He elaborates on how meaning is first made from patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and, eventually, concepts, and propositions. He argues “there is no cognition without emotion, even though we are often unaware of the emotional aspects of our thinking” (p. 9). Johnson provides a substantial body of evidence from cognitive science to support the hypothesis that meaning is shaped by the nature of our bodies, especially our sensorimotor capacities and our ability to experience feelings and emotions (p. 9). As well as making reference to cognitive science Johnson also touches on

phenomenological descriptions in order to provide an enriched view of human meaning making.

Johnson (2007) focuses mostly on looking at the aesthetics of the body-mind-how meaning grows out of our natural transactions with our environment. He focuses on qualities and how they “situate, give meaning to and guide the development of our experience and thought” (p.71).

Johnson (2007) explains that the problem with qualities is that they are about how something appears to us and how it makes us feel. But we are sometimes unable to properly describe these qualities in words or concepts. The result is that philosophers continue to have a difficult time “investigating the role of qualities in meaning and thought” (p.70). He goes on to explain that because qualities are not tangible and we are unable to measure qualitative experience using spoken or written language we tend to “downplay” their importance as part of meaning making. It is important to note that while it is true that it is difficult to put a quantitative measure on a value, the arts do strive to express qualitative experiences. Johnson elaborates in detail how meaning depends on our experience and assessment of the qualities of the situation and how felt qualities are a vital component in our meaning making process. He supports his point of view by presenting Dewey’s argument from his 1988 article *Qualitative Thought*. Dewey states: “qualities lie at the heart of human experience” (Johnson, p. 243).

Dewey emphasizes pervasive qualities and explains that they are not just properties of objects; rather, they define entire situations. How a particular environment or situation or event is experienced and remembered is influenced by its particular

sounds, sights, smells and how we respond to those qualities. This brings to mind my experience in the art room as a teenager. I felt warm. I loved being surrounded by so many colors and images. The lighting was perfect, not too bright and not dark. There was natural light coming in from all the surrounding windows. I felt at peace in the art room, so I kept going there any free time I had. The way I felt during my time in the art room is one of the major factors that influenced me in my choice to take art in college.

I wanted my students to have a similar experience. I wanted them to feel a sense of peace and comfort in our room, a safe place, a place they could look forward to coming to each day. I realized after reading Dewey's writings that I was trying to give my students a similarly comforting experience in our classroom that would, at the same time, satisfy their educational and social needs.

Experience, learning and individual growth

Dewey (1934) describes "an" experience as a "unity" that identifies it from all other similar experiences to the individual and gives it its name, for instance, that class, that dinner, that wedding. This happens when the experience is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience. Similarly, there may be a combination of qualities that define an experience. For instance the feeling of being safe, at peace, and a sense of belonging in the art room are the qualities that made that experience unique and special compared to all the other experiences in the different classrooms I had through high school.

Dewey (1934, p. 37) goes on to explain how an experience is not merely practical, or merely emotional, or intellectual but rather “all of these at once and together”. Dewey explains that experiences are holistic; one quality may stand out more than others; nonetheless aesthetic experiences are holistic. Hence, for my students to feel comfortable and welcomed in the class, not only does the physical structure and design of our class have to meet their needs and the class be visually pleasing but also my teaching style and methods should meet the different individual needs of my students. For my approach and teaching style also affects whether or not they feel comfortable, safe and happy to be in B111. To reiterate, according to Dewey, experiences are holistic; computers can perform functions of logic, i.e. without feeling – but Dewey’s point is that a holistic experience embodies both thinking and feeling. Eugene Gendlin exposes a similar philosophy in his articles *Man and World* (1992) and *Giving the body its due* (1992) and as well as in his book *Focusing* (2007).

Gendlin emphasizes that we are living and working in a changing environment and that none of this can happen without our physical presence, our bodies. Human meaning can not occur without our bodies. Thus, he emphasizes that human meaning exists due to our “embodied interactions” within our environment. To recap, both the environment and the organism is necessary for meaning to take place. Johnson (2007) dedicates much of his argument in his chapter entitled *The Brain’s role in meaning* to support this idea (p. 155).

Johnson (2007) explains how the character of our experience is defined to a great extent “by the nature of our bodies and brains, the kind of environment we inhabit, our social interactions, and the values and purposes we have” (p.136). The experiences

from our interactions define our perceived world and “allow us to make sense of, reason about and act reliably within this world” (p. 136). Similarly, Dewey (1998) notes that what we perceive as “higher cognitive activities” are formed and molded by our on-going bodily perceptions and movement.

Dewey in *Experience and Nature* (1981) emphasizes the role of qualities and consequences in the process of meaning making. He states that meaning is “grounded in our bodily interaction in qualities and the structure of objectives situations; and meaning is always social” (p.226). This is because meaning is not possible in its fullness without communication and verbal or shared interactions. Language and shared interactions enable us to explore the meaning of things. This point suggests that there is a need for my students to be able to articulate their discovered meanings.

Johnson (2007) uses a comprehensive sense of meaning. He states that meaning includes “qualities, emotions, percepts, concepts, images, image schemas, metaphors, metonymies, and various other imaginative structures” (p. 268). Learning the meaning of something and in this case how attention to aesthetic considerations informs learning in my classroom(meaning making), and individual growth would, thus, include learning about all the qualities, perceptions, distinctions, recollections of what has gone on before, and what is occurring now in my students’ experiences within their classroom. Meaning is not isolated but rather “intricately connected to our past, present and future experiences, actual or possible” (Johnson, 2007, p.273).

According to Dewey (1963) “experience influences the formation of attitudes and purpose” and the environment affects educational experiences (p.33). The data

collected in this research helped me to understand my students' feelings and experiences as a result of the situations and interactions in the classroom environment. This knowledge and understanding of my students' experiences enabled me to promote a better quality of human learning experiences within my classroom. As Dewey (1963) states, every experience should prepare the learner for a future experience (p.47). Since these students are at a junior high school level they are scheduled to remain in B111 for two years, after which they will be transferred to the senior high school class where they may choose to stay until the age of twenty-one. Many of these students, especially those who are emotionally aware of their surroundings but have learning difficulties and developmental delays, drop out of school by the age of sixteen. My job as an educator, I believe, is not just to touch on literacy, numeracy and life skills but to also create a classroom environment that will encourage positive feelings to arise. These positive feelings will, I hope, create within my students a desire to remain in school and to continue to come to class to learn and interact with their classmates. Thus, in the two years they were scheduled to be with me I aimed at fostering as many positive educational experiences as I possibly could by creating an environment conducive to learning and interacting. According to Dewey (1963), "the most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning" (p.49).

Dewey (1963), presents his philosophies and opinions on traditional vs. progressive education. He discusses how experience and social control is perceived in both of these educational systems. He also attempts to define and explain his views on freedom (intellectual freedom) and the meaning of purpose as well as progressive organization of subject matter as it relates to these two educational systems. Dewey

emphasized the need for experience in education and life. He stressed the need to relate life experiences in education. He explained that this is important to make education practical and realistic to students, that is, to see and make connections between their experiences in class and in their every day life. The different lessons in my data collection process were designed to allow the students to connect old experiences with new ones.

To be able to research the significance of my students' everyday experiences I constantly tried, through my questions and research methods, to encourage them to remember their past experiences in the class. I made reference to when they first came to B111 almost two years earlier. I tried to connect their new experiences to their old experiences in the classroom. This research process enables me to reflect and make meaning of their feelings and experiences. Dewey (1963) states that it is essential that new experiences be connected intellectually to earlier experiences. Dewey states that it is the educator's responsibility to choose specific things within the array of existing experiences "that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience" (p.90). Through-out my research, data collection and analysis I revisit the past experiences and make connections to the present experiences of my students and my self in B111.

I was inspired by the methods and projects presented in *Finding Art's place, experiment in contemporary education and culture* by Nicolas Paley (1995).

Paley (1995) presents three different art projects to the reader. The art projects are about children's and young adults' stories expressed through their art works. The projects elicit how the engagement of children in the construction of social and cultural materials (their art works) can merge educational thinking with artistic practice. Paley's work encourages a kind of student inquiry that builds visual references that draw attention to certain realities that need to be acknowledged and reflected on for a change to begin to happen. The children's artistic practice brings about a transformation of social consciousness in those who view and reflect on the works of art.

Paley mentions in *Shooting Back*, one of the three projects he describes, that he was inspired by "the power of the independent voice working to find an opening to express meaning" (p.171). I found these words and this particular project to be very touching. *Shooting Back* was a project, inspired by Jim Hubbard, that enabled children living in community shelters an opportunity to learn about photography as a means of expression.

Jim Hubbard was a UPI staff photographer who was assigned to the White House during the Reagan Administration. In the White House he encountered "repeated, official denials that homelessness..." and poverty were not a problem in the U.S.A (Paley, p.117). This, along with other experiences such as volunteering at a shelter, inspired him to resign from his prestigious position at the White House and to instead teach photography to the homeless children he encountered in shelters.

Hubbard founded "the idea to have sheltered children in Washington, D.C. photograph their own world by giving them a camera "to take pictures of their own

struggle” with poverty, prejudice, and an uncaring government, and then to display their work in a major exhibition” (p.118). Thus, this project, later named “Shooting Back: Photography By the Homeless and About the Homeless” is viewed as an educational, artistic and cultural project, a project that allows the children through photography to share their points of view on how they see the world (p.118-119). It allows the children a voice and a means to express how they feel about their world from an educative and artistic perspective. The children’s art works allow for reflection and discussion by a variety of people.

The children who participated in Shooting Back were given guidance about the technical aspects of photography in a series of weekly workshops, which were held at the Community of Hope shelter. The children were given only one rule to follow from Hubbard: “Shoot within one block of the shelter; document that one block of reality”(p.118).

Paley states that “It’s clear that young people, in general, are capable of artistic agency, of producing artistic works which make it possible to see from different standpoint” (p.182). I could not agree more. I decided to adapt a similar method in one of my lessons. I gave my students the opportunity to use cameras to express their standpoints on issues related to our class.

Feeling, Valuing, and the Art of Growing: Insight into the Affective Berman and Roderick (Eds:) (1997) consists of writings by members of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development committee (ASCD) in Washington, D.C. According to Philip. L. Hosford, the president of ASCD at the time, in this book one finds

a synthesis of the learning activities between 1962 and 1977. The writings in this book highlight the ways in which thoughtful educational leadership can enable behaviorism and humanistic educators to work together towards mutually acceptable goals. It explains the value of both these “forces” in our schools (p.viii). This book by the ASCD committee helps readers understand the principle, meaning and value of humanistic education and fifth generation behaviorists ideologies.

One member of ASCD, Kaoru Yamamoto’s, interests lie in the exploration of developmental process, mental health in education, and human inquiry into human affairs. Yamamoto’s writing gets us thinking about persons feeling, valuing and growing within complex and sometimes unfriendly settings.

Another member, C.H. Patterson, observes that there are two kinds of understanding. The first is knowing about something; the second is another kind of understanding. It is the knowing of another being, which is achieved by putting ourselves in the place of another, so that we can see the world, as closely as possible to how that being does. “It is understanding from the internal frame of reference” (165).

Patterson makes reference to Atticus Finch, the lawyer in the novel to *Kill a Mockingbird*, in trying to help others understand the behavior of others towards a person. He says, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (qtd. in ASCD, 1977, p.165)

Patterson was a strong believer in, and advocate for, affective education. He believed if education was concerned with the total development of the individual, then it

must go beyond attention to cognitive development. Education must become concerned and committed in the child's personal development—his feelings, emotions, values and interpersonal relationships (p.165). Art based educational research methods (discussed further in chapter four) employed in this data collection process enabled me to see B111 through the eyes of my students. The process of collecting data and the art works produced enabled me to explore, discover and reflect on my students' individual feelings, emotions, values and interpersonal relationships within our classroom.

Jessie Roderick's research has resulted in the development of observational and reflective techniques for describing what happens when learners interact with different settings. Roderick poses the following questions: "what happens when learners interact with settings? What can we do when we have at our fingertips information about the person in terms of the milieu in which he operates and the persons or materials he endows with affect or for which he shows concern, appreciation, interest and value?" (Berman & Roderick, 1977, p.219)

Roderick states that if one is armed with the answers to the above questions then we as educators are better able to make available to individuals opportunities that present them with choices that appear worthy of their interests and energies. Roderick explains that "when a range of choices [are] available, the person is more apt to commit himself as opposed to dabbling or becoming committed without having examined alternatives" (p.219).

Roderick states that our experience with gathering knowledge about individuals' involvements in their environments and interactions can motivate us, educators, to

reconsider the procedures we employed and to make adjustments where needed (p.220).

Roderick's writings serves as a reminder to me to always ensure I allow myself time to get to know my students. It serves as a reminder to always take into considerations my students' interests, likes and dislikes, as well as academic capabilities when planning both my lessons, classroom management techniques and classroom design. His emphasis on allowing a range of choices for the students is something I take into consideration in all aspects of my teaching methods.

With all this in mind, I felt that if my students were in an environment designed to meet their individual needs, as well as an environment they perceived as comfortable and welcoming through their everyday interactions and experiences with their peers and teachers, they would learn and know in a bodily way that B111 was a welcoming, safe place, a place where the people respected and valued their opinions and ideas, a place designed specifically for them to learn and grow as individuals. I felt that this would ultimately lead them to perceive B111 as a class they wanted to come to rather than a class they were required to attend.

To conclude, I believe that meaning was developed through my students' interactions within their class (B111) environment. The meaning of their experience emerged from its qualities, events and experiences within a classroom space. Therefore, the meaning of something (being and learning in our class) is how it connects to my students' previous, present and future experiences and actions in a

classroom space. Thus it is safe to conclude that while a student's personal history influences his or her ongoing meaning making, it is difficult to predict future meanings.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY



Why Art- Based Research?

A picture can become for us a highway between a particular thing and a universal feeling.

(Leavy, 2009, p. 215)

Art-based research demands our sensorial, emotional, and intellectual attention. Thus, according to Weber and Mitchell (2004), it heightens our sensory and intellectual experience, making the art difficult to ignore once viewed. Art based practices draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film, and other mediums. (Leavy, 2009, p. 2). Another important point highlighted by Leavy (2009) and McNiff (1998) is that the nature of this type of research renders itself more accessible to a broader audience than usual academic language that is used more generally in research publications. It also enables a way of understanding and examining the experience of the researcher together with the participants. (Leavy, 2009, p. 2).

Leavy (2009) states that the writing of qualitative research, as with the work of artists, is in essence about (re)presenting a set of meanings to an audience. “As writers and painters we try to persuade our readers and viewers to see the world through our eyes” (Diaz, 2002, p.153) Leavy explains that visual imagery represents a created perspective. Cubist painter Pablo Picasso noted that “painting is just another way of keeping a diary.” (qtd. in. Leavy, 2009, p. 215) In conclusion, through the art-based educational research (ABER) methods and process I am able to explore, describe, discover and make meaning of my students’ experiences from their points of view.

Knowles and Thomas (2002) asked a sample of students to use art to express how they viewed themselves and what they thought about school as a place to be. A set structure was put in place to guide the students to use a model for their process of inquiry and artistry. Knowles and Thomas supplied their participants with multimedia elements: self- portrait, memory map, photo of place, narrative, photo of self in place, found object, and two - or three – dimensional art work. Students were, as a result, able to describe and explain their art. In this way, the art can be viewed as both the method of inquiry and “a spring board for more conventional qualitative inquiry.”(Leavy, 2009, p. 228)

Leavy (2009) explains, as a result of this artistic participatory method employed by researchers, Knowles and Thomas learned a great deal about students’ feelings, their struggles, and their challenges in relation to “fitting in” at school. For instance, one student created a self-portrait that she explained in this way: “my portrait is cropped closely around my face to represent the lack of freedom I feel at school” (qtd. in Leavy, p. 228). The art-based methods employed by Knowles and Thomas (2002) enabled

them to gain a greater understanding than traditional qualitative interviews would have. (Leavy, 2002, p.228) Similarly Kim Hershorn (2005) used a visual arts-based participatory method in order to explore how students in urban school settings feel about violence in their environment. The visual arts were initially chosen as a research approach because this form of art allows a diverse audience the ability to easily see and distinguish differences and similarities in the results and thus promote a greater probability for further dialogue and problem-solving.

“An artist seeks to understand something about the world, about self, about materials and ways of making expressive forms. Engaging with materials, thoughts and feelings, an artist participates in a search” (Leavy, p.249). The arts, as Leavy (2009) explains, have the ability “to evoke emotion, promote reflection, and transform the way the people think” (p. 255).

“Visual images are a powerful communicative tool with the potential to help us see things in a new way” (Leavy, p. 263). As a painter and an individual with a background in art education, art-based methods such as drawing, painting, collage and installation are a means by which I felt I could best express myself. Thus, this form of research and collection of data would allow me to build a body of pictorial evidence I could then study for emerging patterns and significant insights into my topic. Visual documentation (photographs, and mixed media forms), coupled with narrative inquiry, has enabled me to draw a portrait of life in class B111, thereby enabling an examination, reflection on, and understanding of experiences in the classroom.

The second reason I find ABER is well suited to my study was because of the nature of the students with whom I was working. There were six autistic students, five of whom

were verbal and one non-verbal. I also had two students with Down syndrome and three students with developmental delays (PDD). According to the Kids health web site, Down syndrome is a genetic condition in which a person has 47 chromosomes instead of the usual 46. The extra chromosome causes problems with the way the body and brain develop. Children may also have delayed mental and social development the extent of which may vary from person to person and can range from mild to severe. Children with Down syndrome have a widely recognized appearance. The head may be smaller than normal and unusually shaped. For example, the head may be round with a flat area on the back. The inner corner of the eyes may be rounded instead of pointed. Physical development is often slower than normal. Most children with Down syndrome never reach their average adult height. Children may also have delayed mental and social development. Common problems may include: impulsive behavior, poor judgment, short attention span and slow learning. Autism is also a developmental disorder. This disorder appears in the first 3 years of life, and affects the brain's normal development of social and communication skills. Symptoms may vary from moderate to severe. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke autism affects information processing in the brain by altering how nerve cells and their synapses connect and organize; how this occurs is not well understood. Some communication problems may include: cannot start or maintain a social conversation, communicates with gestures instead of words, develops language slowly or not at all, does not adjust gaze to look at objects that others are looking at, repeats words or memorized passages, such as commercials. Other characteristics may include: does not make friends, does not play interactive games, is withdrawn, may not respond to eye contact or smiles, or may avoid

eye contact, prefers to spend time alone, rather than with others. Person with autism may have heightened or low senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, or taste. They may find normal noises painful and hold hands over ears. They may withdraw from physical contact because it is over stimulating or overwhelming.

The majority of the students in B111 were working between a grade one and four reading level and pre-K to grade three writing level. The students were between the ages of twelve to fourteen, with four of my students being emotionally very much like any other teenager their age, though they were behind in their academic development. However, one student was higher functioning (able to read and comprehend grade five academic material) and was integrated into modified English and science classes. Most of the autistic students found it easier to express themselves through art rather than words. Art-based methods such as drawing, painting and collage also allowed the two students with Down syndrome to express themselves freely. It would have been very difficult for them to find the “right” words to express themselves if they were not first given the opportunity to illustrate how they felt. Many of the students would have been worried about their spelling; they would have been discouraged and not have wanted to take part in the research. I had been teaching nine out of the eleven students for approximately a year and a half and I taught them every subject except for French and Physical Education. I can honestly say that their favorite subjects were art and drama. I wanted the experience of participating in this research to be a joyful and memorable one. ABER allowed for such an experience. I would like to acknowledge that we often discover the meaning of a particular experience as we put it to words; therefore allotting time for my students to talk about and discuss their art works with their peers was an

important part of the lesson. Having a visual image helped them put to words how they felt. I also wanted to integrate the research process into the curriculum because it would not have been possible for my students to stay after school hours, due to lack of transportation. ABER methods allowed me to integrate the research process into our art classes.

Why a qualitative study, advantages and disadvantages?

I began this research convinced that a qualitative study would provide in-depth information and details about the individual student experiences in the evolving classroom environment. I took the view that it would be an ideal way to determine how the changes to the classroom had an effect on their individual growth and learning experiences. My study is an examination of how my students attitudes and behavior to school has evolved in the two years I have spent with them and in particular the lessons described in my thesis.

I am aware that this particular qualitative study and the nature of this type of research relies on my subjective interpretation of events, interactions, informal discussions, observations or content analysis of my students' statements and art works, as well as my personal philosophy of education. Further, since the observations and conclusions are specific to my students and my class, the situation is not replicable. I understand and respect the doubts and questions that may arise due to my choice of research methods. However, as the title of the research study indicates, this is a study,

with the emphasis being on the individual students of B111, their teacher, myself, our specific classroom environment and our experiences.

Method:

My data collection procedure, after I received school board, parental and student consent, can be broken down into six parts, which corresponds to six lessons that I taught. The first lesson was an informal discussion during what is referred to as “circle time”. Circle time consists of a ten to twenty minute period where all the students bring their chairs to the front and we sit in a circle to discuss issues that may be affecting the class or a few students. We work together to come up with solutions or simply to understand the problem at hand. Thus, it was during this time that I presented the research study that I wanted to conduct and how that would help me as a teacher. I explained that it would help me understand what they liked or disliked about the physical qualities of the class and why and how they believed the different features of the class helped them enjoy or dislike learning or being in class. I mentioned that this project could help other teachers and me to organize teaching spaces and classes better. After this discussion I asked them to think about what we had discussed, stressing that it was perfectly acceptable should they not wish to participate in this case study. I believed that my students needed time to think about this project and about whether or not they wanted to participate. I also believed that some of them might want to discuss it with their parents first before they decided whether or not they wanted to participate. By introducing the lesson in an informal discussion I felt it would allow them to feel more relaxed about the possibility of something new included into their schedule.

As mentioned earlier some of my students are autistic and do not adjust well to change in routine or schedule. By introducing this project in an already familiar part of the schedule allowed them to be less anxious than they normally would be had it been introduced otherwise.

Lesson two involved story telling. The process of narrating a story about our first day at school together was to help them recall the minute details of what they saw, heard, and felt on that day. This lesson aimed at getting my students to start to recall their past experiences and feelings when they first came to B111.

Color theory is a topic we had discussed and experimented with during the previous and current term. Thus, the students were familiar with cool and warm colors and what they could symbolize in the North American context.

Lesson three was aimed at allowing the students to create a drawing or painting of part of the class they felt symbolized something special to them. They had to create two pieces of art, one that illustrated how a factor of the class (i.e.: the wall color) appeared to them when they first came to B111 as opposed to the second art work that illustrated how they felt two years later. This lesson I felt would enable the students to textually describe and explain through the art-making process and discussions of their art how they felt or what they thought about the class when they first came, as compared to two years later. This process would allow for reflection, exploration of medium, discovery and discussion.

I kept a journal of the class activities, lessons and how the space was utilized during and after class hours (lunch and recess). In this journal I reflected on my students' paintings and discussions about their likes and dislikes concerning the

classroom space. I also reflected on how lessons that allowed for the full use of the different spaces in the room went. Whether or not I felt they were successful. Such lessons, for instance, would call for groups of students to move to specific locations in the classroom to do specific tasks and then to relocate to different parts of the class for another task. I reflected on the presentation strategies utilized in a lesson and whether or not they were successful and how they could be improved. This process of building pictorial evidence based on students' art works enabled me to study them for emerging patterns. This practice enabled me to reflect on the process, conversations, products and experiences of doing these art-based activities. My hope was that this process of collecting and analyzing data would help me portray part of the inner complexity of my students' worlds. This method of record keeping and analyzing data would allow me to discover and reflect on my own experiences as well as those of my students' in our classroom space. I also believed that these experiences, knowledge and understanding would make me a better teacher. Images and notes from my journal are presented in chapter five.

Lesson four consisted of creating art works using digital cameras to take photographs that were specific to a given theme: the ugliest corner, the scariest corner, the friendliest corner, the safest corner, a secret space and a safe space. I came up with these themes. I felt my students could identify with these themes. The class viewed and discussed the photographs taken by each child on the given themes. The process and photographs produced in this lesson allowed me to reflect on similarities and differences among my students' art works, ideas, thoughts and feelings. It allowed me

to understand their perspectives on the presented themes and draw links to our class room environment.

“Why photography?”, the reader might ask. One of the reasons, as Nicolas Paley (1995) notes, is that photography is creative and children can be physical with it. They can be “inventive and social...It’s an action and an aesthetic at the same time. Kids love that” (p. 156). Taking a photograph is also less technically challenging than a drawing or painting exercise would be.

In my journal I included a photo diary of my experiences in the teaching space. This photo diary was a combination of photos of my students’ art works, the class room, as well as my sketches and paintings of the students at work within the classroom space. I believe this source of record keeping, along with narrative inquiry, allowed me to discover new meaning, reflect on my experiences and understand better how the aesthetics and spatial arrangements in the class impacted my students and my own teaching practice. Examples of such references, images and notes are made in chapter five.

Lesson five: I asked the children to create an art work illustrating their imaginary classroom or dream classroom and to write down three to five sentences about their creation. During these discussions we not only sought to identify common themes or links in the art work correlating with the things already in the classroom but also identify those items or themes in the art work that could be incorporated into the classroom.

When it was time for lesson six I felt my students had had a lot of time to reflect on their individual experiences in the class and their personal growth. I felt they were ready to start a lesson about self portraits. I discussed the idea of portraits with the

class. As a class we discussed what the word meant. I presented four portraits by two different artists, Van Gogh and Frieda Kahlo. I prompted the children to discuss or state how they felt about the art works and the imagery and symbolism employed. We discussed how the artists used symbols, color, line and composition to evoke a certain mood or emotion. I then instructed the students to create a portrait of how they saw themselves when they first started at our junior high school; then they had to create another portrait that expressed how they saw themselves in the present, almost two years later. I gave them a few options to help them create these self-portraits. One was to bring in photo images, as well as any assorted materials they wished to use to create their self portrait. The other option was to use either black and white or color digital images to create their self-portraits similar to those created by David Hockney. All the students opted for the second option. When all the students had completed the art activity they had the opportunity to present their self-portraits to their classmates and to explain their art works.

I felt by watching them create and present these self portraits and other works of art in the various lessons, I was able to make connections, confirm and validate certain emotions, thoughts and perspectives that were evident in art works and discussions from lesson one. Through the art-based educational research methods and process I was able to discover, illustrate and make meaning of the students' experiences as seen from their perspective. I was also better able to understand and put into words my own experiences. This point is further discussed in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE

Process

“Nothing should be over looked in fighting for better education. Be persistent and ornery; this will be good for the lethargic education establishment and will aid the whole cause of public education.” ~ Roy Wilkins

I carried out the data collection phase of this research over a period of eight weeks; however the process actually started two years before, when I first started teaching. I conducted my data collection where I encouraged my students to remember and compare their before and after experiences during six lessons that I taught after receiving school board, parental and student consent. I was hoping that my students would be able to recall more details of how they felt when they first came to B111 as the lessons progressed. I was hoping that they would be able to describe using art (drawing, painting and photography) and words (spoken or written) how they first felt when they came to B111 and how they felt two years later. I was hoping they would be able to identify or describe the changes in the class and how it affected the way they felt about being part of the class.

Lesson one:

During the first lesson I informally discussed with my students my “homework” during what is referred to as “circle time”. Circle time usually lasted ten to twenty minutes, during which the students and I discussed issues that may have been affecting the students. We worked together to understand the relevant problem or issue and, if appropriate, develop solutions. This therefore was the most appropriate time and format to discuss this research and case study with the students. In this particular instance circle time lasted fifteen minutes.

I explained to the students that I was inviting them to provide their input with regard to certain issues related to the classroom. I explained that this input would help me understand what they liked or disliked about the physical qualities of the class and why and how they believed the different things in the class helped them enjoy or dislike learning or being in class. I also told them that this information would help me and other teachers organize our teaching spaces better.

I asked the students to consider my invitation to participate in the study, I stressed that it was perfectly acceptable should they not wish to participate. The students all knew that I was still completing my own studies and were enthusiastic about participating in this case study.

Lesson two:

Two days later, once I had received the parents' consent, I once again regrouped the students during circle time to discuss how they felt about taking part in my homework. They all appeared excited and eager to start, for all the students agreed to participate and I had the cooperation of their parents. I was concerned that some of the students seemed uncomfortable with the physical presence of the audio recorder I was planning on using to record our discussions. I therefore decided to discontinue the use of an audio recorder in order to encourage the full and unreserved participation of all the students. Furthermore, I took care to not influence their input through, for example, asking leading questions.

For example, I asked the students: "Do you remember what the room looked like when we first met?" and "What did you think about the class then?" I did not ask them if they thought it was ugly. But Amanda quickly replied in a loud voice, "Ugly and empty!". Michael echoed her answer, saying "Empty and boring". Nathan quietly put up his hand and waited to be called. "Dull", he said. Also, I read them the following short text to elicit how they felt about the class currently as compared to two years before. My commentary and the students' responses are detailed below.

[Me:] "Almost two years ago, most of us met for the first time on September 2nd, 2008. At 7:30 A.M the sun was out but I remember feeling the chilly morning breeze. Ms. Nika and I were patiently waiting for your buses to arrive. One by one they did. I

have to be completely honest here; I was both excited and a little nervous. All sort of questions were racing through my mind as I am sure may have been the case for some of you. Was it?"

[Michael, after raising his hand]: "I was wondering who was going to be my teacher and if she was nice".

[Tony, in a very low voice]: "I was scared and did not want to come to school."

[Me]: "I remember once we got to our class some of you looked around curiously," "while others looked puzzled and stared at Ms. Nika and me. In our new class Ms. Nika and I first introduced our selves and you were asked to do the same. At the time I remember thinking I could hardly hear Michael's voice. Michael what do you remember of that first day or those first few weeks of school?"

[Michael]: "I was afraid and shy." "I felt anxious (uncomfortable) with every one."

[Me]: "Thanks for sharing, Michael. Does anyone remember the seating arrangement at the time? Do you remember how you felt about the seating arrangement?"

[Gina]: "Yes, it was like a big U and I felt uncomfortable, like people on my shoulder. There was not enough space. Also, the other kids in the "normal" classes did not have their desks like ours... I wanted our class to be like the regular kids."

[Me]: "How do you feel about the way the desks are now Gina?"

[Gina]: "I like it, I have more space, I can think better and it is like the other classes."

I also invited the children to comment on why one of their peers, Samantha, had refused to enter the classroom for three days. Their responses included:

[Michael]: “Because she did not know us.”

[Nathan]: “she did not like her new class.”

[Michael]: “she was afraid.”

Next, I presented a large print of Kees Van Dongen’s *La perruche* to the class.



Kees Van Dongen, *La perruche*, collection of the Montreal Museum of fine arts

What follows is an account of the questions asked in relation to this picture and responses provided:

[Me]: “what do you think the bird is feeling right now?”

[Michael]: “Caged, trapped, not happy.”

[Amanda]: “Lonely, unhappy.”

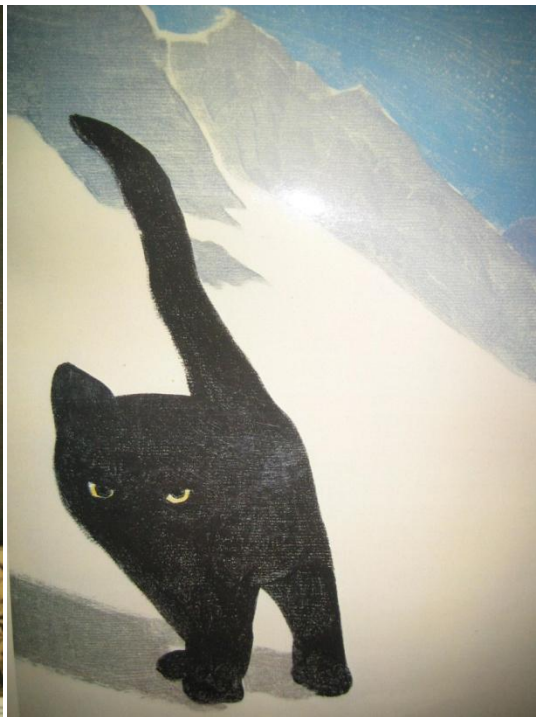
[Gina]: “Trapped because it can’t fly. Alone.”

[Nathan]: “Bored and sad.”

[Gina]: “Wants to get out, wants to be free.”

[Me]: “What about if I put this next to it.”

I presented a picture of Albert Dumouchel’s painting, *L’horrible chat des neiges*.



Kees Van Dongen, *La perruche*, Albert Dumouchel, *L’horrible chat des neiges*.

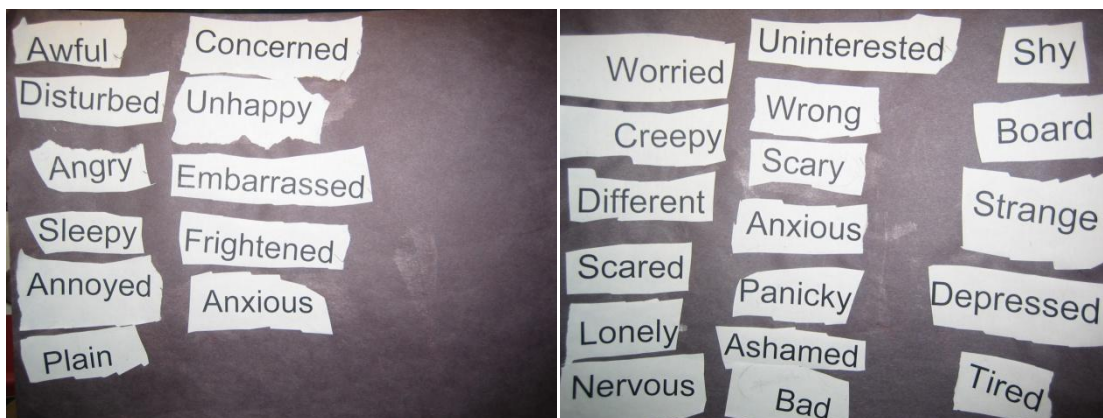
[Amanda]: “Ahhhh, haha, oh my gosh, the bird is glad the cat can’t get to it.”

[Michael]: “It feels safe, it is glad that the bars on the cage will keep the cat from eating it.”

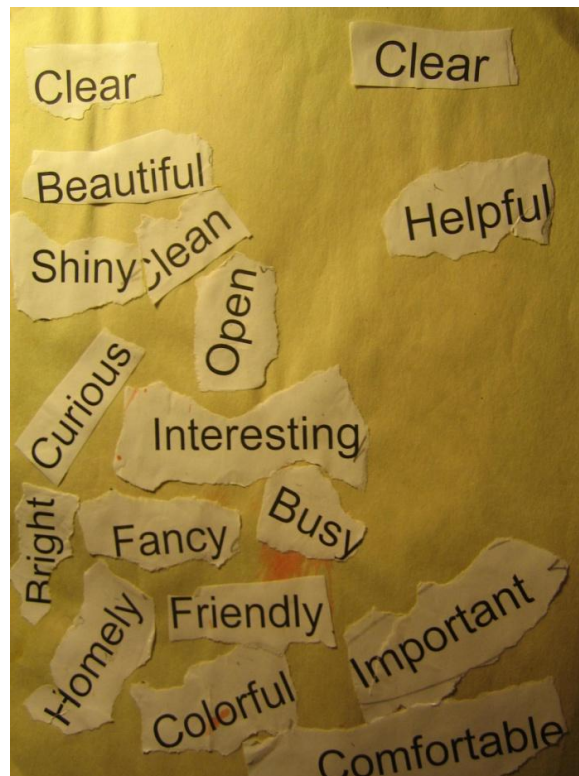
[Gina]: “Anxious, the bird is anxious and worried about the cat in the room.”

[Me]: “Now, I would like you to take a minute to think about how you felt and what you thought about when you first came to this class. How you felt the first day and the first few days of school. Write the words or draw the image that comes to mind. You can use the computer to help you complete this activity.”

Luca decided to type words on the computer and print them out to create a collage. He used a black background to express how he felt when he first joined the class and a white back ground to express how he felt about being in the class at the moment.



Luca’s two art works express how he felt when he first joined B111.



Luca's art work expressing how he felt about being in B111, almost two years after joining the class.

When the students had all finished their art works they had the choice to present them to the class and explain their art works, if they wanted to. A few decided not to talk about their pieces but were willing to display them on the board with the other art works.

Observations/ analysis:

Some of the words Luca chose to put on his collage that expressed how he felt when he first came to the class included the following: Worried, creepy, different, scared, lonely, nervous, uninterested, wrong, scary, panicky, ashamed, bad, strange, depressed, awful, disturbed, concerned, unhappy, angry embarrassed, frightened, annoyed, anxious, plain and sleepy. Some of the words on his collage that expressed

how he felt about the class two years later including the following: beautiful, clear, shiny, clean, open, curious, interesting, fancy, busy, bright, friendly, homely, colorful, important, comfortable, helpful.

Luca's change of thoughts about class B111 could be due to various factors. The relatively smaller class size, compared to what he had experienced previously and the fact that most activities were carried out together by the class meant that Luca was given more of a chance to integrate with the class. Indeed, Luca made many new friends in the class. Luca was also receiving substantial encouragement from me. Therefore, while the change in physical environment cannot be held to be the only factor contributing to Luca's improved impression of the classroom, I argue that it was a major contributing factor; the change in the physical environment allowed Luca to be susceptible to the other positive influences.

Gina's point about the desks not being arranged in the same manner as the desks in the other classes made me realize just how important appearances and the issue of fitting in is to her and perhaps to many of the other children. Making a simple and easily effected change in the physical environment, such as desk arrangements, had a considerable impact on the students, and in particular on their comfort levels. The term "comfort level" is used here to refer to the students' sense of ownership of the space they occupy in the classroom, together with their sense of belonging in and within that space.

The case of Samantha demonstrates the relationship between ownership and physical environment: Samantha's mother informed me that Samantha was particularly fond of bright colors and items that could be used for creative art or craft projects.

We were decorating the classroom with colorful fun items and I asked Samantha to help with bringing in some of these decorations into the classroom. Samantha's response was to enter the classroom for the first time. The availability of brightly colored beads encouraged her stay. I assigned her the "task" of arranging the beads by color.

I designed an arts and crafts section of the room for Samantha and the other students. She took charge in organizing the beads and threads according to colors. Gina took charge in ensuring the brushes, sketch books and paints were neat and orderly. It would appear that Samantha and Gina became friends as a result of their classroom responsibilities or chores. After about six weeks into the school's first term, it became apparent that Samantha was excited to come to school, with her mother calling to mention that she had seen a big change in her daughter's attitude in the morning as she got dressed for school. She mentioned that Samantha was even happier at nights when she came back from school. She was chattier and would take out her homework on her own.

This experience once again highlights the importance of feeling a sense of belonging and connecting with the persons in the class, a sense of belonging that, from the evidence presented in this case study, would appear to be capable of being developed and fostered by making appropriate changes to the physical environment of the class.

Lesson three



Tate Hamilton, *The Sitting Room*

I showed The class images of Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* and *The Church of Auvers*.. They compared the colors, image and style to that of the *Sitting Room* by Tate Hamilton.



Van Gogh, *Bed room in Arles*, 1888.



Van Gogh, *The Church of Auvers*, 1890

It is interesting to note that the students were very focused on the images being projected on the screen as well as the projector itself. This correlated with past experience that suggested that the use of technology heightened the interest of the class. This interest in the technical hardware is consistent with student interest in the physical environment.

During the previous and current academic term, I discussed the color wheel in detail, with the students learning about cool and warm colors and the feelings these colors could evoke. They created many art works, allowing them to experiment with the emotive values of primary colors, as well as creating art works using complementary colors.

Amanda was quick to point out that the blue colors in the Church painting made her think of winter even though she could see there was grass outside the church. This observation demonstrated that she understood our lessons on colors. She stated that she felt cold. Michael said “it looked scary” while Nathan said the painting “looked beautiful but it did not feel happy”. The class compared it to the second painting by Van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles*. Gina commented that the Bedroom painting did not feel as cold even though the walls were blue. She pointed out that the color of the blanket was red and this may have helped. Amanda added that the furniture was brown and that also is a warm color. They all agreed that it did not feel like a very comfortable room to be in. I added that perhaps the direction of the lines and angles used might add to this feeling of discomfort.

We then looked at Tate Hamilton's sitting room painting. Gina stated that it was pretty and it looked like a place she would love to be in. When asked if the room in the painting felt warm or cold, they replied in chorus W A R M.

Nathan stated that the brown arm chair reminded him of his grandmother's chairs and it looked comfortable. Amanda stated that the floor was brown and that is a warm color. Gina stated that the open window made it feel like the room was not a trap. She insightfully noted that the room in Van Gogh's painting had a closed window and it made it look almost like the occupant of the bedroom was "stuck there".

I informed my students that they could choose a part of the class or something in the class that they felt represented how they felt when they first came to this class as compared to how they felt now. I informed them that I needed one art work to express the "before" feeling and another to express the "after" feeling. When they had finished their art works we put them up on the bulletin board for display and each child had the opportunity to talk about his or her art work.

Observations/ analysis:

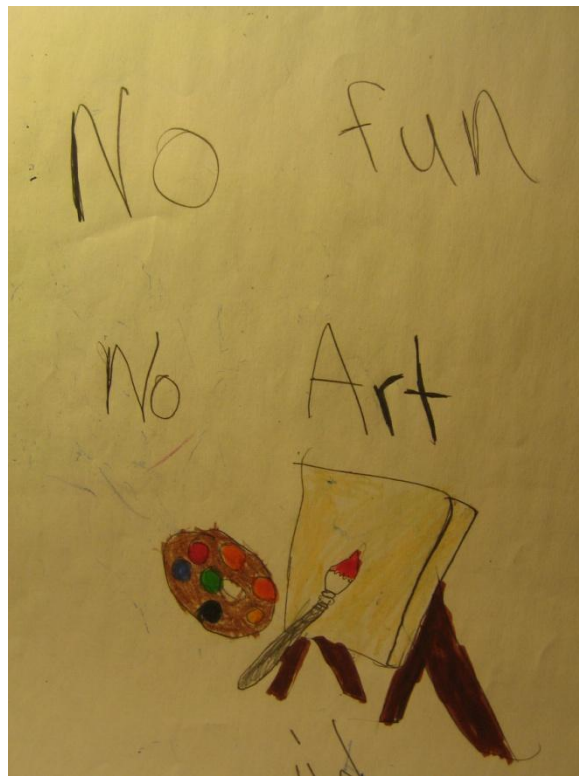


Gina's drawing

Gina chose to draw the section of the class that was visible to her from her seat. She drew the classroom sink and the class door. She explained "Because it's clean. Because it go(e)s straight to the lockers to my friends." As was the case for Luca, it was also important for Gina to not feel trapped. The image she drew shows the door slightly open. This, coupled with her comments on the drawing, allowed me to draw the conclusion that having the perception of freedom to mingle with her friends from the other classes was very important to her.

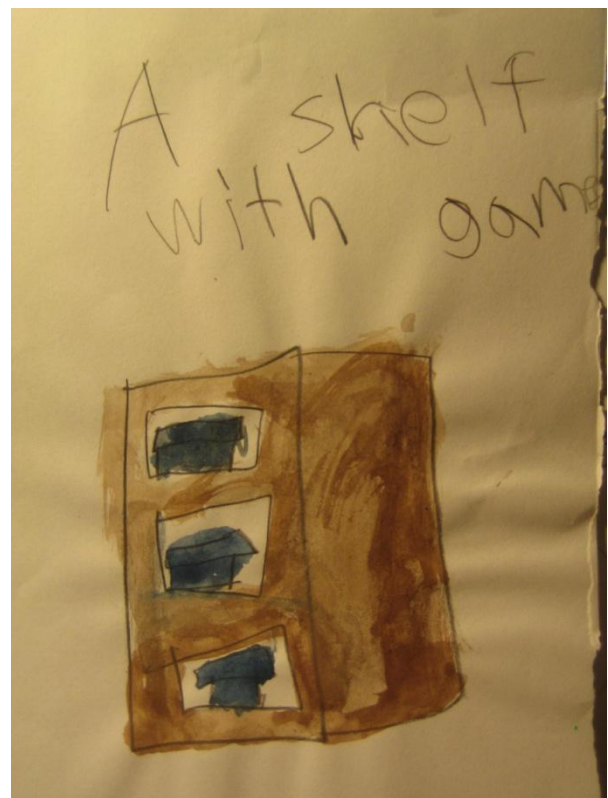
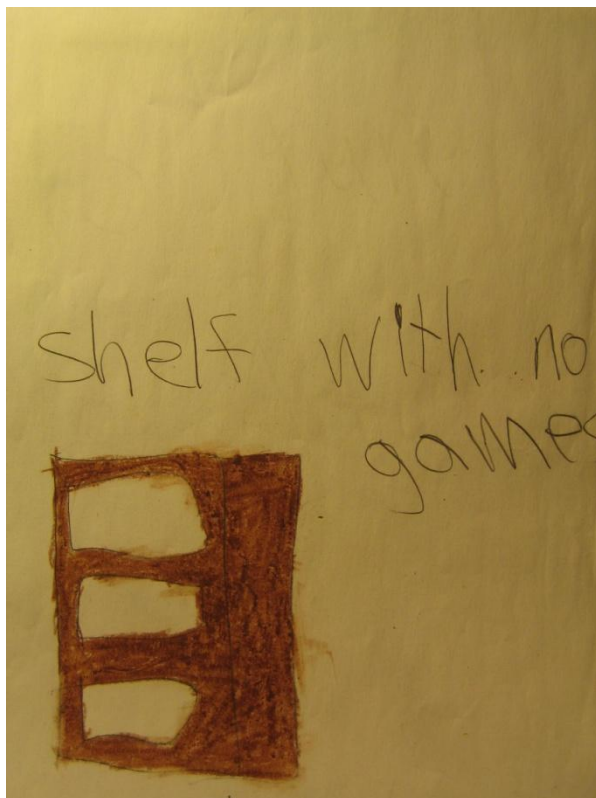
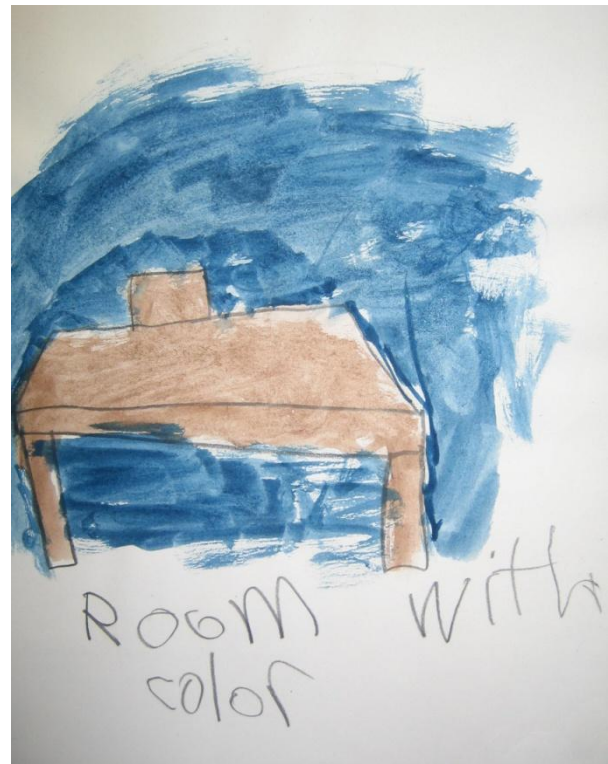
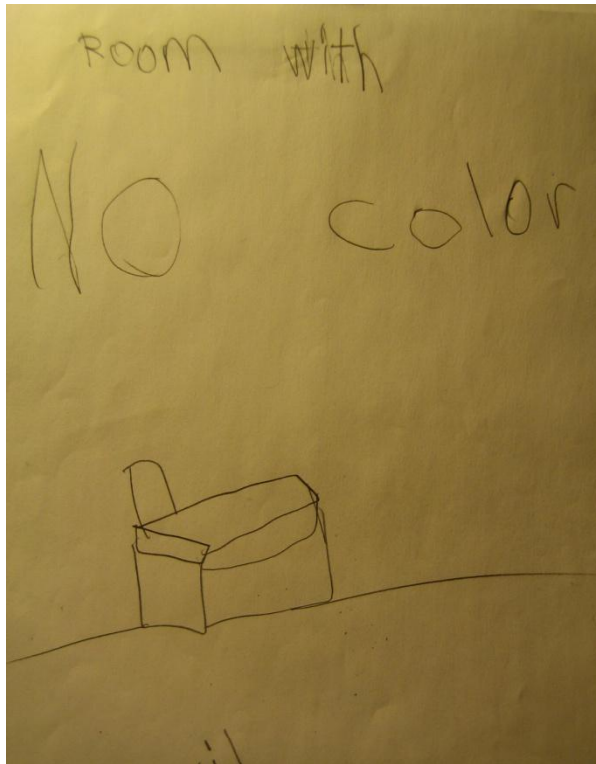
David made a series of drawings that illustrated various things that were important to him. His first drawing was labeled "a shelf with no games" and the second

was labeled “a shelf with games”. He also made a drawing that he labeled “room with no color” and another one “room with color”. One of his drawings was labeled “No fun, No Art”. He explained that at first when he came to the class we did not have any art classes, there were no board games and the walls had not been painted yet. It was after the first two weeks of school that the students started to have art classes rather than just a bit of drawing integrated in language classes.



David's drawing

David's drawings - These express how he felt about the classroom when he first came to B111 and then almost two years later.



Lesson four

During circle time we looked at the following images in *Finding Art's Place* by Nicholas Paley: *Girl at Back Door*, 1990 Norman Heflin, age 8; *Property*, 1989 Calvin Stewart, age 17 (pg 125); *Girls*, 1989 Dion Johnson, age 11 and *Boy in Shelter*, 1989 Tamicka Hodge, age 12. (pg 129). I photocopied these black and white images and put them up on the white board.

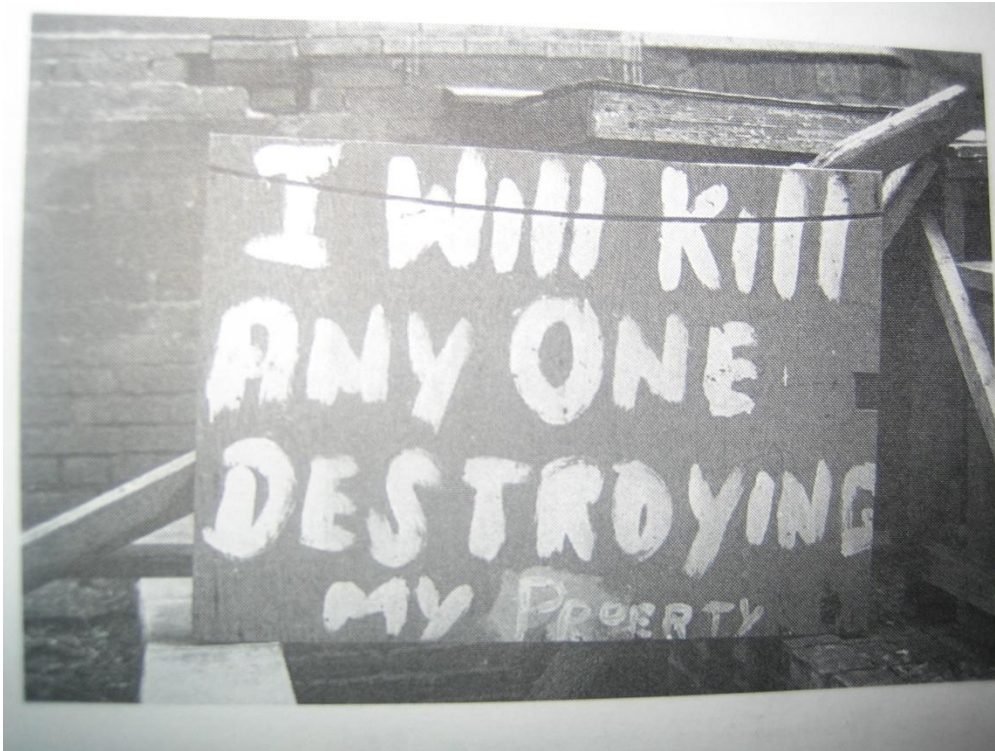
I asked the students which places represented in the photos they found scary, ugly, happy, friendly, safe and/ or secret. We put these words on pieces of paper, with magnetic scotch tape on the back and then put them up on the board. I encouraged the students to pick up the word they felt applied to a photo and match the word to the photo.

The results were as follows:



Girl at Back Door, 1990 Norman Heflin, age 8;

Girl at Back Door, 1990 Norman Heflin, age 8: Secret space, by Gina. When asked why she felt this way, her response was that the girl looked as if she was upset and wanted to be left alone and maybe that's why she went there.



Property, 1989 Calvin Stewart, age 17

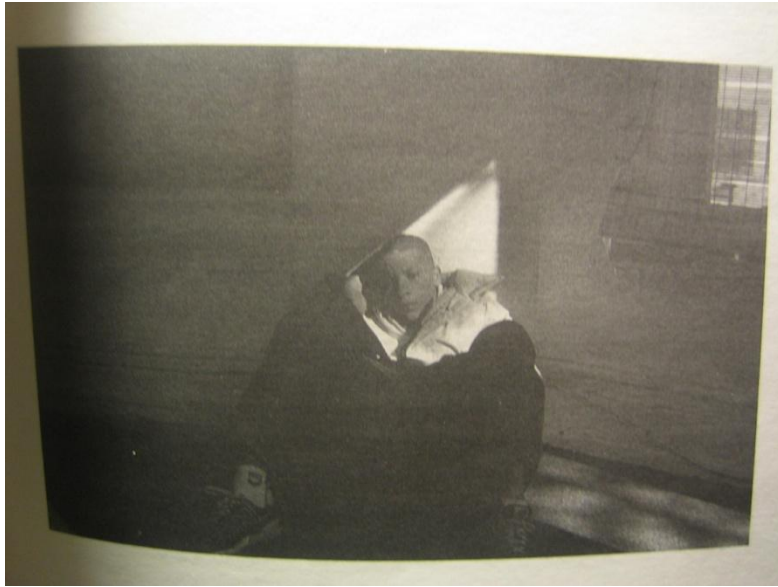
Property, 1989 Calvin Stewart, 17: Scariest corner, by Amanda. When asked why she chose that word her response was that it was because she felt scared when she read the words on the sign. It made her want to run far away from it.



Girls, 1989 Johnson, age 11.

Girls, 1989 Dion Johnson, 11: Friendliest corner, by Gina, ugliest corner, by Michael.

Gina stated that she felt it was a friendly place because the two girls are smiling in the photo and they “look[ed] like friends...maybe it’s their playground”. Michael explained that it was ugly because the wall was “all messy”.



Boy in Shelter, 1989 Tamicka Hodge, 12: Scariest Corner, by Michael; safest corner, by Nathan. When I asked Michael why he matched the phrase “scariest corner” with this image his response was that he would not like to be away from his family and alone in a strange dark place. Nathan suggested perhaps he (the child in the image) wanted to be there, away from everyone. Given the difference in upbringing of Nathan and Michael, their responses appeared to be clearly derived from their previous experiences with life, friends and family. This subjectivity of response to surroundings highlights one of the principal difficulties in establishing a positive physical environment enjoyed by all members of a class. The different responses also highlight the ambiguous nature of visual imagery; one’s history influences one’s response.

I asked the class to take images, over three sessions, using a digital camera, of the places they felt matched the above-mentioned themes. During the first session, they took photos of their scariest and then ugliest corners.. During the second session they

took photos of their friendliest and then safest corners. During the third session they took photos of their secret spaces..

Once the images were taken they had the choice to include words to match their photos but all of them preferred to leave the photo just as they had taken them.

The images were arranged on the board according to themes. The children then each had a chance to explain why they chose to take photos of specific spaces in the school for the given themes.

Observations/ analysis:



Gina's scariest corner

Gina's scariest corner was the principal's office. She explained that this was because it made her feel isolated, alone and far away from her friends. Michael's Scariest place was the B hallway. His explanation was similar to Gina's. He explained that when he was in that hallway he felt uncomfortable and alone. When asked "What about lunch time Mike? There are lots of people at lunch time in the halls.", his response was "Yes, but too loud, too noisy."



Michael's scariest corner, the B hallway



Fabio's ugliest corner

Tony and Fabio both explained that their images under the theme “ugliest corner” revolved around the idea of emptiness (a space not being used profitably) and loneliness. The images they took were of a place that reminded them of these emotions and made them feel sad.



Luca's ugliest corner

Luca's image of the boys' lavatory represented the ugliest corner to him because that lavatory was usually dirty and very smelly.

In particular, it was interesting to understand the reasons behind the selection of the images they took of their safe space. Michael, Nathan and Jason took images of spaces in the class to represent this theme.



Nathan's safe corner, class B111.



Michael's safe space.

Michael took images of his desk space. His reason was that this was his desk, his chair, his stuff and no one could bother him there. He also took images of the games in the class because he felt that when it was free time and he was allowed to pick a game it was a time and place where he could relax and not worry about making mistakes or “concentrating”. He could “just have fun.”



Jason's safe space

Jason's took his photo of a computer in our technology corner because, as he explained, he enjoyed and felt more comfortable working on the computer than on his own desk. This was the space he enjoyed the most and where he felt most comfortable.



Luca's safe space

Luca's safe space was a space between the library bookshelves. He explained that it was a place he could "hide" from everyone and everything and just have time to himself, to think, calm down or just relax. It was his "get away" place.



Fabio's safe space

Fabio's safe space was the Gym because he felt his gym teachers were very protective of him and he felt taken care of in the gym. His family has a mini gym in their house, which he uses with his two older brothers. The familiar sights and actions allowed him to feel right at home in the school gym and he enjoys being in that environment.



Amanda's secret space.



Toni's friendliest space (their lunch table in the cafeteria)

Lesson Five

Lesson five started as an informal discussion, a review of the words the children had chosen previously in lesson two to describe the class when we first met each other two years before. These words (empty, clean, different, plain, ugly, boring, dull) were displayed on the board. I asked them to look around the classroom and to tell me how the class had since changed. I was informed that we now had a fridge, stove, microwave, cooking utensils, cutlery, computers, a T.V, DVD player, reading books, shelves, games, a desk and chair for Ms. Nika, posters, games, art materials, screen, overhead projector and painted walls. Amanda stated that “everything was organized and placed where it [was] needed, that things were not messy and just everywhere or anywhere”.

I asked the class to take a minute to think about their elementary classrooms and any other classroom they had been in, their likes and dislikes pertaining to those particular rooms. We discussed this briefly and I wrote some notes on the board, including the following excerpts:

“Things they liked about their elementary classrooms: Round tables for reading, plants, class fish tank, and class hamster.

Things they disliked: only one computer, no class T.V.”

I then asked the students to reflect on the assignment they had carried out in English class—drawing and writing about their dream bedroom. I then asked them to think about their dream classroom and how they would design it.

Observations/ analysis:

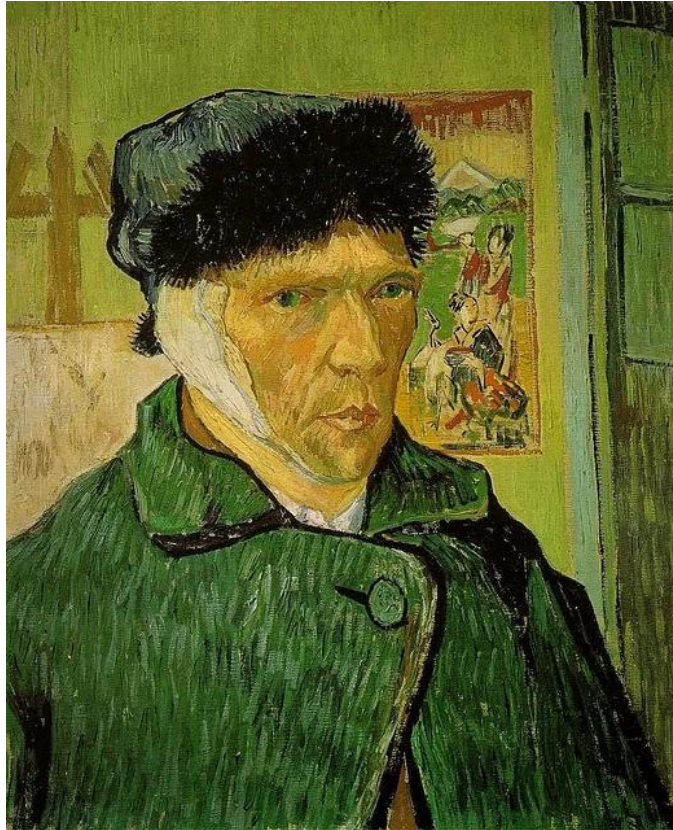
The common element in many of the drawings by the children was the technology in the classroom. Luca’s dream class consisted of a cinema projector and couch where the class could watch *Bill the science guy* U tube videos and other movies. Amanda’s dream class had the whole series of *Twilight* and a huge blue bean bag chair where she could sit and read.

Lesson six:

Lesson six began with the word “portrait” written in big bold letters on the white board. I asked the students what comes to mind when they hear or see the word “portrait”. Amanda’s response was “a picture or painting of someone’s face.” I then wrote the word self in front of portrait, making the word “self portrait”. I explained that a portrait could be a drawing, painting or photograph of anyone. I could take a portrait photo of Amanda. However only if I took a photo of myself, or painted a picture of myself, only then would I be making a self-portrait.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Self portrait of an Artist*, 1888



Vincent Van Gogh *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*,
January 1889

The students then viewed a power point presentation of self-portraits by Vincent Van Gogh and Frida Kahlo. Subsequently I asked how they felt about the different images. During the course of the conversation the students noted that Van Gogh was a painter and that's why he had paint brushes in his hand in one of the self portraits. The paint brushes indicated to the viewer who he was as a person, a painter first. When I showed the second painting by Van Gogh many of the students said he looked injured, not well, almost as if he just got back from a hospital. Amanda pointed out that he had a painting behind him and it could be that he is trying to show he's love for art and painting. I informed my students that he loved and collected Japanese prints and that

was one of them in the background. We then looked at two of Frida Kahlo's self portraits.



Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907-1954)
Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940



Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait as wounded deer* (1946)

The students were really intrigued by her paintings and they had a lot of comments to share about them.

Gina commented on the cat and monkey in the *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*. She stated that perhaps these were her pets and she felt they were part of her life so she wanted to show that by painting them as part of her self-portrait. Amanda and Nathan stated that perhaps she loves nature; that's why she has plants and bugs in her painting. Michael stated that the branches around her neck indicated perhaps that she was hurting or unhappy or perhaps she felt trapped. When I asked him why he felt that way he said they looked painful. The majority of my students also stated that she looked sad, almost like she was having unhappy thoughts.

Michael stated that the deer in the self-portrait looked like it was in a lot of pain and it was trapped. He stated that it looked like it was trying to find a way to escape but it was too frightened. He also pointed out the wounds and the arrows and how that must really hurt. Nathan said perhaps the deer was trying to escape through the trees. Amanda pointed out that the trees are too close together and perhaps it could not fit through them. Michael stated that it was "scary". Nathan said that even though he thought it was a good painting he did not like it. Amanda said she liked it but she would not hang it at home because it would make her feel sad. I was quite impressed with their responses since they did not have any knowledge of Kahlo's past or previous exposure to her paintings. The emotive power of these images over the children highlights how receptive children are to imagery and symbolism.

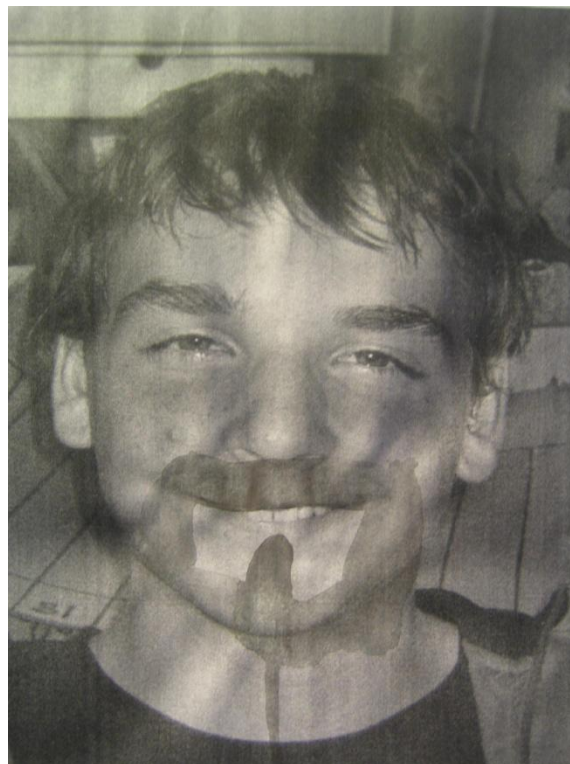
I then asked the children to produce two self-portraits: One of the self-portraits was to be about how they felt when they first came into class B111. The second one was to express how they felt about being in class B111 at the time of this study, i.e. two years later. They could use photographs, writings, or letters about themselves as well

as collage, drawing or paint. I reminded them that the Van Gough and Kahlo used symbols and colors to express their ideas and feelings and that they too could do the same. I also reminded them of the previous lessons and suggested they take a minute to look at the words they chose during lesson two to express their feelings about class B111. The words they used were on large flash cards.

Observations/ analysis:



Luca's self-portrait of how he felt when he first came to the class was a combination of photography, painting and drawing. He took a picture of himself outside the class in front of our class lockers with his fist clinched. He put on a frown and tried to express his anger in the way he looked at the camera and by painting in brown the facial section of a black and white print of his photo. He also made a drawing with the word "angry" written twice on it and highlighted in red. He presented these to the class by displaying them next to each other. He explained that he purposely took the photo outside the class because when he first came to B111 he did not want to come in, he did not want to be associated with this class and he was afraid his friends in the other classes would make fun of him.



Luca's Self portrait, how he felt now

He presented a self-portrait of himself expressing how he felt about being in B111 now—a photograph taken inside the class. Behind him is the cooking section of the class and the table that is used for arts and craft, eating together during recess and at times for group work. He also painted a moustache on this black and white photo. He explained that this section of the room was his favorite and he is smiling because he feels much happier now as compared to when he first joined the class. He explained that the painted moustache was because he felt more “grown up and older”.



Michael's photograph expressing how he felt when he first came to B111 was taken outside the class room next to the lockers. He had his face hidden and he is fully dressed for winter. However, the photograph that represents how he feels about the class now was taken inside the class, in the cooking section in front of the fridge, with all

of Samantha's paintings. In the photograph he is facing the camera with eyes that sparkle and a big grin on his face. He explained to this peers that before he felt shy, afraid and uncomfortable. Now he felt happy, comfortable and unafraid to be himself though sometimes he was still shy when new people came into the class.



Nathan's portrait, how he felt when he first joined B111

Nathan's self-portrait expressing how he felt about the class when he first joined was also a black and white printout, which he then painted on with water color paint. He painted all his features loosely and used green to highlight his shirt. He explained that he felt ill, worried and anxious when he first joined. The second self-portrait expressing how he currently felt about himself in our class was a collage. He explained that even though he got anxious at times for the most part he felt happy and safe.

Jonathan

As a result of the different lessons conducted Jonathan has become aware of his progress in our class. He has become aware of the fact that he is a much happier student of B111 as compared to his first few months in the class. He is aware that he needs to have access to the computers for a few minutes (ten minutes) for every half hour of work that he does. He is aware that routine and short working periods are factors that enable him to focus and enjoy learning.

Amanda

Amanda, as a result of this process, has become conscious of the importance of the library and quiet corner. She has become aware of her progress in fitting in and making friends in B111.

Gina

Gina has recognized that when she feels confined and far from her friends she is unhappy and unable to concentrate. Through this ABER process both she and I have realized that her sitting near the class door allowed her to feel closer to her friends in other classes. This served as a reminder that at lunch and recess she was able to spend time with her friends. This fact encouraged her to keep focused on the task at hand. Gina has also recognized that the cooking and crafts corner are one of the factors that making the class enjoyable for her.

Dylan

Through the research process Dylan has acknowledged that it is very important for him to feel accepted by his peers and teachers. Through out the ABER process he has recognized that at first he was angry about being placement in B111; however, he has also become aware of how much progress he has made both academically and socially as a result of this placement in a smaller class. By acknowledging his progress and by recognizing his new found friendship with other class mates he realizes that he has adjusted well and is a much happier student.

Michael, Fabio and Luca

Through their art works these students have realized that they all needed an organized space to be able to learn comfortably. They all indicated that having centers such as the games and cooking center enabled them to take pleasure in coming to class. They all realized that these different centers were significant to them because it enabled them to get a break from the academic routine of math and English. These centers enabled them to interact and play with their friends.

Conclusions:

David's illustrations in lesson three, along with Luca's and Gina's drawings, would, at face value, appear to emphasize the importance of being sensitive to the individual students' needs in the class. By understanding their needs, likes and dislikes, a teacher can manipulate the conditions of the class to allow the students to feel a sense of belonging. If the students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance this would lead to a sense of security and happiness. Thus, the classroom would symbolize a positive place to be. Ultimately, this would help motivate them to want to be in the class, listen, participate, and work on assignments in class and at home.

Lesson four serves to emphasize that it is essential to know and understand the student population on an individual basis and the importance of considering the relevant students' backgrounds, individual needs, likes, dislikes and behaviors when designing a classroom space for children with special needs.

Michael, Jason, and Luca's art works and comments on their safe and secret spaces appear to confirm that it is important for the child to have a "get away place" or have a down-time space (quiet corner) incorporated into the classroom design. The terms "get-away place" and "down-time space" are used here to refer to a space students can go to when they need a few minutes to themselves to either reflect on a situation, or calm down. While many educators may envisage such a space being a quiet corner of the classroom, from the evidence collected over the course of this case study, it may be more helpful to envisage this space as being potentially different kinds of spaces such as a library, a computer or technology corner, a music corner (with head

phones), an art and craft corner, a cooking corner or a reflection corner. These different “healthy” escape spaces, rather than just a quiet chair, will most likely serve the different personalities in the class more effectively.

Therefore, these “spaces” would not just comprise of a physical space but also a series of helpful activities. Amanda, an emotional teenager who loves to read and write, had a “reflection corner” where she could go to reflect on matters that were upsetting her and causing her to become aggressive in class. One of the reflection activities included filling out a reflection sheet. The following questions (and choice of answers), along with spaces for comments, were on the reflection sheet:

What happened?; How do I feel right now? (Very angry, angry, sad, upset, hurt, annoyed, frustrated, happy, overjoyed); Did I over react? (Yes, no); Could I have reacted differently in this situation?; How could I have reacted differently?; Next time this happens what can I do to first calm myself down before I react? (Take three deep breaths, silently count to ten, walk away; think about what I will say at least twice before saying it); Next time this happens what could I say to have a more positive response? (Think about and choose my words carefully, speak calmly or without yelling); Next time this happens what could I do to have a more positive response? (Keep my hands to myself, remind myself that I would not like to be yelled at and not to yell at the other person, remind myself to be polite no matter what happens); What could I do now to make things better? (Write an apology letter, apologize in person to the other person, recognize my mistakes and show through my actions that I am sorry).

The benefits of the use of an activity as an integral part of a classroom space is also illustrated by Jason, who sometimes came to school very anxious about things that were going on at home. He also got very nervous and anxious when there was a change to the schedule. He normally got ten to fifteen minutes on the computer to draw or read for every forty-five minutes of the school work day. Being on the computer had a visibly calming effect on him and improved his overall performance in the classroom.

It is also interesting to note the negative feelings evoked by unused space as demonstrated by Fabio's photo of his "ugliest corner". This may lead one to conclude that every space in a class should have a purpose and should be used for that purpose. If any space is not being utilized, the classroom layout should be reevaluated and redesigned. Every space or corner should serve a purpose specific to the nature of the class and type of students. Over all, the classroom space, all the different centers, should be designed in the room to make the class look comfortable and interesting from a child's perspective, to encourage experimentation and utilization of all the different centers.

Lesson five indicates that technology appears to be very important to the children. Not only does it appear as something they could use for entertainment but it is viewed by the students as a fun, "cool" tool, a tool they enjoy experimenting with, a tool they appear to be curious about and eager to use. Technology and comfortable furniture seems to be the underlining theme amongst most of the children's drawings. Thus, this lesson is a strong indicator of the importance of incorporating the use of technology into the lesson, for it seems to be an excellent tool that motivates students, captures their attention and keeps them focused on the lesson. The following could be used in the

classroom: white board, educational video clips, computer and projectors. Their use could be incorporated as part of the lesson, either in the motivational or procedural aspects of the lesson.

During lesson six I concluded that the art works and statements of the students that participated in this qualitative study highlighted the importance of the state of the classroom environment as well as giving children the time to adjust to their environment. The art works of the students in lesson six highlighted yet again the importance of creating a class environment where children can feel safe and comfortable, an environment where they know their interests and opinions matter, are respected and valued. This respect and value of their unique interests translates as creating different centers in the class where they can experiment and learn through play. This qualitative study raises ample evidence to further the conclusion that children perform and socialize best in a calm and relaxing atmosphere where play is part of the environment. Students with special needs need a beautifully designed, comfortable, welcoming and designed to meet their individual needs and interests. These students need play to be part of the learning context. Positive reinforcement is important to help to create a positive, calm and supportive atmosphere when working with students with special needs. I felt it was my task and responsibility as their teacher to create that environment.

Each second we live in a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and will never be again. And what do we teach

our children in school? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France.

When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body – what a marvel it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, or a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can then you harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must cherish one another. You must work—we all must work—to make this world worthy of its children.

When shall we become accustomed to the fact that we are human beings? We are all leaves of a tree, and the tree is humanity. ~Pablo Casals (no date)

CHAPTER SIX

Aesthetic considerations of the children's individual needs when designing a class room space for children with special needs will ultimately create a sense of comfort and organization in their environment. Aesthetic considerations such as the implementation of a cooking corner, arts and crafts corner and the general seating arrangements can also serve to encourage social interactions among students, which, in turn, will foster a sense of belonging among the students. To conclude, I feel Johnson's definition that aesthetics is the "study of everything that goes into human capacity to make and experience meaning" (Johnson. 2003. p.x) is applicable to this study.

In the two years we spent together my assistant and I have done our best to ensure our students' individual needs were met. We started by considering the changes that needed to be done in our classroom design to allow the children to explore and experiment with matters that interested them (i.e.: cooking, electronic educational games, art and craft). We got to know our students, their likes and dislikes, as well as their educational backgrounds. We brainstormed about the different centers we could create for the different personalities and needs in our class. We wrote several letters, emails and notes to raise funds for our class. We attended several meetings with administrators and school committees to enable us to ask for funds to improve our classroom. We knew we had to be the voice for our students; we needed to be their link

to ensure their needs were recognized by our administrators and staff. We went through several catalogues and did several hours of research to ensure that we created a solid argument in our letters for the need of specific materials and how that would benefit the class. Our determination, and love for our class allowed us to order the best materials possible within our budget (3000\$ excluding the Kitchen corner (1500\$) and three computers) to meet our students needs. We constantly worked together and supported each other to ensure that, through our actions, we modeled a healthy work relationship. In turn, we hoped to ensure a happy, healthy classroom environment for all. We wanted to create the best possible classroom design equipped with materials that would interest and benefit our students (i.e.: computers and special software and hardware for students with special needs). We both enjoyed coming to B111, we both enjoyed interacting and working with the students of B111 and I believe the students could feel this. I believe this made a difference to them and to the atmosphere in the classroom. Through our interactions with each other and the class we created an atmosphere where our students felt safe to voice their opinions, answer questions and try new activities. All of the above descriptions of the teaching environment contributed to the context in which the teaching took place. These are part of the “everything” to which Johnson makes reference in his definition of aesthetics.

The physical environment of the class together with my pedagogical concerns enabled the students of B111 to not only feel a sense of comfort and belonging, but also to feel valued within their school. Due to all the improvements that were made in the classroom space and equipment they felt their educators and administrators were supporting them and listening to their suggestions about what they valued and found

interesting. The boys loved the technology corner of the class, a little something that encouraged them to finish their class assignments. I argue that positive reinforcement is more effective than negative reinforcement. The classroom space in a class such as B111 can be designed to serve as a room filled with wonderful things that students would be excited to experiment with and explore. These centers and positive feelings associated with the classroom continue to encourage such students to keep on task and to continue to enjoy coming to the same classroom year after year.

This research study only begins to scratch the surface of the need to understand how a classroom or school (physical) environment influences a student's self image, learner identity, sense of belonging and agency. Answers and knowledge gathered in this area of study has helped me to become a teacher. A teacher that is aware and more sensitive of the different needs of students. During the process of my research study I have come to believe that such answers and knowledge gathered will also better equip other educators, design professionals, and school leaders when designing an educational space as well as when organizing the allocation of departments or resources within an educational setting.

This research provided a rich description of the children's evolution in thinking and behavior as a result of what I am arguing was an aesthetic orientation to teaching. The students developed a sense of belonging. Future research could explore with a different student population this aesthetic orientation to a classroom working environment.

It is essential to recognize and reflect on the students' perspectives, ideas, opinions and feelings. Thus, the studies geared towards these research questions should naturally aim to gather knowledge in a manner that allows students to express their ideas, thoughts, opinions and feelings. To answer the above research questions a qualitative or mixed research study would therefore be recommended.

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