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## Students' Perception of Success in the Art Classroom

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### Abstract

Interested in learning about current perceptions of success held by high school students, we carried out a qualitative research study in order to examine what adolescents identify as success in different contexts. Through discourse analysis, we found that the students' artworks served as a means to communicate their current challenges, values, and goals. We also learned that the students often reflected the messages about success that they received from society. Though they valued personal expression in their artwork, students struggled in identifying art education as important.

### **Students' Perceptions of Success in the Art Classroom**

A navy and gold banner emblazoned with the word, "Success," ran across the cafeteria's wall. It is a wonderful sentiment and an inspiring idea, but what does it refer to? Success is a word that educators and students hear so often that they may not even realize it. What exactly *is* success? And, success in what context? And, for whom? Our experience as teachers has shown us that in the classroom, the term often relate to good grades, effort, behavior, and participation. These definitions, unfortunately, leave out an important part of the equation: the students. It was the students, in fact, and their comments within Hillary Andrelchik's high school ceramics class, that made us wonder what our students thought about being successful—both inside and outside of the art classroom.

In order to more fully explore this idea, we conducted a qualitative research study in which we interviewed high school ceramics students about their perceptions of success. The participants identified strong themes in their definitions of success in life, in education, and in art. In the ceramics classroom, the students articulated their enjoyment of opportunities to develop their creativity and self-expression. They stated that they appreciated learning through hands-on art-making, which differed from the learning outcomes of their other classes. However, though the students expressed positive feelings towards art education, they also seemed to minimize its importance. Students appeared to reflect messages that they were absorbing from society.

#### ***Literature Review***

*Adolescent Development.* In order to better understand the students, we examined literature related to adolescent development. During adolescence, young people are "forming new kinds of relationships, and planning their academic and occupational futures" (Perry & Pauletti, 2011, p. 61). Having relationships with peers is important, and peer pressure can lead to both healthy and unhealthy behaviors. In addition, adolescents may experience pressure from their family members. The environment in which the adolescent lives influences identity development (Lachmann, 2004).

*Students' Perceptions.* After reviewing literature related to adolescence, we concentrated on students' perceptions of success. There is an important link between students' perceptions and academic achievement. In looking at how students view success in particular, researchers consistently found that students' perceptions of their academic ability are tied to their level of achievement (Byrne, 1996; Silverthorn, DuBoise & Crombie, 2005; Jinks & Morgan, 1999; Mulford, Kendall, & Kendall, 2004). Schonwetter, Perry, and Struthers (1993) found a relationship between students' perception of control and success in their coursework. Research has also explored students' perceptions in the art classroom environment. Gaffney

(2011) found that design students who had positive past experiences in arts-based settings, including critiques and the studio combined with their general competency, tended to have higher self-efficacy in critiques and studio work. Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's belief in his or her ability to accomplish a task. Pavlou (2006) uncovered a relationship between art students' perceptions of competence, arts value, and their achievement goals and their level of actual involvement in art making activities in class. Pavlou found that students who reported high levels of confidence enjoyed more art making tasks, which lead to a higher level and quality of engagement in art making tasks. Students with lower levels of confidence reported enjoying less projects and acknowledge that fear of failure in a task affected their level and quality of involvement.

While looking at students' perceptions of art-making, and their belief in their ability to achieve a task, Watts (2005) discovered that students held a variety of understandings as to why people make art, what purpose of art is, and why art is important. Students' perceptions of their self-efficacy affected their level of achievement in art education. In addition, students express a variety of perspectives as to the purpose and meaning of art.

## **Methodology**

### ***The High School Setting***

This research study took place in a Southwestern public Title I high school, where co-author, Hillary Andrelchik, was the ceramics teacher. The school's small suburb had a median income of approximately \$10,000 less than the estimated median income of the state. The community is mainly Caucasian and Hispanic (US News, 2012). In three years, this high school's graduation rate dropped nearly thirty percent, from 98% in 2003 to 69% in 2006. The school's graduation rate was well below the state graduation rate of 83%.

Due to the low graduation rate, the high school enacted an improvement plan. One aspect of this plan was the creation and implementation of a school-wide mandatory course called Success for Life. Several teachers, including Hillary, the ceramics teacher, instructed this twenty-minute class. Teachers led a scripted curriculum that focused on success. The content included reading stories about successful people's lives and answering discussion questions about students' goals and future plans. The topic of "success" was on everyone's mind, at least to some degree.

During the year this study was conducted, the school district's budget cuts reduced the art department at this high school by fifty percent, leaving only two fine arts teachers and three art class options for approximately 1,500 students. The budget reductions in the visual arts program were more dramatic than the cuts to any other subject area.

The ceramics course focused completely on hand-building techniques, such as slab work, pinch pots, coil building. In addition, the class included surface decoration processes, such as

incising, impressing, sgraffito, and the use of glazes and underglazes. Each of the lessons taught in the classroom included an Art Historical component, a visual presentation of student and professional artists' artworks, and a hands-on demonstration by the instructor. Finally, students were asked to design and construct their finished product, while receiving individual attention from the teacher.

In order to assess student work, Hillary used rubrics that focused on the criteria of the level of work the student had attempted, the creativity of the idea, the student's participation during the assignment, and the overall level of craftsmanship of the artwork. These four criteria remained the same for each assignment, while a fifth criterion, specific project requirements, changed with the different needs of each assignment.

### ***The Participants***

All of the participants were students in the Introduction to Ceramics course. For most of the student participants, this beginning ceramics course was their first art class in high school. In order to randomly select ceramics students to interview, we drew fifteen students' names from a bowl and then invited them to participate. We informed students that the interviews were voluntary and we also collected signed consent forms from the students and their parents or guardians. To preserve confidentiality, we used pseudonyms for these students. The seven female students in this study included: Sophia, Erin, Shannon, Krista, Kami, Jennifer, and Allison. The four male students were: Daniel, Jack, Joseph, and Chad.

### ***The Procedures***

We completed eleven face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured format of questions. (Refer to Appendix A for a list of the interview questions.) The interview focused on how beginning ceramics students perceive success in art, in education, and in life. We explored the connections between the students' perceptions of success in the art classroom and success in life. We asked students about the role of art in their lives, as well as the reasons that students selected ceramics as an elective. We asked the participants, "Why did you decide to take this class?" and "What role does this class play in your life?"

Literature informed us about the influence of environment and adults on adolescent students. Michael (1983) noted that during high school, adolescents are often aware of their parents' expectations to go to college and pursue a career. Adolescents are also striving for independence and respect as they seek to find their places in the world. Therefore, we sought to learn about the messages regarding success that adults in the students' communities were sharing with them. We asked the students questions, such as: "What do you think the adults in this school think about the idea of being successful?" and "How do you

think that the adult's view of success affects your view?"

While one author is the ceramics instructor, the co-researcher, Rory Schmitt, is a board-certified art therapist and art educator. We agreed that incorporating the students' visual artworks in the discussion was paramount. Therefore, we requested the students bring an artwork that they felt was successful with them to the interview. We then used these artworks to elicit responses. The use of the visual permitted open-ended and meaningful responses from the participant (Lapenta, 2011). In addition, we photographed the artwork in order to gather visual data.

### **Data Analysis**

We audio recorded and later transcribed the interviews. We color coded the interviews and identified emergent concepts and themes (Stokrocki, 1997). We also analyzed the transcripts using a data analysis technique, referred to as generous reading (Tobin, 2000).

Generous reading is associated with discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is:

... A multimodal method that combines empirical, theoretical, interpretive, and critical analytic dimensions. The conceptual basis is constructed from lived experiences, pedagogic practices and selected theories in: art education; education; critical curricular studies, cultural studies; post structuralism; post modernism, and various forms of feminism (Krug and Cohen-Evron, 2000, 258).

Generous reading is a set of tools and ideas that examines written or spoken words to identify connections, meanings, and significant ideas (Tobin, 2000). The theory behind generous reading is that what people say or write reflects the larger context in which the words were spoken. These ideas find their roots in Freud's (1932) theory that thoughts, actions, and expressions often reveal topics of concern that people attempt to hide. Slips of the tongue and other such actions are clues to those hidden meanings. Russian theorist, Vološinov (1987), explains that the things people say and write are linked to their personal beliefs and ideologies. Vološinov proposes what people say can reveal many layers of hidden meanings and connections to themselves and the sociocultural context surrounding them.

In addition, Bakhtin (1984) continues this idea by suggesting that because people and their words are connected to this larger sociocultural context, everything people say is "borrowed" from ideas that they have previously encountered. As people live and interact with others, they make their own meanings and connections between these previously encountered ideas and share them in new contexts. In this way, what people say is actually a dialogue between what has been said prior and the context in which people are currently speaking. Bakhtin refers to this notion as dialogism.

Generous reading has been applied to written and spoken words in school contexts to uncover the links between students' comments, class work, and societal issues (Tobin, 2000; Spence, 2008; Kaomea, 2001; Sumida, 2000). Art education researchers, Krug and Cohen-Evron (2000), have also used discourse analysis methods in their study of curricular paradigms. Our approach to analyzing the data was a combination of coding and generous reading. We used Tobin's (2000, 2010) framework for the application of generous reading techniques to the students' transcribed interviews. We identified manifest (actual) and latent (hidden) meanings in the students' speech (Tobin, 2011).

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### ***Definitions of Success: The Acts of Accomplishment and the Feelings of Accomplishment***

We found three major themes emerged related to definitions of success. Firstly, students defined success as the act of achieving goals. In regards to being successful in life, one of our students, Daniel stated, "Um, success to me would mean just setting goals and achieving them, like throughout life." Other students referred to setting specific goals, working towards what they wanted in a situation, and not having things "just handed to you." Jack shared, "[Success is] striving and completing- basically a project or any homework, even completing homework, that is pretty successful for me."

Secondly, we found that students defined success as a feeling of accomplishment when they achieved their goals. Jennifer said, "Success is when you actually achieve something that you've been striving for. Yeah. Like, when you've worked really hard and you want to get your goal and you actually get it. And well, and it's being happy."



*Figure 1. Erin's Artwork*

Our third discovery of definitions of success was that students' discussion of success involved overcoming challenges. Many definitions of success in life related to the idea of striving for a goal. We found a similar set of themes when talking with our students about what success in art class looked like. Students explained that in art class, they encountered challenges in completing difficult projects. Through persistence and dedication, they overcame challenges, which led to successful experiences. Through making artwork, adolescents can gain flexibility in reasoning, as well as develop deeper understandings of themselves and their environment. In fact, research has supported the notion that the arts contribute to learning, brain development, and growth in cognitive abilities (Diket, 2003; Zeki, 2001; Eckert, 2012; Hughs, 2011).

For their most successful artwork, two students discussed the challenges involved in creating wall plaques that had letters carved in relief. While discussing this work, Erin and Shannon referred to the difficulty of keeping the background flat while still maintaining the shape of the letters (See Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 2. Shannon's Artwork



Figure 3. Krista's Artwork





*Figure 4. Daniel's Artwork*

Often, students brought up the idea of perfection in their artworks. Daniel (Figure 4) stated, "I guess I could've done a better job, like painting it. Not everything is like perfect..." Erin stated, "I tried to be a perfectionist, but then I realized usually later that it's not going to happen." All but two of the students interviewed could easily identify an area of their artwork with which they were not completely satisfied. The students' acknowledgement of their perceived lack of technical skills indicated their belief that successful art requires a high level of skill is consistent with Burton's (2000) research on art education with adolescents. Burton recognized that adolescents experience frustration in art class when they do not have the technical skills needed to make an artwork that they envision.

Students seemed to be quick to pick out areas of their work that challenged them. They were also able to locate parts of their work with which they were not completely satisfied. Yet, when we asked these students to choose their most successful artworks to bring to the interview, they chose artworks that involved challenges in the production process.

In addition to understanding how adolescents define success, we examined students' perspectives of their art class. Students noted that the ceramics classroom invites a fun, supportive, and interactive atmosphere. We found that students felt ceramics class was a break from what they explained as their more rigorous courses, like Chemistry. Chad said, "It's that little fun class before I go home (laughs)... It's nice for after the hard day... Gives me a little time to unwind, you know, like I can still do artistic, creative things using my mind, but it's not as hard as uh, writing and doing math, and all that fun stuff."

Joseph discussed how this class supports relaxation. He shared, “It relieves my mind of stresses that other classes bring upon me. It helps me relax and you know, have fun in class, ease my day.” Though the class supported his ability to de-stress, the class had less importance than other courses to this student. When we asked him about the role of this class in his life he stated, “Um, probably just like a place filler, I'd say.”

There is a conflict that we can see forming. Joseph explains that art class is easy and helps him relax; however, he also described how art class involves challenges. Joseph described his a sculpture of a coyote:

Well, for me, my artwork's not very, it's not really good to look at because I'm not very talented. I think this one's probably my best one. It actually looks like something, it doesn't just look like a big blob of just clay (laughs). And I, and I think I did an alright job this time.

This statement, about the quality of his work indicates that making art *is* a challenge for him, something that does not necessarily come easily.

Additionally, Chad indicated that art class is just something fun and it is not a priority for him. However, he also described mastering the technical challenges in creating artwork that makes him feel pride. He explained:

Because whenever I make a coil pot or a little pinch pot and it's not right, it's just I keep working at it. Dang it. Then you mash it together and re-wedge it and try it again. Because I don't want something that's going to sit on my dresser and then eventually get pushed to the back and something thrown over it because it's not that proud of it. It just doesn't look that good.

Chad's artwork that he defined as successful was a small, incised pinch pot that contained details recounting September 11<sup>th</sup>. The ceramic vessel contained a drawing of planes flying towards the Twin Towers. During the interview, Chad shared his memory of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, which was his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. He shared that people might see his project as disrespectful, but this was not his intention. Chad has experienced challenges by choosing to work with difficult and traumatic subject matter: September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Adolescents in our study stated that they created artwork in response to personal events. Creating artwork is a way to inspire students to share their personal narratives. In her case study, Hafeli (2002) also noted that adolescent students shared personal meanings associated with their artwork and created narratives that were inspired by society. Personal expression is also very important during adolescence; through making artwork, adolescents can express themselves. Art therapist, Edith Kramer (1993), explains that when looking at an adolescent's artwork, one must note that “every element in the child's work contains a part of himself (p. 32).” Art serves as symbolic communication. In addition, when adolescents dialogue about

their artwork, they may reveal how their environment affects them (Diket, 2003).

What are we to make of our students' comments regarding challenges and successes? By reading more deeply into our students' discussions, we can see how our students are working through their own understandings. There seems to be a conflict between art class as challenging, and art class as not important. If we return to the ideas behind generous reading, we can find an answer. Bakhtin and Vološinov both suggest that what we say is linked to the contexts in which we are speaking. Because we are influenced by the world around us, and the world around us also has tensions (seen and unseen), our speech will therefore reflect these tensions.

Tensions and challenges can be seen within society. Surmounting a challenge is often part of what makes a person successful. Think of the heroic stories covered in inspirational movies: an individual has a challenging past, yet somehow they overcome these obstacles to reach an important goal. Yet at the same time, we often hear the rhetoric about how unimportant art making can be. We laugh about starving artists and at times (within this particular school) electives such as art and foreign languages were called "non-content courses." Within these contexts, the students comments may be reflecting these tensions- a challenge is part of success, but perhaps only in worthwhile pursuits.

### ***Balancing Between Personal and Parental/Peer/Teacher Ideas***

In examining students' definitions of success, we discovered that they were working on developing their own personal understandings of what it means to be successful. While students define success in their own ways, they are also influenced by their families, peers, and teachers. At times, the students' understandings of success were in conflict with adults' conceptions.

#### *Family Influence*

When responding to questions about the role of art class in their lives, we found that students were motivated to study art because they wanted to make "cool stuff" to show to their families. Sharing one's artwork with family members led to students having feelings of personal pride. Sophia stated, "I wanted to make cool things. I wanted to have stuff that I could take home to my family and be proud of." Erin also stated that one role of this class in her life was that "I get to bring home cool stuff every other week and show my parents."

In our qualitative study, students shared that their parents influenced their views of success in education. This finding is consistent with adolescent development research, which supports the notion that during the high school years, students are aware of their parents' expectations

(Erikson, 1950; Lachmann, 2004; Michael, 1983). During their interviews, the students often acknowledged their parents as having significant influence on their lives.

### *Peer Influence*

Students recognized their peers during their interviews. Some students, such as Erin and Sophia, even discussed being influenced by their peers in their decisions to take this ceramics course. Erin said, "My friend, Alicia, took it last year. And, she was bringing home all these ceramics projects. And I was just like, 'Those are so cool.'" Several students also stated that the success of their artwork was related to whom they made it for, such as their boyfriends or girlfriends. These findings suggest that adolescents are heavily influenced by how they appear in the eyes of their peers. This is related to Erikson's (1968) theory that social surroundings and peer relationships are important components in adolescent development.

During her interview, Krista presented her conflicting notions of success. Krista related her creativity in the ceramics classroom to her love of being a hairdresser. Multiple times during her interview, she described experiences at her job at a hair and makeup salon for young girls. When we asked her to tell us about what she wanted to study in college, she gave the following reply:

I wanted to go to E-Tech [a vocational high school] next year and do hair...Now my dad told me that I can't go to E-Tech because I have more potential than that and he doesn't want me getting stuck doing hair. And, I'm like well 'cuz like I've like always loved doing hair...and I love it so much, and I'm like, "Dad, why can't I go to E-Tech and do hair?"... But he just won't go for it. He's like, "I don't want you getting stuck in something like that. You have more potential."

By applying the tools of generous reading to this passage, we can find a number of important ideas. First, there is a struggle for a coherent definition of what makes a person successful. While Krista loves doing hair and would like to pursue this as a career (if even for a limited time), she receives opposition from her father. When Krista contrasts her own ideas about enjoying hairdressing with her father's comments of "I don't want you getting stuck in something like that. You have more potential," she is bringing up a conflict in the messages she is receiving from her sociocultural context.

During her interview, Krista repeatedly equated her creativity in the ceramics class with the creativity she found being a hairdresser. Seen in the context of the Success for Life class (in which various paths to success were discussed), Krista's desire to pursue hairdressing is a valid path to becoming successful because she would be pursuing a career that made her happy. However, her father stated that while it might make her happy, hairdressing is also something that can hinder her ultimate success.

Michael (1983) suggests that during high school, adolescents are often aware of their parents' expectations to go to college and pursue a career. Many students received messages to go to college so that they may get a high paying job. However, it is important to note that the reality is the community in which Krista live contains many families who have jobs as hairdressers, grocery store checkers, and fast food workers. Krista's comments reflect a conflict between freely choosing a profession that brings joy and creativity, and choosing a career members of society esteem.

We found that while students' ideas about success reflected their parents' and peers' beliefs, often a student's measure of success conflicted with the beliefs of those same groups. Comments by the adults, including teachers, who surround students often influence the students' perceptions (Rose, Jolley, & Burkitt, 2006, 2010; Ulbricht, 1999; Crum, 2007; Anning, 2002; Zander, 2004; Sabol, 2006). In addition, researchers found that the sociocultural context in which students practice art influences what and how students learn. Teachers' and parents' attitudes and practices play a significant role in influencing students' art-making experiences (Rose, Jolley, & Burkitt, 2006, 2010; Ulbricht, 1999; Crum, 2007). Students may try to mediate the influences and desires of the adults outside of school settings with their teachers' expectations (Anning, 2002).

#### *Teacher Influence*

In addition, we found that there may be a conflict between the ceramic instructor's comments and the students' own measures of success. Students' perceptions of successful artwork may be related to the emphasis placed on technical skills by the ceramics instructor. During group and individual demonstrations, one consistent area of emphasis in Hillary's class was the achievement of technical skills. For example, during the lesson in which Erin, Jennifer, Shannon, and Jack produced their plaques, Hillary focused on teaching many different ways to make sure the background of the carving was smooth and flat. Both Erin and Shannon commented on their ability to keep the surface of the plaque smooth, while still creating relief with their carving. This may demonstrate the idea that what teachers' state and emphasize can influence students' ideas about their own work.

When selecting their most successful artwork, some students appeared to choose artwork that was not technically proficient, but which held personal meaning. Their specific successful artworks were based more on the artworks personal meanings to them, than to the instructor's technical measures. In fact, many of the pieces students chose to bring to the interview as their most successful, works were not the same artworks that the teacher would have chosen as their most successful.

Through analyzing the students' responses, we found that their successful artworks served as

symbols for meaningful relationships. Several adolescents explained that they made artwork for an important people in their lives. Allison explained that she made the red and green panda bear sculpture (Figure 5) as a gift for her boyfriend. The colors represented a combination of their favorite colors.



*Figure 5. Allison's Artwork*

In addition, Sophia chose her penguin sculpture (Figure 5) as an example of a successful artwork because it was made for her best friend. “[It] is going to be my friend’s late birthday present.... I like him the best. I mean, my other projects, they have meaning, too. I made them for my siblings, and stuff....”



*Figure 6. Sophia's Artwork*

We found that students may have different perceptions about art judgment than their teachers. While they are aware of their teachers' criteria for art-making, students may choose to ignore those standards in favor of their own personal set of criteria (Zander, 2004; Hafeli, 2006). Students may prefer to use friends' opinions and the artwork's coolness factor as important aspects in judging an artwork's success (Sabol, 2006). Often times, existing research on classroom processes tends to ignore children's intelligence and viewpoints (Weinstein, 1983). Researchers have noted that children's and adults' views of the reality of the classroom may not necessarily be synonymous (Weinstein, 1983; Young, 1985). Additionally, when Marx and Winnie (1978) compared the responses of students and their teachers about teaching behaviors, they found that the two perceptions were not the same.

### **The Art Class Environment is Supportive**

We discovered several students shared the feeling that the art class environment was enjoyable. They shared with us that the ceramics room was a place they could be themselves. Allison stated, "It's just more fun, and more what *you* want to do instead." Art class empowered students by providing choices. In addition, Jennifer noted that art class supported self-expression. Jennifer (Figure 7) commented:

It was like a class where you can just like express yourself and you don't have to do like tests, or like written work, and stuff like all that. It's fun to have a class that you

can just make stuff, and like just express yourself, and pretty much do your own thing. But like within a limit, so I think it's really a good thing to have.



*Figure 7. Jennifer's Artwork*

We found that students were able to identify the positive aspects of being a student in an art class. The class structure, as well as the ability for students to practice free choice and self-expression, empowered students and created positive experiences.

### **The Challenges of Art Programs in Schools**

The final theme we located in our study deals with the way that students' comments and beliefs about being successful, both inside and outside the art classroom, seem to reflect the challenges facing art programs in schools. For example, during their interviews, our students commented on the lack of importance of art class. They also discussed the effect of art department budget cuts on their ability to be successful.

In our study, we noticed ways in which students seemed to reflect the community's low values of art and art education, which included budget related teacher reductions, and negative comments by both administration and community members. When we asked Allison about the importance of her ceramics class, she replied, "I don't think it's that important. It's something to waste time-- not waste time, but enjoy it more." Applying the tools of generous reading, Allison had a slip of the tongue. Her manifest content, the words she spoke aloud, "It's something to waste time," reflects her possible latent ideas, or those hidden connections surrounding the comment that were not spoken. Despite the fact that she attempted to correct herself, her initial comments may hint at the perceived lack of importance of art class. In



addition, when we asked Joseph about the role of this class in his life, he stated, "Um, probably just like a place filler, I'd say." And, when we asked Daniel if his ceramics class would be useful in this future, he responded, "Um, I wouldn't really think so." As previously discussed, even though art class offers a challenge, it is also not valued by students.

Kami described school art class budget cuts affected her ability to be successful. During her interview, Kami indicated that she planned to pursue a career in the arts and attend an art institute for college. She consistently made the connection between this ceramics course and her desire to be an animator. Kami contemplated how the state budgetary cuts to her school's art program would affect her future. Not being able to enroll in future arts courses limited her ability to gain direct experiences, knowledge, and skills related to her goals. When we asked Kami what she thought adults' definition of success influenced her understanding of success, she responded, "It can be a downer sometimes, because they're like 'That's [art] a horrible occupation for your future. You're never going to make it.'" The statement seems to be indicative that careers in the arts are not a valid path to success.

Some students also indicated that their parents not support their children studying ceramics. Erin, shared that her parents were initially not supportive of her studying art. She stated: "Um, I get to bring home cool stuff every other week and show my parents. They were like, 'You're taking ceramics, really?'" And I was like, "No, it's fun and I need a fine arts credit." And, then I started bringing home projects. And they were like, "Okay, that looks kind of cool."

Erin's parents' viewed art education is not a pursuit to be taken seriously. However, when family members saw her artwork, they began to recognize possible usefulness of the ceramics class.

### **Conclusion**

In our study, *Students' Perceptions of Success in an Art Classroom*, we interviewed high school students in order to learn how they defined success in art, in school, and in life. Through coding and discourse analysis methods, we uncovered that students appreciated personal art expression and the challenges that may come with the development of technical skills; however, they seemed to devalue the importance of art education. When looking at the students' quotes, we discovered that their minimization of art's importance seemed to be a reflection of larger societal messages.

We believe that these findings can have wider implications. We agree with Burton (2000) that dialogue in the classroom encourages reflection and learning. Art educators can support the needs of children and adolescent students by focusing on the learners' needs. By carefully

examining what students are saying about being successful, teachers can identify the needs of students in relation to their future goals whether they desire to become an artist or an engineer, or to just use the class to for personal expression. Teachers can then make informed changes to curriculum and teaching methods paying heed to these goals. We do not suggest that teachers abandon their own measures of success, but rather that they may want to find ways to make those two sets of goals connected or compatible.

Educators can also use students' statements as a tool for understanding the larger ideas that society may be presenting to our students. This understanding may shed light onto the struggles and challenges current students face. By recognizing that teachers' words influence students' perceptions, teachers can reflect upon what they can do to enact positive change within themselves and their classrooms. For example, after completing this study, Hillary has had to reflect upon the way she focused her class on technical skills. While these priorities are important, the fact that her students used other measures, such as who the artwork was for, led her to believe that finding a balance between her goals and the students' goals may have led to more student involvement.

We were surprised to find that a majority of these students did not see the relevance of art education to the rest of their lives. The students enjoyed art class and found it a fun place to be, yet they did not see its connection to other facets of their lives. We also know that their peers and family influence them (and likely vice versa). In order to see the status of the arts rise in education, art educators must make sure to clearly explain the purpose of art education to their students. If the findings of our study are similar to the experiences of other high school students in other schools, then perhaps, there is a need for art educators to be more explicit about the purposes of art courses. For example, talking with students about what their goals are may be a start. If we listen to our students' ideas, we can then use their backgrounds as a starting place for explaining and making connections between what we know to be the importance of art class and what our students are looking for from the experience. Literally discussing art classes' relevance to our students' lives may help to bridge the gap that we found in our research. If students understand and believe in the necessity and benefit of the arts, they can become the biggest art advocates. As Kami said in her interview, "Because in art, you can really do anything you want."

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## Appendix A

### Success in the Art Class Interview Questions

- 1) Why did you decide to take this class?
  - a) How did you pick this class over others that met the graduation requirements?
  - b) Were there any outside people who influenced your decision to take this class?
- 2) What do you hope to get out of this class?
  - a) Is there anything else you'd like to learn?
- 3) What role does this class play in your life?
- 4) What role does this class play in your education?

- a) Is this class currently helping you in any other classes?
  - b) How do you think this class will affect the rest of your education? (in HS and beyond)
- 5) What does “success” mean to you? What is your definition of “success”?
- a) Can you describe what success might look like to you?
  - b) Can you tell me how you came to this definition/idea/understanding?
  - c) Are there certain people in your life who you have seen be successful?
  - d) How have these people impacted your life?
- 6) How do you know if you have been successful?
- a) Can you tell me about a time when you were successful?
  - b) How did this make you feel?
- 7) What does success *in education* mean to you?
- a) How did you come to this definition/idea/understanding?
  - b) Who, in your life, has had a role in your idea of success in education?
- 8) What does success *in an art class* mean to you?
- a) How did you come to this definition/idea/understanding?
  - b) Who, in your life, has had a role in your idea of success in this class?
- 9) What does success *in life* mean to you?
- a) How did you come to this definition/idea/understanding?
  - b) Who, in your life, has had a role in your idea of success in life?
- 10) How do you think this class will help you be successful?
- 11) What do you think the adults in this school think about the idea of being successful?
- a) successful in school?
  - b) in life?
  - c) in this class?
- 12). How do you think that the adult’s view of success affects your view?
- 13). Tell me about the artwork that you brought in.
- a) In what way was it successful?
  - b) In what way was it not successful?
  - c) Why did you choose it as a representation of success?

### **About the Authors**

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