

VOICES IN THE HALL: A BLACK MALE STUDENT CENTERED EXAMINATION
OF ENGAGEMENT IN AN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL ART CLASS

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the experiences and perceptions of black male middle school students in an urban visual art class. Black male students have endured unequal educational outcomes such as dropping out of school at a higher rate than many of their peers of other races (NCES, 2013). Previous studies have shown that many students who have considered leaving school cite a lack of engagement in the education setting as one of the key reasons they attend school less and may eventually drop out (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010; Fredricks J. A., Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005). Research has also shown a correlation between high school dropout rates and student performance, attendance, and engagement in 8th grade (English, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Increased levels of engagement have also been shown to lead to improvements in student attendance, behavior and academic outcomes (Finn & Rock, 1997; Marks, 2000; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002).

The arts have long been seen as areas of study in which students show indications of increased engagement. The present study will add to this body of research by examining how black male students experience the art classroom and how such classes impact their overall sense of engagement. Data gathered for this study includes observations of student behaviors and interactions in their art classes. Five black male 8th grade students comprised the key study participants. Interviews were formulated to gain background

information and to ascertain how the observed classroom setting was perceived from these students' perspectives. Additional data was gathered from teacher interviews. This data provided a context for student analyzing perspectives. The literature for this study helped to explain the role engagement plays in educational outcomes, observable measures of engagement, the value of an increased emphasis on the arts for middle school students, discernible practices that differentiate arts classrooms from other classes, and the processes through which students make meaning of their experiences.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Silers. We are a monolithic family of people who love for the sake of love and always try to lift one another no matter how low we may have fallen. Without their love and encouragement I would have stopped trying long ago. This dissertation is also dedicated to me...not the narrow Don Siler version of me...but the thousands of Me's dancing through the halls of urban public schools all over America. The Me's who feel like the art class is a place where they finally get to be themselves. The Me's with whom I sat outside of the art class. The depth of their thought is inspiring.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

School can be a challenging experience for any child; but for black males, school success has proven to be especially daunting. Black males, as compared to their white peers, score lower on standardized tests, drop out of school at higher rates, and are more often referred for disciplinary action. Much of the existing literature on the subject places the onus for these discrepancies on culture, race, and class. Allen & Boykin (1992) argued that black students suffered due to cultural incongruence between how they were raised to think and interact at home and the behaviors expected in America's schools. The basic disconnect is that American public schools reward students for operating and behaving in an individualistic manner while many black students are being raised in "Afrocultural" home environments that place a premium on communalism and group success (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2009). Another disconnect noted by Kunjufu (2002) was that black male students were at a particular disadvantage in the school setting due to the race and class of most schoolteachers (middle class white women). This disparity, he argued, affects black male students in profound ways. One such effect is the fact that a white female teacher fulfilling the role of a daily caregiver and educator cannot truly grasp the nuances of the lived experiences of black male students as well as a teacher of the same race and gender could (Kunjufu, 2002). While the aforementioned authors do not agree on the cause, they all see male black students' educational outcomes as a reason for concern. As demographics in America shift, the ability of schools to educate a student body that is increasingly diverse becomes more significant (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

A common thread that runs throughout the literature on educational outcomes is the idea that some students simply do not feel connected or “engaged” in the traditional American education setting (English, 2007; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks J. A., Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005). According to Yazzie-Mintz (2010) students who do not see how their formal education will benefit them in the future are more likely to consider leaving school altogether. Kunjufu (2002), Allen & Boykin (1992), and Kaplan & Maehr (1999), all wrote that students who are more engaged through connections with peers, teachers, and class materials have a better chance for educational success (graduation, higher grades, and less disruptive behavior). As noted by Yazzie-Mintz (2010), student engagement is a potent indicator of future educational outcomes. For urban black males, a lack of engagement in the traditional education setting has been associated with, and compounded by, the social inequalities they face both inside and outside of school (Noguera, 2009).

Engagement

According to Perry (2008), recent educational reforms have centered narrowly on improving student test scores. This is problematic in that it has ignored the importance of student engagement as a determinant of student outcomes. Perry has argued that engagement plays a large role in whether students complete school as well as whether their future work trajectory will trend up or down. Unless students feel valued, respected, and have a sense of belonging in school, they will begin to withdraw emotionally, cognitively, and, eventually, physically. Engagement is, therefore, a “mediator for achievement” (p. 400) that can play a positive or negative role in educational outcomes.

An understanding of engagement is necessary to address the issues facing black male students. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris (2004) have split engagement into three areas, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement. Emotional engagement refers to the student's positive or negative reactions to educational stimulus. It is an indication of students' attitudes and their ability to create ties between themselves and their school. This type of engagement is considered to be especially impactful as it is "presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work" (p. 60). Cognitive engagement is demonstrated in student learning strategies, problem solving, and coping skills. It is also seen as an aspect of student motivation, self-regulation, and a willingness to work hard to understand complex concepts. Behavioral engagement is indicated in the student's actual activities. Behavioral engagement is argued to have three central components, positive conduct, involvement in class activities, and involvement in extracurricular activities. The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010) asserts that acknowledging and understanding the existence and interrelation of these aspects of engagement can potentially lead to more focused intervention initiatives.

The HSSSE is a national study of high school students conducted by Indiana University. Through both selected response and open-ended questions, this study attempts to look at students' perspectives on engagement in their schools (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). This study found that student engagement could affect retention, performance, and overall student motivation in school. The HSSSE results also indicated that many students who eventually drop out of school note feelings of depression, alienation and an

overarching lack of engagement in the school environment. Engagement, which is defined as a sophisticated psychological concept, generally relates to the student's investment and involvement in the school setting. More specifically, engagement is a multifaceted notion that reflects student actions and perceptions as they relate to their surroundings. Academic failure, behavioral issues, dropouts, and outside-of-school problems have often been cited as direct results of student disengagement.

For black American males, the results of disengagement are profound. Black males account for nearly 40 percent of the male U.S. prison population while, as a whole, blacks make up only 12 percent of the population at large (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). This type of disparity is not confined to the criminal justice system; black students also face similar problems in the American education system.

Black students make up 17 percent of the U.S. public school population but constitute almost 40 percent of students placed in various categories of special education. Of those black special education students, 80 percent will be male (Kunjufu, 2002). Additionally, black students drop out of school at higher rates than their white peers. For example, two of the largest percentages of high school dropouts in Philadelphia are black and Latino males. In a study of Philadelphia's "dropout crisis", Curran-Neild & Balfanz (2006) noted that the Latino male graduation rate in the city was approximately 40% while black males were not far behind at barely 50%. The majority of these students of color were attending the city's most economically challenged schools. Philadelphia's 24 poorest schools (many of which are predominantly populated by students of color) accounted for 71% of the city's dropouts (Curran-Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Of those who

dropped out, 85% had been identified as "at risk" in 8th grade. These students are not only impacting their own lives; they have also affected the city via the money they will not earn and spend as well as the homes they will not purchase. Philadelphia's mayor recently cited a study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, which noted that 50% of Philadelphia's class of 2008 dropouts amounted to over \$18 million in lost tax revenues for the city. This implies that it is not only ethically important to do whatever is necessary to improve the fortunes of urban students of color, it is also essential to the social fabric of American cities.

According to Tyler, Boykin, Miller & Hurley (2006), the undergirding structure of the American education paradigm is based on the Eurocentric ideas of competition and individualism. Competition is defined as a student's aspiration to be the best and outperform their peers. Individualism, in this case, refers to a student's desire for singular or "solo accomplishments" (p. 367). These concepts leave few options for alternative approaches to educating groups that don't share these priorities. They also leave little space for true instructional differentiation. The American education system is ill prepared to engage "other" students in learning activities that mirror their cultural value systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Allen & Boykin, 1992). The "vervistic" Afro-cultural traditions suggested by Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie (2009) place black students in a group that prefers communal, self-affirming, and energetic learning experiences. How, then, are they expected to succeed in the potentially counterintuitive world of school? How can the traditional American school connect with these students?

Overcoming Disengagement

One way that schools might gain and hold the attention of these students is via the arts. There are several authors who have explored the potential impact of an increased focus on the arts in schools (Deasy, 2002, Deasy & Stevenson, 2005, Smilan, 2009). These authors have all made a case for the therapeutic and academic benefits of arts centered learning. Smilan noted that students who are dealing with trauma and disasters could use the arts to heal. The arts, in this case, become an outlet for communication and catharsis. Deasy & Stevenson (2005) noted that, in urban areas, the arts have been shown to increase communication between students and their peers and teachers. In their work, Deasy & Stevenson established that the environmental changes and sense of community brought on by strong arts programs have had a lasting effect on student performance, self-esteem, and overall engagement with the curriculum. The underlying argument has been that the arts can make academic subjects more relevant and more accessible for a larger portion of the student population. Central to this argument is that the arts have impacted student engagement, retention and overall success. In urban centers, specifically those populated predominantly by black students, the arts have the potential to be more impactful. The reality, however, is that arts programs are actually being removed from many of these schools (Nelson T. J., 2005; Metlife, 2012).

As noted earlier, in cities like Philadelphia, the poorest neighborhood schools house a large number of the cities' black and Latino students (Curran-Nield & Balfanz, 2006). These schools have also been the hardest hit by budget cuts with the arts among the first programs sacrificed. The loss of the arts has often added to the problems already

facing the schools. For example, in 2004 Florida's art budget went from \$28 million to \$5.9 million. Colorado's art budget fell to \$200,000 in the same year. In all, over \$80 million was lost to the arts in Americas' schools in 2004 with more cuts imminent (Nelson, T.J., 2005). In 2006, of all the schools in Philadelphia's public system, nearly half were absent a full time music and/or art teacher (Socolar, 2006). The effects of these cuts were demonstrated in a study by the College Entrance Examination Board (2014). That study showed that students in music appreciation and performance courses scored higher on standardized tests. Compared to the mean SAT scores of students who had no involvement with the arts in school, students in studio art classes scored 45 points higher in critical reading and 30 points higher in math while students in music performance scored 55 points higher in critical reading and 42 points higher in math (College Entrance Examination Board, 2014). Another study asserted that troubled students (those who are often suspended, disruptive, etc.) comprise 12.4% of all students. Conversely only 8.08% of students who had music classes were termed as disruptive (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). This research has demonstrated that the arts play a role in improving student academic performance and behavior. The question becomes: can the presence of a strong arts program act as a catalyst for students who might otherwise struggle to feel engaged in the school environment?

This Study

This study has attempted to examine how black male students were experiencing school in general and their art classes specifically. Further, data was gathered concerning the impact of familial and pedagogical factors on the students' perceptions of school and

art class. The goal was to determine whether students felt more engaged in the art class and, if so, why. Gathering data qualitatively ensured that the results of the study valued students' lived experiences. Qualitative data also ensured that students were not limited in terms of how they communicated their thoughts and feelings.

A secondary focus of the study concerned student perceptions of their own emotional engagement. While the study examined some aspects of student cognitive and behavioral engagement, the focus, emotional engagement, has been shown to be the a factor in fostering positive school outcomes. By centering on how students felt and understood their situations, the study was able to avoid having too much emphasis on the perspectives of others. Emotional engagement, importantly, centered on how the individual felt they fit into a given environment and was best explored through the students' own voices. The interviewer provided assurances to the students that their responses would be the experiential authority. Only their perspectives could be the indicators of their emotional engagement.

Research Questions

The issue of student engagement has been operationalized as a quantitative metric by which researchers measure the range of student responses to instruction, teachers, peers, and course materials (English, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). This proposed study sought to explore the issue of engagement through the experiences and perceptions of urban black male middle school students in an art classroom. In addition to general findings on engagement, the HSSSE also showed that art and drama were among the school activities that students found most engaging. It was also noted that white students

were much more likely to report feeling engaged in school than students of color. This study will further explore whether the arts provide an environment in which urban black male students feel engaged in school. This study was framed by the following questions:

1. What are the art classroom experiences of urban black male middle school students?
2. How do urban black male middle school students describe/portray/communicate their prior experiences with the arts?
3. To which aspects of the art classroom environment, if any, do urban black male middle school students attribute any feelings of engagement?

Definition of Terms

Academic: Relating to a class or content area in which students are studying topics that are associated with standardized state testing (i.e. English, Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science) or other subjects that are considered to be of high importance such as Geography or History.

Traditional Classroom: A learning environment where students generally sit in front facing rows of seats, focus on teacher instruction, and only move or speak when given implicit permission. This classroom structure may also center on individualized achievement and competition (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2009).

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed research study was to examine the art related experiences and resulting perspectives of urban black male students. This study was intended to ascertain if and how experiences in an art classroom affected the overall sense of engagement of the study's participants. The sample of this study is representative of a population of American school children who have chronically underachieved in a traditional school setting. This underachievement has been demonstrated in lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and increased disciplinary referrals. Although many different educational reforms have been passed with a mission of helping struggling students, these reforms have not greatly impacted the urban black male student population. To the contrary, budget cuts have had a disproportionately negative impact on the quality of education that urban black students receive. This study has allowed black male students the opportunity to speak for themselves about their experiences in art class. The students were also able to examine and reflect upon their personal history in school and in arts classes. Additionally students expressed their views on if, how, and why the art class helped them feel more engaged within the school environment. This qualitative interview approach ensures that any prescriptions based on this study's findings would be firmly grounded in the lived experiences of the students as well as aligned to a relevant theoretical base.

This study attempted to ascertain how arts classes impacted engagement among five urban black male students via interviews and informal observations. Individually and as a group, the data gathered in each case allowed student experiences and behaviors

to tell their own unique story. These in-depth narratives were thoroughly analyzed to look for emergent themes, similarities and differences. This qualitative approach ensured that student perspectives were examined in multiple ways. Using existing literature related to aesthetics, culture, engagement, and arguments for the arts in school, the study was intended to show how the arts have affected the participants. Ultimately, this research has provided a platform for the participants upon which to discuss their views of their educational environment and how it has affected them and helped to frame their future aspirations.

Significance

Often black male students look to a future tinged with anger, defeat, fear, ludicrous media images, and very few strong role models. The underlying assumption for this study is that feeling more engaged in their school environment can lead to improved educational outcomes. This study examined aspects of the art class to determine their effect on student engagement and perspectives on learning. The existing research on engagement suggested that students wanted classroom pedagogy and environment that made them feel more connected to school. Researchers also acknowledged a need for teachers to address content and concepts in ways that considered student learning preferences as well as an understanding of the context in which they lived. This study continued that tradition by exploring the pedagogy of the art class as well as specific student experiences in art and school. The authentic experiential data ensures that this study adds to the body of research in a targeted fashion. Embedded in the data are elements of the broader theoretical and conceptual conventions around

aesthetics, culture, the art classroom, and engagement on a specific student demographic—the urban black male. This targeted student population has outcomes that tend to lag behind their peers. Therefore, it is important to examine strategic interventions and pedagogical strategies that may help urban black males to succeed by becoming more engaged in the school environment and culture.

This research is important because any team is only as strong as its “weakest” players. The team is the American student population that will lead this country in the future. Tragically, those perceived weaknesses may be based on the fact that other members of the team are playing by different rules, with different advantages, and with modes of communication that mirror those of the coaches. The “weaker” players (urban black male students) are internalizing their frustration and pain and feeling disconnected from the team’s successes. Changing the rules and creating a sense of cohesiveness for these students must be explored. Allowing urban black male students’ voices to paint a picture of their experiences might be the key to helping them feel more connected and integral to the team. Seeing the issues from their perspective can ensure that any resulting models or interventions will be centered upon student needs and thereby more impactful.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Any discussion of the arts as an integral part of engagement in everyday learning should begin with a thorough consideration of how they exist in the educational context as well as the world at large. Further, one must also make a strong argument as to how the arts can be accessed in the most beneficial and natural way. In this literature review, the focus will be on aesthetics, culture, engagement, and literature that make specific arguments regarding the arts. These topics must all be investigated prior to exploring student experiences in art classrooms. This literature review will focus on the role that student culture and aesthetics play in how students view the arts as well as how they perceive their school. Another body of research has noted the importance of engagement for urban black students. (Allen & Boykin, 1992; English, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Finally, researchers have been making the case for more arts and arts related pedagogies to help provide avenues of engagement in schools. Although the current study focused on student experiences, perceptions, and backgrounds, the research base has made it important to consider the components, rationales, and merits of the instruction that takes place in art classes as related to student engagement.

Aesthetics

According to Tolstoy (in Knox, 1930), art is both “esthetic”—an infectious transmission of experiences and their associated emotions—as well as “socio-religious”—focused on the morality of those experiences and emotions. Tolstoy further offered this “esthetic” definition of art:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling- this is the activity of art (p. 65).

Art itself, according to Tolstoy, acts as an objectification of experience. This experience is, by nature, highly subjective and connected to the life-worlds of the creators as well as the beholder. Aesthetics, thereby, become an important aspect of cultural reproduction, communication, and the transmission of knowledge. This framework considers aesthetics to be the communication of emotive experiences associated with the arts. This establishes a rationale for examining the feelings and perspectives of students as they pertain to art and the art classroom.

Kant (in Nelson E. S., 2011) defined the world as a natural set of forces that are in constant flux and interaction. This world of aesthetics is then delineated, defined, and limited by humanistic thought. Kant asserted that a person should be openly responsive to free, natural, sublime beauty. This argument sets the stage for aesthetics as an external force to which each individual reacts. Within each person, however, lay a set of embedded preferences of aesthetic prejudices. Kant's argument for aesthetics was also called a "disinterested valuation of a universal bent" (Cordileone, 2011). The implication is that Kant saw aesthetics as reflexive to external stimuli. Those reactions would be moderated by the preferences of the viewer. Thus he argued, unlike Tolstoy, that aesthetic assessment and exploration required some cognitive distance between object and individual (Cordileone, 2011). As such, many students only have an almost

subconscious recognition of their aesthetic prejudices and preferences. They are also often unaware of the role that their culture plays in their aesthetic preferences as well as their everyday learning.

Schusterman (1997) examined how aesthetics and arts were affected by societal and cultural shifts. He looked at the concepts as a binary, with aesthetic being the state of experiential engagement with arts and “anaesthetic” being a more dispassionate interaction with art that is indicative of the more recent cultural shift towards an information society. The anaesthetic experience is modulated by broader theorization and interpretation of art that devalues intrinsic responses. Schusterman explained that classical art shifted away from its religious roots and provided newer notions of natural beauty that were grounded in the lived-world. This made art into a subjective experience that could be explored and understood as opposed to a sacred concept that was beyond reproach. Aesthetics, thereby, became transformative experiences that must be “undergone or suffered” (p. 30). The viewer is not a merely a passive recipient of visceral responses, nor are they dispassionate analysts. Schusterman, in discussing the work of Theodor Adorno, noted that viewers must submit themselves to the aesthetic experience in order to open new directions for inquiry and understanding.

Joseph Gougen (2000) discussed the idea of aesthetics as a degree of subjective beauty. That beauty had, traditionally, been judged in only the most rational, absolute terms. Kant, Gougen argued, epitomized the Enlightenment view of the arts and aesthetics. The Age of Enlightenment, with its emphasis on logic and understanding, posited aesthetics as an exercise in imitating and recreating the beauty of the natural

world. This conception removes any responsibility to examine the cultural or individualized relativity of art. Gougen also argued that it was dangerous to go to the other extreme and examine art from a solely subjective perspective. Doing so might emphasize primitive and subconscious reactions and forego more complex explorations of the work. Gougen instead noted that aesthetics are, and should be, unconscious cognitive processes.

Moreover, it is clear that nearly all of whatever brain activity it is that corresponds to aesthetic experience is unconscious, and it is even doubtful that the ideal viewer of a great artwork should be conscious, because one (often claimed) effect of great art is to merge subject and object in an ecstatic epiphany that transcends individual consciousness. (Gougen, 2000, p. 13-14)

Gougen recognized that no views of aesthetics were without flaws. He did, however, theorize that art and aesthetics were highly contextual. This meant that valuation of these concepts would vary based on confluence of factors like culture, artistic knowledge and preferences of the viewer, and the role/intentions of the artist. This type of theorization posits aesthetics as a waypoint between the intrinsic natures of the artist and the viewers as well as the cultures in which they are embedded.

Aesthetics, however, are not limited to conceptions of beauty and individual experiences. Bourdieu (1986), in his discussions of different forms of “capital”, places aesthetics as an aspect of human social interaction and community building. Whether dispositions, “cultural goods”, or credentials, cultural capital allows an individual to display and reify their connection to particular social groups or communities. In this

light, aesthetics becomes the value and authority ascribed to the different types of cultural capital. Beauty, truth, and pleasurable experiences become normative in Bourdieu's broad worldview. Other literature has focused on other individual aspects of aesthetics that veer away from general discussions of beauty.

In further work, Schusterman (1999) discussed the concept of "somaesthetics". This concept was similar to the work of Bourdieu in that it did not focus solely on visual and auditory perceptions of beauty. Schusterman did, however, keep the focus on individual experiences and perceptions. His discussion of somaesthetics was a philosophical exploration of the human body as both an embodiment and receptor of the broader aesthetic experience. He posited experiences like the pleasurable sensation of deep breaths and the tingling sensation one gets from stretching as true aesthetic experiences. To Schusterman, perceptions of the very functions of the body as well as its underlying potential for performance were at the core of aesthetic philosophy. He also discussed the baser of the cognitive functions as aesthetic drives. Imagination and insight, he noted, were naturally occurring aspects of the "art of living". In this way, somaesthetics were almost the counterpart to higher cognitive functions like reason, logic, and strategy. In somaesthetics, Schusterman placed the natural act and experience of living as the center of aesthetics. In doing so, he claimed that humans seek to establish natural balances and a consistent improvement in experiences. Schusterman's work thereby becomes a mirror of Piaget. Muller, Carpendale, & Smith (2009) define Piaget's concept of *equilibration* as "the tendency of the subject to develop increasing control over experience" (p. 132-133). Life becomes a quest for physiological, psychological,

and cognitive balance. As a subject develops a near-control of a particular concept, task, or experience, their mind instinctively begins to seek out the mastery or control of another. In these ways, aesthetics avoid the limitations of only looking at external beauty. What becomes more important are humanity of lived experiences and the many ways in which they can be sensed and understood. This understanding, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The social contexts in which life occurs as well as the perceiver's sense of self (their personal identity or view of themselves through the eyes of others) within that context are also of great import.

Social and cultural aesthetics, as discussed by Taylor (2010) and Burns-Coleman, Hartney, and Alderton (2013), examined the role of environment, culture, and society in the study of aesthetics. Taylor (2010) offered a culture centered theorization of black aesthetics. He sought to do so with a dispassionate examination of how black aesthetics had been defined and perceived in the last 200 years. Aesthetics was described as “expressive objects and practices” (p. 2). Taylor offered a more nuanced definition for “black”.

Black is not a colour but a condition. It is the condition of being positioned in certain specific ways – of being racialized – by social and cultural forces.

Racialization in this sense is not a function of racial essences, biological or otherwise, but of contingent dynamics that have linked human appearance and ancestry to distinctive social, semiotic and psychocultural locations. (p.3)

He noted that aesthetics were seen as a lens through which black life was often studied and understood. This required that black aesthetics be dogmatic and contain specific

rules by which the arts could be judged in terms of validity and quality. Aspects of black aesthetics like physical beauty were subsequently shaped and “by racialized social practices of colonial domination” (p.2). Originally, black aesthetics were centered on heterogeneous groups of blacks (Taylor uses the trans-Atlantic slave trade as an example) attempting to make meaning of their new life-world. As a reaction to this type of seismic shift, groups began to create new communities via shared experiences, practices, and artistic expression. When studied from the outside, these practices were often labeled as primitive or frightening and eventually led to pushes to “civilize” black aesthetics. In order to gain validation and prove a capacity for cultural enlightenment and refinement, black aesthetics began to be performed and judged according to European standards. Musicians and artists were lauded for performing or creating work that mirrored or showed the influences of European conventions. They were fighting against conceptualizations of blacks as savage or inferior. They were also, once again, attempting to broaden their understanding of their own lived experiences.

These ideas led to periods of black aesthetics that attempted to further prove that blacks could live up to European standards of propriety and respectability as well as an eventual counterpush to reestablish a positive black self consciousness and art that reflected authentic aspects of black cultures (Taylor, 2010). Herein lies the heart of how theories of aesthetics are linked to particular culture. As the very expressions of existential aspects of black life—like emotion, community, oppression, and survival— aesthetics act as the gilded mirror of culture...reflecting lived experiences in a way that

can captivate and transmit meaning across barriers. This makes it important to examine the impact of acculturation that is currently occurring.

Burns-Coleman, Hartley, and Alderton (2013) discussed “social aesthetics” as the harmony within social structures and spaces as well as the value of how individuals perform within those structures. The innerworkings of any social system are affected by the accepted function of and overall atmosphere or feeling provided by a space as well as the appropriateness of human social performance to that space. It is for this reason that artists, the authors argued, began to plan aesthetic experiences that would intervene or countermand the space in which they occurred. Artwork like Christo’s Gates in New York or the work of Yoko Ono place both the person and the art into the realm of performative experience. The art exists only partially as external stimulus (a physical structure or collection of arranged objects). What makes these things socially aesthetic is the juxtaposition of the experiences in spaces where they do not seem to belong. These experiences are heightened by the fact that the experiencer or the artist will have to interact with the art. In this way, not only is the art intervening in the traditional use of the space, the individuals’ behavior or performances are doing the same. Social aesthetics becomes an exploration of place and space. Those explorations seek to better understand the structures themselves as well as how their functions can be augmented or subverted. These concepts of performance are especially prescient when discussing the behavior of adolescent students in certain environments. They might lay the groundwork for a contextual understanding of how students perceive and behave in different educational spaces. Social aesthetics can be a lens through which to glimpse how

students develop their sense of self in educational spaces. A similarly important component of aesthetics to consider would be the broader concept of truth. Not truth in the absolute form, but truth in the interpretive and subjective form.

Becker (1980) offered one example of literature that addressed the value of subjective aesthetic experiences. Becker theorized that interpretation is at the heart of aesthetic experiences. A photograph, for example, could be interpreted according to which questions it answered. The credibility of those answers could be interpreted as their likelihood of being “truth”. Each answer would raise more questions due to the interpretive nature of the experience. The presentation or examination of more evidence could prove this viewer wrong. Becker used a series of photos as an example. This series was of the residents of one specific region at a specific time in history. The interpretation, and thereby truth, could seem that all of the people in that region were relatively culturally homogenous. This interpretation might miss that the photographer intentionally chose similar subjects or manipulated the settings. Even small changes in images or perceptions could elicit different interpretations. Becker offered that humans are involved in an ongoing process through which they seek aesthetic and personal truth as a validation of their own interpretations of reality. Aesthetic experiences become the conduit through which humans seek to find their truth. As they gain more knowledge or evidence, their personally perceived truth is reconfigured. It is the subjective nature of aesthetics that makes its study so important. Phenomenological research is based on gaining a better understanding of individuals’ experiences. Aesthetics is the actual visceral sensation and meaning-making process that is embedded in those experiences.

Any discussion of aesthetics in the art classroom must avoid the pitfalls of a myopic perspective of the subject. For the researcher, teachers, students, and students' families, aesthetics affect all parts of daily life. From specific behaviors to a person's actual sense of living, aesthetic experiences are ongoing and ubiquitous. Embedded in those experiences is also an inescapable truth; our sense of self and reality are shaped by how we perceive (and are perceived by) the world in which we live. In that way, our collected aesthetics become the very essence of truth.

School Arts and the Urban Adolescent Black Male

Maslow's *Theory of Motivation* (1943) provides a solid basis for the internal and external turmoil that exists at the intersection of adolescence and blackness. Maslow took cues from behaviorists and psychoanalysts before him who argued that human motivation was based on external forces or the internal subconscious, respectively. Maslow noted that these two schools of thought were inherently flawed in that, in spite of some seemingly valid concepts, neither accounted for the existence of free will or humans' ability to make decisions. Maslow's theory took aspects of each school and considered how they interrelated as well as how they affected and reflected free will. Maslow developed his "hierarchy of needs" as a conceptual roadmap to understand human needs and motivations. Basic needs—physiological and safety—had to be met before a person could truly focus on the higher level needs. The higher-level "growth" needs—belonging, esteem, understanding, and aesthetics—had to be met before a person could attain the final goal of self-actualization. If one or more of the preceding or lower needs were not met, the higher needs would seem less important to the individual.

Herein lies the crux of the issues faced by the adolescent black male student. He is, at this age, in a state of perpetual internal-physiological and external-social flux. His body is changing and acquiring new needs and drives. His mind is trying to make sense of these changes along with potential new social responsibilities and pressures (Uhlin, 1962). His entire hierarchy has become a moving target. When this turmoil is coupled with the external social perceptions of black males as well as the cultural contexts in which they live, we begin to see just how important this stage will be in determining their future educational outcomes. External factors like teacher perceptions and the pedagogical structure of the classroom also play a role in shaping student experiences. The “hypermasculine” traits that are often projected onto and by adolescent black males are especially impactful (Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013). During adolescence, black males are faced with the realization that the world may be adversarial and restrictive in terms of how they are expected to behave. Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes call hypermasculinity a type of coping method that allows adolescent black males to project a protective façade. Hypermasculinity becomes a survival instinct for many black male adolescents. They use it to navigate their potentially unsafe communities as well as to protect themselves from the appraisals of adults and teachers in the school setting. These students begin to read the cues and expectations of the teachers and other adults in order to decide how to react and behave.

Ideally, if it is intended to aid students in fulfilling their ultimate goal of self-actualization, school should be a place where students can find safety, acceptance, esteem, knowledge, and aesthetic engagement. Satisfying—or contributing to the

satisfaction of—those needs could be especially impactful for adolescent black male students. The arts, therefore become a form of “mental living” for adolescents where they begin to express or repress desires, thoughts, and humor. Middle and high school arts classes are spaces where students are not necessarily treated like an adult or a child. Adolescents are in the process of developing their self-worth via a balance of how they view themselves as well as how they think they are seen by others (Harter, 2012). The art classroom environment allows students to (generally) safely experiment with their aesthetics and developing senses of self-worth. The independence that often exists in these classrooms is a perfect match for the tumultuous, revolutionary newfound freedoms of adolescence.

Linda Nathan of the Boston Arts Academy (2013) related the story of an 8th grade black male student who was at this stage of internalizing expectations and creating an emotional barrier in school. This student was known for fighting and this was not necessarily a negative thing in his community. He felt that fighting earned him respect outside of school and carried that knowledge into his school life. When Nathan first met this student, he was the very embodiment of a distant, angry black teen. He wore a scowl on his face and sat in a closed, defensive posture. This student was constantly in and out of school due to suspensions. She surmised that this student might benefit from learning to express himself in ways that felt good to him, could be socially acceptable, and, most importantly, made him feel a sense of connection with school. The student, through arts classes, began to see that there were other ways to establish credibility inside and outside of school. Nathan theorized that he could build an artistic identity that connected in in-

school and out-of-school reputations via artistic expression. She further argued, “making creative work...gives students bragging rights and credibility, both critical to healthy adolescent development” (p. 47-48). This particular student began to see that his esteem could be based on talent and hard work. The accolades he got from his accomplishments began to melt away the bad habits and sense frustration he felt in school. When he got to high school, the student struggled again. He did not receive the same compliments and respect in his new school. He eventually reverted to his previous behavior patterns and got suspended. He was also struggling with the increased academic and artistic rigor at the school. Nathan noted that a music teacher stepped in and created an opportunity for the student to have a position of responsibility and prestige if he could improve his behavior. This intervention gave the student an increased sense of agency. Eventually, in spite of academic setbacks, the student began to understand how it felt to be successful and saw that there was something he wanted to achieve. He also wanted to reestablish the talent-based credibility he had at his previous school. The student persevered through family problems (his mother thought studying music was not going to help him in his future). He also showed improved dedication to his academics. He eventually graduated and Nathan saw it all as a result of his chance to express himself artistically. His art did not necessarily make him a better student. But understanding the intrinsic and social values of the arts prompted him to do whatever was academically necessary in order to continue to grow and express himself artistically.

San-Martin & Calabrese (2011) and Grant & Dieker (2010) indicated that any examinations of the experiences of black male students should be centered on what those

students have to say. San-Martin & Calabrese examined the learning preferences of at-risk students. Teachers commonly saw these students from a deficit perspective. The researchers found that focusing on student strengths and valuing their views on instruction could create a better learning environment. Among the student suggestions were relevant experiences, a fun cooperative learning environment, and a sense of family or community. Similarly, Grant & Dieker conducted a study on using online mentoring to engage and listen to black boys. These students, the authors argued, were often in schools where most of the teaching staff were white women. The researchers theorized that this disparity might have played a role in why so many black males were suspended or referred to special education classes. The mentoring model placed an adult black male researcher as a moderator who, through brief videos and live videoconferences, facilitated peer-mentoring and feedback sessions. Students were given prompts for both reflective blog posts as well as to guide live discussions. The goal was to provide the boys with a familiar, at least in terms of race, face with which they could discuss their feelings about academic and behavioral topics that had been preselected by the researcher. The study found that listening to the perspectives of black male students revealed that students saw a need for a more diverse teaching staff, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and an increase in multicultural teacher education classes. The students' views revealed that they felt helpless, frustrated, and unsupported. The above suggestions are indicative of student voices calling for understanding and an educational experience that will be relevant to their unique reality. Freire (2000) offered the idea that a dialogical relationship is required to build with the

oppressed. Thinking of the black male student as an oppressed group, researchers have a responsibility to engage in an intellectual sharing of ideas that is honest and flows in both directions. What is most important is to allow the student voice to be the final authority on their experiences and values. Grant & Dieker's study did so by connecting black males with an empathetic online mentoring model. They were able to connect with a mentor who looked like them, in contrast to their normal, daily school experience. What truly made the student voice the final authority was the fact that their perspectives were not rationalized away or overanalyzed. Students also began to take control of the mentoring sessions, leading the facilitating researcher to speak less about the issues he wanted to discuss and just listen to the students. This, the authors argued, was ideal. They noted that as their agency increases, the students' voices should begin to drown out that of the researcher (Grant & Dieker, 2010).

Arguments for the Arts in School

Tolstoy's definition of art as both the perpetual transmission of emotional experiences as well as the moral valuation of those same experiences (Knox, 1930) provides a basis for this discussion of the value of art in school. Art is often spoken of as having specific cultural and aesthetic value (Crowther, 2010; Robinson, 2009, 2011; Taylor, 2010). According to Crowther, the arts, or knowledge of what is commonly accepted as the arts in its various forms, are often seen as a type of cultural capital to be wielded and used as proof of one's belonging to a certain superior layer of society. This was evident in the earlier discussion of Taylor's (2010) work on black aesthetics. In that

work, art was placed, in certain timeframes, as a means through which oppressed or marginalized people could prove their capacity for civilization.

Crowther asserted that these cultural valuations of the arts are flawed and exclusionary. The arts, a core aspect of how ancient civilizations communicated, celebrated, mourned, and marked their history, have been relegated to a role subordinate to class and cultural semantics. These cultural semantics have created a version of art that is rooted in normativity, hegemony, and classism. The functional and cultural contexts of art had been replaced by uniform interpretations. This led Crowther to offer a new definition. He likened “the making of art to the aesthetic manifestation of cognitive factors which are the basis of our knowledge of both self and world” (p. 29). This definition of art creation is inclusive and fluid. It acknowledges the aesthetic aspects of the arts as well as their contextual relativity.

Dewey (1980) and Robinson (2009), similarly, provided humanistic definitions of the arts. Dewey’s definition was built upon the “overall human aesthetic”. It was also built upon the core of the human self and where and how it finds beauty, truth, and enjoyment. This definition is inclusive as well as reflective of the infinite variations of media and desires that can be called art. Robinson (2009) also argued that the arts are aesthetic triggers in which a human finds joy. That joy may reside in the creation or observation of the arts. This joy, this state of being aesthetically engaged, creates a lasting emotional bridge between the subject and the individual. This, Robinson argued, is the key to waking up students who have been anesthetized by school.

School is described as a place in which students, who are hyper-stimulated in their home lives by technology and the kinetic nature of their own development, are constrained by an outmoded enlightenment concept of education. Students are often engaged by a constant stream of communication; visual and auditory stimulation, tactile interactions, as well as many other responsibilities and activities when they are not in school. The traditional school environment, however, tends to ask that students be still, refrain from speaking, and complete work at a predetermined pace in groups based mostly on age (Robinson, 2009, 2011; Freire, 2000; Gardner, 2011). The incongruity between the students' home lives and their schooling contributes to an inability to focus. Latino and black students, for whom there might be a stark contrast between behavioral norms at home and what is expected at school, are most likely to suffer lowered academic performance (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003, 2009).

Combatting this disparity between home and school is the art classroom. The art class utilizes methods and curricula that are flexible and reflexive to students' skills, needs, learning styles, and aesthetic preferences. These practices, when combined with the often more vibrant environment of the typical art classroom, allow students to explore the various media, techniques, and subject matter in their own unique ways...bridging the chasm between their often frenetic home existence and school (Boykin, 1982; Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Moore, 1995; Palmer & Maramba, 2011).

According to Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan (2007), it is problematic to simply see the arts as a tool to be used for increased student engagement and/or improved academic achievement. Too often, they argue, the arts, like many other subjects, are

rationalized via an *export paradigm*. This idea focuses on what skills a student can acquire through the arts for use at a later date and/or in another subject (i.e. tessellations will eventually help a student do better in math). Instead, Perkins argued in the foreword for *Studio Thinking* (2007), that the arts work in more of an *import paradigm*. He meant that what is learned in the art setting is put to immediate and more meaningful use in order to engage students in critical thought. Importantly, the skills learned in the art classroom are still available for future benefit but the immediacy and depth of their initial application gives the student a chance to feel more connected and provide an opportunity for a reflective dialogue on what they've learned (in Hetland, Winner, et al., 2007).

There are also indications that the pedagogical choices and skill acquisition that occur in the art classroom can be beneficial to a wide array of students. These spaces are replete with opportunities to reinforce the type of skills, rigor, and intellectual growth that are the basis for many educational standards. According to Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007), the ideal art classroom environment, as well as the instructional practices within its confines are built around the ways that humans best learn. What makes these art classrooms distinct from many other subject areas is in the way they embrace the overall aesthetic experience and allow students to connect with the subject matter. Hetland, Winner, et al. argued that ideally art classes are taught in ways that value persistence. This would help the students to analyze and move beyond mistakes in order to complete projects. Students are also encouraged to express themselves beyond the mechanics of a particular method or concept. In this way, the art class does an effective job of connecting classwork to students' outside lives in a way that may not be present in other

classes. Students in art class are also encouraged to evaluate and reflect on their work and innovate new solutions and directions for exploration. This posits the art class as a place where students develop skills that can impact their lives in and out of school. Specific pedagogical and environmental choices also mean a great deal in art classes. Teachers in arts classrooms tend to move around the classroom more. They also tend to interact more with students as the students are working on a given task. Students are generally given more independence regarding both subject matter and the speed at which they work. Art classrooms also tend to offer a more multisensory experience. Art classrooms are often bright and visually busy spaces that are covered with student art as well as art from various genres and eras. Often the students are allowed to move, the lighting is adjustable, there are opportunities for tactile stimulation, and there may be music playing. The teacher in an arts centered classroom will routinely demonstrate a task in minute details yet allow student version to vary. All of these factors combine to create a learning environment that keeps a great many students engaged and invested in the class.

Theorists have, for a great many years, contended that the arts were a key component of a well-rounded education. John Ruskin, for example, saw the arts as a means to develop the moral and ethical development in students (in Atwood, 2008). He argued that an education that included the arts would prepare students to be productive and upstanding adults. His theories, however, stopped well short of espousing the potential benefits of arts related instruction on other endeavors. More recently, the arts (and other learning styles) have been discussed as not only important aspects of a

students' moral and/or ethical development, but also as an inherent cognitive drive. Gardner (1983) offered some of the first glimpses of the idea that some students would actually learn better from a multimodal approach to education. In *The Unschooled Mind* (2011), Gardner noted that linguistic and mathematical learning generally occurs with ease in early childhood. Most children are able to learn language and to decipher symbols (letters) and phonetics without much more than observations and conversations. In school, however, teaching students the rules for the grammar they may have already put into practice becomes more difficult. Current education methods are more focused on the idea of meeting a uniform set of criteria in order to move on to the next rung of the ladder. A better goal would be to utilize multisensory and engaging methods that allow a student to question and examine a subject in order to gain a deep critical understanding. This is similar to what Robinson (2011), Winner, Hetland, et al. (2007), Sheridan (2011), and Tomlinson (2000, 2003) say about art classrooms. While art is noted by each author to be a worthwhile endeavor on its own (art for art's sake), the methods and environment of the art classroom address many disparate subjects in ways that foster critical thought, exploration, and deep understanding.

The above literature laid the groundwork for researchers to begin arguing for the implementation of art related pedagogies. Deasy & Stevenson (2005) wrote about schools in specifically impoverished areas that had been able to create a haven for students where they could not only learn through the arts, but also begin to bridge educational gaps between these schools and their more affluent peers Deasy & Stevenson (2005) paint a portrait of ten schools that have determined that the arts can create a safe

place within a curriculum in poor urban areas. They are quick to note that poverty in schools is only mentioned as it pertains to income. They in no way condone a deficit poverty model that ascribes negative sociocultural characteristics to those with fewer financial resources. The authors focused on the planning, creation, and implementation of systematic and sustainable arts-integrated programs (classrooms in which the arts are taught as an aspect of most, if not all, other subjects). They also created ways to measure the overall effectiveness of such a program. The central idea was that the arts could benefit all children, especially those from impoverished backgrounds who have, historically, had a difficult time feeling engaged within the existing school structure. This book provides both quantitative (demographics and statistics) data as well as qualitative (interviews) data to rationalize the cultural and educational value of the arts. They ultimately argue that the arts create a richer, more engaging educational environment. More specifically, Deasy & Stevenson found that the arts hold the potential for very broad psychological changes. These changes may include how students perceive themselves and their own learning as well as how teachers look at teaching. The arts, being uniquely representative of culture, provide an opportunity for the intergroup sharing of ideas, concepts, and aesthetics that has been elusive in many urban schools. This transmission of ideas is a key to creating the lasting relationships between students and teachers that greatly contribute to student success (Deasy & Stevenson, 2005; Freire, 2000; Ladson Billings, 1995, 2014; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). An increased emphasis on the arts has made the schools Deasy & Stevenson studied into places where “students have moved from passivity to activity, from being receivers to being creators”

(p. vii). An education rooted in the arts allows students and staff to understand subjects in their most simple, generic forms as well as in their more existential and/ ethereal forms. Techniques as simple as creating solid and dashed lines can lead to understanding Cartesian coordinates and how they represent the three-dimensional space we all occupy. Learning to trace, cut, and paste images can lead to complex mathematically grounded tessellations. The titular Third Space discussed as a place where students and teachers approximate the “wide awakeness” that Greene espoused (1978). It is a space where student and teacher are conscious of themselves as well as their counterparts as humans with their own inherent value.

The arts also provide a unique insight into student understandings of the world in which they reside. For many urban black males, that world is stark and violent. They are confronted by environments and imagery that show them as the victims and perpetrators of many heinous acts. When that world is contrasted with the expectations of the traditional education system, the disparities can be difficult to reconcile. Milbrandt (2000) suggested that the arts can actually help students and educators to understand the contexts for violence and trauma as well as how and why these things exist in a given society. This type of critical analysis, she argued, is necessary to ensure that students will not simply accept violence as an inevitable occurrence. Milbrandt offered the arts as a doorway to valuable discourse between educators and students. Milbrandt goes as far as to offer specific practices for how to address the historical context of violent imagery in a way that allows students to interpret and express their views on the work and the topic. In her example, Milbrandt suggests that educators utilize a historical occurrence and

artwork that can directly relate to a given situation or event in the students' lives. In this case, she used the Bayeux Tapestry, which recounted William the Conqueror invading England in 1066. She used this to begin a dialogue about the rash of shootings at schools across the country in the prior year. While this argument has an opportunity to show how the arts can draw students into conversations about their lives, it falls well short of clarifying the significance of the how artwork that was used. While the Bayeux Tapestries are historically relevant, they tell the story of a war on a large scale. Milbrandt does mention that the story contained issues of loyalty and betrayal. These topics, however, are not central to the artwork itself. This critique notwithstanding, the arts are still noted as a powerful communicative medium.

Diket and Mucha (2002) contended that dialogue could help to create a safer environment for students. Dialogue about violence and violent imagery, they argued, could help students to better understand the violence they encounter. Conversely, this dialogue can also help educators to better understand student artwork. As students and educators engage in discussion surrounding student work, the students can feel both acknowledged and relieved. The symbolism, stresses, and concerns that may not be as visible in their art can act as a catalyst for mutual enlightenment. Diket & Mucha note that students will be impacted by violence no matter what we avoid discussing. They will pour much of their feelings about violence into their work. The greater goal is to seek an understanding of the unstated themes, meanings, and value of the work. These authors offer an outline for discussing violence in student art. Through this model, they suggest, students will be able to draw a systematic line from their work, to how it portrays an

historical context, to how an adult viewer characterizes the work. This type of approach is meant to facilitate a sharing of meanings and interpretations in a way that allows students to maintain their agency. Diket & Mucha argue that the student story is a pivotal aspect of this process. Students have an idea of why they have created a work and, although it may seem esoteric, it is still valid even if it is not fully formed. This study does not suffer from the same lack of perspective as mentioned about Milbrandt. Diket & Mucha have girded their ideas with theoretical musings, a logical progression of dialogue, and reflections about interactions with students and their stories. Here, there is a clear idea of how educators can draw meaning out of student work. Diket & Mucha do not talk about how the arts reach and engage students. Instead, they look at the arts as a part of a student's lexicon. Students use the arts to express and create meaning for their experiences and thoughts. Diket & Mucha offer a basic groundwork for decoding, contextualizing, and sharing the core meanings of student art.

In *The Case for an Arts-Based Curriculum* (Colcord-Stuht & Yuguchi-Gates, 2007) the reader is introduced to value of the arts for students in "continuation schools". Continuation schools were developed during the Great Depression as places where students could attain full time employment to help support their family without abandoning the pursuit of their high school diploma. These schools are often populated by students who have fallen through the educational cracks. It is argued that these students have underperformed in traditional schooling and may also be beset by emotional and behavioral issues. In this type of school, the arts can be particularly impactful as a means to connect classroom learning to the lives and experiences of these

students. The researchers contend that continuation schools have had their issues in the past. Some schools suffered from non-credentialed and/or poor teachers, limited curricula, and an unwelcoming culture. Colcord-Stuht & Yuguchi-Gates also suggest that these disenfranchised students are in need of more innovative teaching and a hands-on arts approach that can reinvigorate their engagement and desire to learn. What makes researching these ideas more difficult is the personal and contextual nature of engagement.

Observing Cognitive and Emotional Engagement

The multidimensional nature of engagement is what makes it both telling and difficult to accurately measure (Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, & Mooney, 2011). As such, it is necessary to ensure that any instrument used to measure or catalogue engagement is both flexible and reliable. The instrument must be able to acknowledge the outwardly visible (and audible) indicators of engagement as well as the object or subject with which the student is to be engaged. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004), accurately understanding engagement has the potential to increase student test scores, alleviate feelings of alienation, and even curtail dropout rates. The key to accessing these benefits is a systematic approach to understanding and measuring engagement.

When looking at student engagement as empirically measurable, a clearer description of its dominant forms is in order. As noted above, engagement, for the sake of research, is broken down into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral categories (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster,

2013). Of the three, it is believed that behavioral engagement is the easiest to observe. While behavioral engagement is often “seen as a proxy for emotional and cognitive engagement” (p.41), Axelson & Flick (2011) argued that this idea was dubious. The problem with using behavioral engagement as a metric is that no two students are guaranteed to react in the exact same way to the same stimulus. A student who has learned that particular behaviors are seen as favorable may feign engagement while feeling internally detached and uninterested (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Conversely, a student may not show outward signs of engagement yet be completely engulfed in the cognitive and/or emotional aspects of a particular experience. For these reasons it seems wise to consider the thoughts and feelings of students. In order to gain an understanding of student emotional and cognitive engagement, students must be allowed to tell their stories.

Emotional engagement, the visceral or aesthetic connection to an experience, is best examined the way it happened, in the voice of the experiencer. That voice can be verbal, kinesthetic, or visual. It can come in the form of analogies, stories, metaphors, imagery, or movements; but it must come from the student. Emotional engagement can reveal the motivations for behaviors. It can also provide context for a student’s cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement examines how a student thinks about a given occurrence. How is the student reconciling what is happening? How do they understand their experience? What language, imagery, or other forms of transmission best fit their level of understanding and communication? Research that allows students to communicate as best they can, using the modes in which they feel most comfortable may

yield the best results for better understanding the internal operations of emotional and cognitive engagement.

Instruments used for measuring engagement may be student-reported or teacher-reported. These instruments can range from general and lengthy questionnaires, to more directed and simplified 4-item scales. Student-reported instruments offer students an opportunity to add their perspective to larger initiatives. Teacher-reported instruments, which work best when the teacher has had previous experience with the student, can be beneficial in that the reporter is able to place student behaviors and action into a larger classroom context. The teacher is also in the position to observe more students over a prolonged period of time. Third party observational measures allow a trained researcher to observe behavior on a student-level and a classroom-level (Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, & Mooney, 2011). In either case, observing student engagement is a complicated proposition.

Arguments for measuring engagement are often wrapped in the idea that empirical tools are the best option. According to Axelson & Flick (2011) the push for empirical ways to measure engagement was largely based on the educational fears that were stoked by *A Nation at Risk*. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) led to the eventual creation of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which was administered to students in higher education institutions in the hopes that it would be able to pinpoint the educational processes that were connected to student engagement. This attempt to create a clear typology for engagement was focused on observables. Observable measures would remove the skewed results that were found from wholly self-reported measures of

student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster, 2013). NSSE considers factors like time spent studying or levels of activity in endeavors that are seen as educationally effective.

Here, Axelson & Flick (2011) argued, is where issues begin to appear. By giving quantifiable and observable measurements of engagement priority over students' perceptions, the NSSE is overlooking the context in which the students' experiences reside. Even the definitions of observable engagement are problematic in that they presume the "sameness" of student behavior. They would have a researcher observing a lack of engagement in a student who did not meet the particular defined criteria of behavior. That student, however, could be an introvert, or may have had a bad day, or may be sick, or dealing with serious issues in their home. Instead, Axelson and Flick as well as Goldspink and Foster (2013) advocate for research that considers contextual and entangled nature of different types of engagement. Goldspink & Foster mention that many students report consistently feeling bored and unchallenged at school. They discussed results from the HSSSE (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010), which showed that of the over 350,000 students surveyed, 50% had skipped classes and 20% had considered dropping out of school. Goldspink & Foster noted that the highest number of negative responses on the HSSSE came from students with the least privilege. Engagement and academic success appear connected; but how is that connection best measured? This study is based on the idea that contextual and multidimensional measurements of cognitive and emotional engagement, which consider the perspective of the participant, are the best options (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

The preceding literature offers a glimpse into the role that the arts can play in engaging adolescent black male students. Aesthetic ideas like beauty, truth, and social space and performance drive the human experience. Humans are in a constant state of sensory engagement during which they have to make decisions and inferences as well as examining their own sense of self. These processes are especially difficult during adolescence. During this time children are becoming adults and learning to navigate new sets of responsibilities and expectations (Harter, 2012). The complicated nature of adolescence is exasperated by the unique intersection of social life inhabited by black male middle school students. They are also dealing with cultural barriers between themselves and teachers. Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie (2009) noted that many American blacks have been brought up to prefer “Afrocultural themes of communalism and verve” (p. 164) to individualism and competition. The latter of these themes, the authors argued, were more prevalent in traditional classrooms. This incongruence is a central part of why black students often feel disengaged in the traditional classroom. The implication is that a certain subject or set of classroom practices might hold the key to ameliorating the confluence of these factors and work to improve engagement among black male middle school students. This leads to the question of how to know if these students feel engaged in specific environments. Based on the literature, empirical measures of engagement may not get to the heart of this issue. A multidimensional student-centered research approach is necessary to truly examine student engagement in this case. This examination must, at its core, focus on the experiences and perceptions of the students as they attempt to navigate adolescence and

develop their enduring sense of how they fit into society. As one of the larger part of their lives, the study must begin this examination with a look at how they are making sense of their daily experiences in school. This study intends to add to scholarship on engagement and the value of arts education by establishing a specific, student based, look at how the ideal art classroom's methods and environment can positively impact the engagement of urban black middle school students. These classrooms have been established as places that allow students to explore aesthetics and their own development. This study will consider exactly which aspects of the art class are the most important to the student participants and why. This will be done in order to prescribe practices that may be most impactful for adolescent black males.

Theoretical Framework

Phenomenology provides unique access into how students created meaning of their experiences in art classes as well as how they were learning to learn. The philosophy of phenomenology lays out a broad argument for the value of examining the world through the eyes of its inhabitants. Phenomenology, however, is not monolithic. It is comprised of multiple sets of philosophical and methodological principles. The philosophical aspects of phenomenology are concerned with the overall search for a pre-conceptualized understanding of a particular lived experience as well as how those experiences lead to social action and the creation of concrete social structures. Where researchers and theorists have varied most is in how that data is best collected and analyzed (Finlay, 2009; Halling, 2010; Giorgi, 1989, 2008). Methodological approaches are especially important in phenomenological research due to the interpretive and

reflective nature of the research. Finlay (2009) argued that as phenomenology is a philosophy that seeks to revalue “embodied, experiential meanings” (p.6), it requires a set of methods that consider the phenomenon being studied as well as the relationship between the researcher and their participants. In the following section, I will discuss the philosophical and methodological distinctions between theorists. I will then argue for an inclusive approach that mixes aspects of different phenomenological approaches. I will maintain that, as suggested by Finlay (2009), dogmatic use of theory or methods threatens the value of phenomenological research.

Edmund Husserl’s overall philosophy of phenomenology accepted that it was important to look at social phenomena from the perspective of the individual (Smith, 2013). He proposed that this should be done only after the researcher has dispensed with their preconceptions and prejudgments. Methodologically, this could be achieved via conscientious reflection and journaling on the part of the researcher. Only then could one examine the internal structures of the participants’ lived experiences surrounding a particular phenomenon. These experiences, Husserl noted, should be examined with little consideration for their context. Husserl sought the “ideal meaning” of conscious thought and action in order to determine shareable and almost generalizable sets of meaning (Smith, 2013).

Martin Heidegger, conversely, theorized about a more interpretive approach to understanding thoughts and perceptions on individual actors (Smith, 2013). He felt that understanding and sharing the context surrounding an individual would bring forth a closer approximation of the actual essence of the experience and its related phenomenon.

People, he argued, lived a life that was inexorably embedded in their personal context. This fact meant that their decisions and perceptions would be heavily influenced by the context in which they abided (Smith, 2013).

According to Endress, Psathas, and Nasu (2005), one of Alfred Schutz's central contributions to the philosophy of phenomenology was the idea of the reevaluation of the subjective perspective of actors in a given *life-world*. Additionally, Schutz argued that using a strictly scientific methodology to understand the lived experience was insufficient. The object of study in sociological research is actually in the process of interpreting the world around them. Phenomenology must therefore focus on examining aspects of the lived world that may appear mundane to the subject, but are seen as having value by the researcher (Wilson, 2002).

Phenomenological methods provide a unique opportunity to examine this particular issue. According to Bruzina (2004), Edmund Husserl focused on a reductive methodology that would describe experiences in a generalizable and schema-building fashion. Heidegger advocated for an interpretive, inclusive methodology that would consider the context of participants' experiences (Smith, 2013). Schutz argued that a researcher should strive to engage the participant in a relationship where they are aware of linguistic, behavioral, and symbolic cues (Wilson, 2002). That relationship, Schutz noted, was a key to understanding some of the complexities of how individuals behaved, thought, and anticipated the behavior of others.

Halling (2008, 2010) added a new set of methodological arguments. Philosophically, Halling sought a multilevel understanding of phenomena. He was

interested in the particular lived experiences as well as the broader, more universal truths or understanding that might overlay them (Finlay, 2009; Halling, 2008). Halling suggested a multifaceted “dialogic” approach to phenomenological research. This methodology could be simultaneously idiographic and hermeneutic. The levels of analysis in this approach would move from the individual experience to common themes in the data to overarching philosophies of human behavior (Finlay, 2009; Halling, 2008). Halling also argued that “this conversation or dialogue takes place on two levels: among the researchers and between the researchers and the phenomenon” (p. 135). This ongoing dialogue would reinforce the focus on the descriptions of the phenomenon; thereby making it remain constantly “present” throughout the research (Halling, 2010). While this study did not include a dialogue between researchers, it did include ongoing reflection on the phenomenon itself.

This study used a methodology that was consistent with the work of Heidegger, Schutz, and Halling. This study examined how urban black male middle school students perceived their experiences in visual art classes. The goal of this study was to carefully and conscientiously interpret participants’ responses and behaviors in their art classroom setting. Through this approach, the perspectives of individuals were analyzed and further understood by both those in the study and others who were unaware of its existence. The data was also analyzed in order to draw connections with overarching themes about adolescence, pedagogy, engagement, and the arts. The benefit of telling this story is the potential for broader understanding of student experiences as well as the possibility of future targeted interventions and program creation.

Research has shown that students note the importance of engagement when discussing why they chose to leave school (English, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Students of color, particularly black male students, cite a sense of detachment as a central factor in why they leave school in higher numbers than others. That research, however, did not delve into how the students defined or experienced engagement. That research also did not explore other pedagogical factors (beyond teacher perceptions, curricula, etc.) that may have contributed to student feelings of engagement or disengagement. This study examined student experiences in a way that preferenced their viewpoints as well as how those viewpoints came to be. This study also considered how the particular pedagogy of a visual art class informed and/or influenced students' overall sense of engagement.

A phenomenological approach required that I suspend my judgment of the participants and focus on their view of their own experiences. An important aspect of offering students a "voice" was ensuring that those voices were as authentic and unfiltered as possible. I admitted and recognized participant positionality (and its potential impact on the study). Although interviews and observations were the central methods used in this framework, a careful analysis of both linguistic and aesthetic communication and choices was vital to creating the most complete representation of this phenomenon.

The hybrid of Heidegger, Schutz, and Halling's approaches to phenomenological research also intimated that it was possible, through a respectful understanding of symbols, structures, and linguistics cues of a given life-world, to create a representation

of a phenomenon that is not ethnocentric to the researcher's own life-world (Endress, Psathas, & Nasu, 2005). The experiences and perspectives of the participants, therefore, were observed, interpreted, and reported as they related to the students' life-world. I typified and categorized what was observed; but I did so with the understanding that my goal was to better understand this phenomenon, not to rationalize or generalize.

This study used a phenomenological lens to examine the how students created meaning of their experiences in art class. In order to do so, I considered their life-world. This is the world into which they have been socialized. This world has provided them with assumptions and beliefs about what is expected of them and what they should expect. This study examined how five students saw themselves within that world. This study also looked at how these students saw the world of school in conjunction with their individual outside worlds. I attempted to ascertain if they saw that their actions and meaningful acts were complicit in the creation of their world. I also attempted to examine how their perspectives interrelated with broader theorization on human behavior and development.

Philosophically, phenomenology seeks to understand an occurrence or situation from the perspective of those involved. That perspective is presented here in a manner that acknowledges the subjectivity of both the participants and the researcher. The methods associated with phenomenology also provided an opportunity to examine how multiple areas of given life-worlds coexisted and converged to create a unique set of cues, symbols, and outcomes for the participants. For this study, phenomenology was a lens through which I could better access the decisions and experiences of the participants.

Phenomenology also provided a methodological framework upon which I could look at different aspects of students' lives in order to ascertain how other factors (family, other classes, exposure to the arts, etc.) led them to their current situation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study explored the experiences of urban black male middle school students in an art classroom. I sought to ascertain how these students' experiences in the art classroom differed from current literature concerning the experiences of urban black male middle school students in traditional academic classrooms. This study focused on whether urban black male students acknowledge feeling an increased sense of engagement when in the art classroom as opposed to traditional classrooms.

According to Denzin & Lincoln (1998), qualitative research assumes that no event or situation exists in a social vacuum. Rather, all events are directly influenced by external factors and their own unique context. Therefore, qualitative methods have been shaped to extract how and why particular influences have affected the events being studied. This study used a phenomenological lens to analyze a series of interviews and observations conducted with urban black male middle school students enrolled in art classes. The interviews and observations focused on student perspectives and were compiled into a comprehensive case for each student participant. The cases were analyzed, individually as well as collectively, using an in-depth cross case analysis. The cross case analysis compared the students' experiences to expose emergent themes, similarities, and incongruences.

Phenomenological Methods

Research techniques associated with phenomenology were a best fit for this study. These techniques examine issues that cannot be tested empirically. Phenomenological techniques also require a descriptive analysis of participants' procedures of meaning-

making, introspection, reflection, and social constitution. As noted by Endress, Psathas, and Nasu (2005) as well as Peters (2009), Schutz found that using a particular set of methods was not the best way to examine social and cultural sciences. His central concern with the word “methodology” was that it implied a traditionally quantitative, objective logic and analysis, which were less successful in studying the lived experiences of research participants. The goal of any phenomenological research is to understand the knowledge and dispositions that are socially reified in participants. For this reason, phenomenological techniques must be centered on the perspectives of the participants. The participants’ first person views must be analyzed in as unfiltered a method as possible to better understand how they construct their individual consciousnesses (Peters, 2009).

Traditional quantitative research overlooks the more emotional and environmental aspects of the student experience. In this study of urban black male middle school students, the following questions must be answered. What is the reality of school that these students construct? What factors and intrinsic and extrinsic forces shape that reality? How do the students see themselves fitting into that reality? Answering these questions creates a solid framework for understanding their perspectives and building solutions. Solutions based on the students’ experiences will fit better into their realities. The solutions will also have the potential for a broader impact due to the fact that other students may receive more focused guidance. This guidance can lead to students no longer seeing school as a place of alienation, rejection, boredom, or disengagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Students may see that they can have input in their education and

will begin to see improvements in the levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement among black male students (Fredricks J. A., Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005).

The methodology that was used for this study was intended to build rich narratives based on student experiences. Interviews are often seen as the primary source for qualitative research due to the fact that the focus is on the participants' lived experiences (Englander, 2012; Kvale, 2008). Additionally, participant observations, while not necessarily assigned primacy in phenomenological research, maintain an important role. Halling (2010) likened participant observations to being a "witness to truth" (p. 136) or at least a witness to a phenomenon. The researcher's presence turns this occurrence into a public event. As a witness, the researcher is then overcome by a desire to share this event with others for posterity (Halling, 2010).

This chapter will briefly discuss the setting for the study, elaborate why the chosen methods of data collection and analysis were appropriate for this study, and consider the theoretical and analytical value of phenomenological interviews as a means of contextualizing participant observations. Finally, this chapter will also discuss sampling, data analysis, and potential limitations of the study.

The Setting

"Henry Ossawa Tanner" Middle School is located in the northeast section of urban Philadelphia. During the 2013-2014 school year over 900 students populated Tanner (SDP, 2015). This was an increase of over 300 students from the prior year. These numbers would become a factor in the data collection process. Tanner's mission

included providing a well-rounded education to students that included academics, physical education, and the arts. The year prior to this study, Tanner was one of a few non-specialized schools in the city with visual arts, music, dance, and theatre programs. Additionally, the student population was over 50% black and 100% of the students were termed “economically disadvantaged” (SDP, 2015). This meant I could choose participants from a large pool of candidates without an implicit need to verify their socioeconomic status. For all of these reasons, Tanner was an ideal site for this study. This site will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

Data Collection

The initial goal of this study was to focus on the sense of engagement that black male students felt in the art classroom. Phenomenological methods for data collection focus on individual stories and understandings. As such, this type of research can be effective with a smaller sample group. Boyd (2001) suggests that 2-10 participants could be a saturation point for phenomenological studies. Boyd explained that as the sample group increases, the space for richer individual narratives might become compromised. Phenomenological research is mainly concerned with the specific thoughts and reflections of the individual. The in-depth and iterative methods associated with this type of research would make working with a large group much more difficult and time consuming. The processes of collecting and analyzing this narrative type of data tend to overlap due to the iterative aspects of qualitative research. The hours associated with observations, interviews, interview and field-note transcription, and data analysis is extensive. It is also important to remember that the focus of phenomenological research

is the lived experience surrounding a specific phenomenon. The richness of this type of study exists in its analysis and the value that it adds to the views of the participant. A study of five students is intended to better understand what they have experienced and how their experiences relate to one another. Therefore, engaging in phenomenological research for large groups would potentially shift the focus of the research from the individual participant to the process of gathering and analyzing data. Additionally, analysis of a larger sample size would likely shift towards generalizations and potentially diminish the importance of the individual experiences of the students. The goal of this study is to examine the specific experiences of these students as well as commonalities and incongruences between their cases. For this reason, the sample size was limited to five students.

Informal observations were conducted over the course of two months with the 5 selected students. The students also participated in a series of semi-structured interviews about their perceptions of the arts, school, relationships with peers and teachers, and their overall feelings of engagement in the educational setting (Angrosino, 2007, O'Reilly, 2005). In-depth yet loosely structured interviews were important aspects of this research. The main research questions were distilled into simple interview prompts that would be easy for students to understand without a great deal of thought and would also allow students to reflect on the nuances of the broader ideas. These questions allowed students to discuss their past experiences, their current situations, communication with family and friends, as well as exploring why they felt and thought as they did. Like Freire (2000), Kvale (2008), like Freire (2000), saw the purpose of the interview to be a sharing of

thoughts that allows a researcher to begin to see a phenomenon through the eyes of the participant.

I also encountered issues around scheduling, communication, and consent with both students and teachers. The school's class schedule changed at least twice based on testing, school holidays, and in-service days. The art class schedule, even when regular, had other inconsistencies. There were several classes that had art 2-4 times per week. Other classes only went to art once per week. As a result, there were hundreds of students who were at varying places in their art lessons. The inconsistent schedule made it hard for the art teacher to know the personality of each class and establish rapport. It also made it hard for the art teacher to suggest which students and classes would be appropriate to observe for this study. Those obstacles notwithstanding, I was still able to select a compelling set of participants from varied backgrounds.

Interviews

Interviewing, as offered by Seidman (1998), was described as a powerful method by which a participant can tell his or her own story. By telling that story, the participant is engaging in meaning making...which is a key aspect of human life. Interviewing participants allows the researcher to access that very personal meaning making process. Qualitative interviewing is not an evaluative process. Rather, it is a process by which a researchers and readers can gain an understanding of the experiences of others. Interviews can also provide insight into the processes by which the participants make meaning of their experiences and environments (Seidman, 1998). Both Kvale (2008) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) noted that the acquisition of knowledge and understanding

is dialectic. Kvale noted that the central purpose for qualitative interviews was to be able to get to know the interviewee in order to better understand their life-world. He went on to argue that, although the interview must still be professional, qualitative interviews should engage the respondent in deliberate, specific, and open minded dialogue. Researchers must examine their positionality and enter the process with a “deliberate naïveté” (Kvale, 2009). This would allow them to be genuinely engrossed in the responses and experiences of the participants. Willis (2005) additionally noted that qualitative interviews must consider the cognitive capabilities and preferences of respondents.

Another purpose of interviews was to examine the role that the arts might have played in the students’ lives. During the interview process, students were also asked about their goals and/or dreams. Students were asked to place their dreams in the context of what they are learning in school and in the art class. This information was gathered and analyzed to show where curriculum might contribute to students’ cognitive engagement in school (Fredricks J. A., Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005).

Seidman’s (1998) work guided the interview process and structure (See Interview Protocols in Appendix A). That structure was a reflexive format that used mostly open-ended questions to permit the researcher (and participant) to build upon, elaborate on, and/or examine responses to supply rich data. “The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study.” (Seidman, 1998 p. 9). This structure relied on a three-interview series format (see table 1.1). Each participant was interviewed three times in order to build details of their context.

The interview structured required that the first interview be the longest of the three. This interview focused on the participant's life history. During this interview, students were asked questions about their personal and family history in reference to education and the arts. Students discussed which family members impacted their education. They were also asked questions about how art fit into their family life and prior experiences. The interviewer then posed questions related to students' perceptions on their prior experiences in school. These questions were intended to give some information about students' personal perceptions of their experiences and feelings.

The second interview was meant to have students examine their current situation in relation to school and their art class. That interview sought to provide an opportunity for participants to recount the details of their current situations and experiences. This interview questioned how the students felt they were doing in their current classes and how their view of school might have changed over the years. The interview then shifted to the arts. Students were asked how they felt about the art class they were in at that time. They were given a chance to discuss any differences they noticed between that art class and their other classes. Finally, students were asked how they felt when they were in the art class and which, if any, aspects of the class kept their attention best.

The third interview placed an emphasis on the meaning of the participant's experience. It was structured to be more introspective. It let the students consider how the factors and experiences discussed in the first two interviews impacted their perceptions of school and art class. Students were asked about how other people may have impacted their views of school and the arts. They were also asked to examine their

communication with friends and family about their experiences. Then the students were asked how they saw these experiences impacting their future, if at all. This final interview allowed the participants to examine how aspects of their life and their school experiences were connected to the topic being studied.

Interview durations varied in length depending on the willingness of the participants to share their experiences. Interview days were decided in consultation with the classroom teacher to ensure that the students would miss as little work or instruction time as possible. During each interview, students were given the opportunity to defer answering some questions (all questions were given to the student in written form at the end of each interview). This was done in an effort to give the participants a degree of agency within the research process. They were able to respond to any questions via the medium with which they felt most comfortable. For example, students were offered the option to share work in the form of paintings, poetry, rhymes, drawings, and sculpture.

Using the arts as a medium for interview responses required a specific protocol for analysis. Although none of the students chose to create artwork specifically for this study, one student did engage in a conversation about work that he had already created in the class. The reasons for the lack of work appeared to be related to students' lack of interest in creating work in addition to what they were already doing in art class. One student did choose to share some of his class work. This work was added to the study at a late date. Not only did he have a limited time to share his work, he also felt that what he had previously drawn was a good indicator of his skill and interest. An inquiry based protocol for analyzing this student's artwork was created using the work of Sanders-

Bustle (2003). Sanders-Bustle argues that the educators must recognize the dominance and omnipresence of visual culture in the lives of their students. Students are constantly inundated with images, both moving and still, suggesting how they dress, what they watch, how they behave, and to whom they should be attracted. Images are the visual representation of ideas that may or may not be realistic. In spite of their feasibility, images can have profound conscious and subconscious impacts and meanings for students. Images have the power to invigorate or to mollify. They also play the role of a subliminal tool for hegemony. In this study, images were viewed as windows and/or bullhorns to show or magnify student ideas, values, pain, desires, goals, or general aesthetic preferences. Images were used as a channel through which to see and understand student experiences. The protocol used in this study was centered on the artistic meanings indicated by the student artist.

The ability to defer some answers, as well as the freedom to choose the medium through which they responded, was intended to help to alleviate issues of miscommunication that can plague interviews. Deferred student responses were meant to be completed at the students' leisure. They were offered time to create artwork during their downtime in art class. According to Willis (2005), this could help the student to be less concerned with the social desirability of a given response. The extra time and freedom to work alone was offered as a way to increase the likelihood that the responses were an accurate representation of the students' feelings. Students could also use this time to comprehend the intent and meaning of the questions (Willis, 2005). Student interviews were conducted in the hallway just outside of the art classroom. Aside from

Patrick, each student was interviewed during or after his normally scheduled art classes. Since Patrick was added to the study later than the other participants, there was only time to interview him once. All of the same questions were asked, but he was not given extra time to think about any of his responses as was the case with students whose interviews were separated across three days.

Three teachers were also interviewed for this study. The art teacher, Mr. Clay, the music teacher Mr. Cookie, and one of the observed class' homeroom teachers, Mrs. Claudia were part of this study. Mr. Clay and Mr. Cookie were interviewed together in the art classroom. Mrs. Claudia was interviewed in her own classroom. Each interview occurred during a preparatory or lunch period. The interviews focused on how the teachers perceived students' engagement. The interviews were structured to determine if and how teachers saw a difference in how students behaved in arts and traditional classrooms. The questions also sought to explicate any structural or methodological differences the teachers might have noticed between art and academic content classes. It was pertinent to ensure that adult voices only served as a background or broad context for the more important student perspectives. Interviews with teachers allowed time to assess the impact of factors that student participants may have overlooked. These external factors included, but were not limited to, preexisting student academic and artistic acumen, and aesthetic, artistic and educational norms in the school.

Name	Observations	Interview 1	Duration	Interview 2	Duration	Interview 3	Duration
Cletus	2/21, 2/28; 3/7, 3/21; 4/11, 4/25	5/12	23 minutes	5/16	18 minutes	5/18	23 minutes
Randy	2/21, 2/28; 3/7, 3/21; 4/11, 4/25	5/9	12 minutes	5/12	13 minutes	5/16	9 minutes
Lee	2/21, 2/28; 3/7, 3/21; 4/11, 4/25	5/9	19 minutes	5/16	9 minutes	5/18	6 minutes
Patrick	na	6/2	8 minutes	6/2	12 minutes	6/2	8 minutes
Rodney	2/21; 3/7, 3/21; 4/11, 4/25	5/12	11 minutes	5/16	10 minutes	na	
Mr. Clay	2/21, 2/28; 3/7, 3/21; 4/11, 4/25	5/16	23 minutes	na		na	
Mr. Cookie	na	5/16	5 minutes	na		na	
Mrs. Claudia	na	5/16	28 minutes	na		na	
	na=not applicable						
	All dates are from 2014						

Table 1-Interview and Observation Schedule

Observations

In addition to interviews, each student participant was observed in his art class over the course of two months. The observations were used as tools for both sampling and to provide context for students' responses and perspectives. Although interviews were the main method of gathering data, observations allowed me the opportunity to get to know something about the potential participants in advance of speaking with them individually. This added to the creation of a rich and inductive data set. During each visit to Tanner, I observed art classes that included at least one of the chosen participants. A consistent and relatively long observation schedule was planned in order to help the students to adjust to the observer's presence (O'Reilly, 2005). As the goal was to build student comfort and trust so that interview responses were more authentic, observations preceded and ran concurrent to interviews. Observations focused on visible and audible indications of emotional engagement (Fredricks J. A., Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005). Observations mediated the gap between student perceptions and what was

observed. As the focus of this study was student perceptions and experiences, any observed incongruences were shared with the student participant for further discussion and reflection. Central pre-observation questions had to be answered on-site (Roskos, Burstein, and You, 2012). Primarily, it was important to establish what engagement looked like in this school setting. What were the visual and audial cues? It was also pertinent to examine how the teacher and/or environment of the classroom might affect student engagement?

In addition to understanding how to observe engagement, it was also important to consider the particularly difficult stage in life that the student participants for this study inhabited, it was necessary to use a methodology that would allow student perspectives to be buoyed, yet not subservient to, observational data. Middle school is a time when student lives and bodies are changing in profound ways. This time of stress and anxiety in students is accompanied by a newfound independence. This is also a time when a child has to develop a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as well as question all that they learned previously (Uhlin, 1962). Muller, Carpendale, & Smith (2009) defined Piaget's concept of *equilibration* as "the tendency of the subject to develop increasing control over experience" (p. 132-133). Adolescent life becomes a quest for physiological, psychological, and cognitive balance. As a subject develops a near-control of a particular concept, task, or experience, their mind instinctively begins to seek out the mastery or control of another. Adolescents are in the process of developing their self-worth via a balance of how they view themselves as well as how they think they are seen by others (Harter, 2012; Manning, 1988). Adolescent students begin to spend more hours

alone and or in their community (Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013). They also begin to make, and suffer the consequences of, their own life decisions. This tumultuous stage in physical and cognitive development can make it difficult for students to distinguish between what they know to be true, what they think is true, and what they want to be true (Uhlin, 1962). Although a purely dogmatic approach to phenomenology would place a clear emphasis on the perspectives of the participants, it is important to balance the views of adolescents with those of adults who can add broader context. It is for these reasons that this study examined the experiences of the student participants in addition to contextual data. The researcher's observations were also included in order to present a richer narrative while avoiding a devaluation of student perspectives. The observational data was used to display examples of occurrences that related to data from interviews or theorizations. In keeping with the aforementioned phenomenological traditions, the focus of the study remained on the students or salient points that arose from student interviews.

In the classroom I acted somewhere between a passive and moderate participant observer. My interactions with students were inconsistent due to the often-frenetic environment in the classroom. In order to note as much interaction as possible, fervent note taking filled most of my time in the class. Memoing became the tool through which I could analyze how I fit into the classroom environment. Engagement, as discussed previously, was difficult to ascertain based on the nature of the classroom environment. A focus on behavioral engagement might have led to conclusions that disputed student perspectives. Ideally, an observer would be able to note the intersections of student

mood, behavior, overall effort, and interest as indicators of engagement. This class, however, allowed students, who were often coming directly from the gym, to interact with one another and their work in a fashion that appeared chaotic. This made it difficult to note which students seemed to be most engaged in the class. That, in turn, meant that sampling data would have to rely on students whose behavior and approach to creating art varied...but who also consistently worked on their assignments and showed a high degree of focus on the assigned tasks.

Sample

This study used purposeful sampling to determine student participants. The original criteria for selection as a participant in this included being male, black, in 8th grade, and currently enrolled in an art class at Tanner Middle School. The intention was to choose a small sample of males who had academic or disciplinary issues in other classes but appeared to display typical indicators of behavioral engagement in the art classroom. These students would ideally appear completely focused on the work in art class (very little talking and consistently on-task during the class period). They also would not require disciplinary redirection from the art teacher. This was intended to select a group of students for whom the art classroom appeared more interesting or relevant in comparison to their academic classes. After several art classes were observed, it became clear that the selection criteria needed to be augmented.. During those observations, I looked for students who worked on their projects consistently and almost single-mindedly. What I found instead was a classroom where very few students fit my preconceived image of engagement. What I saw was classrooms filled with

students who worked fairly consistently yet interacted with classmates throughout the class. They moved around the room and spoke almost constantly. This would have been easy to mistake as being disengaged; but I noticed that most of the students' movements were to get supplies, speak to the teacher, or look at classmates' work. What I might have originally dismissed as a chaotic, directionless classroom environment was actually a fairly well organized artistic ecosystem. My expectations of quiet, focused participants seemed out of place in this environment. I recognized that my presuppositions about selecting a specific type of engaged student would not yield a compelling sample. The more interesting artistic experiences seemed to be embodied by the students whose behaviors existed on a spectrum between one boy who exhibited prototypical signs of focused engagement and another who, at times, seemed more interested in making classmates laugh and socializing. The unifying factor for all of the boys who were selected was that they worked on their projects consistently and without complaint or apparent disquiet or nervousness. It is for that reason that, along with having disparate behaviors, perseverance and persistence became important aspects of selection. Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007) suggested, student perseverance and persistence are among the central goals of almost any educational environment. They are also indicative of some of the more difficult to observe aspects of engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Using these traits as selection criteria moved this study closer to a true examination of art classroom engagement from the students' perspective. As I began to note students who seemed to display their engagement in compelling ways, I shared my thoughts with the art teacher. He then, without sharing specific personal details, offered his thoughts on

external factors for some students that might negatively impact the study. He specifically suggested a student for exclusion due to his behavioral diagnoses and the potential for violent outbursts. He also told me that another potential candidate was struggling with overall attendance so that student would be difficult to observe and interview. After considering Mr. Clay's suggestions, I made the final decision on participants based on my own observations with consideration for any extenuating circumstances that he mentioned. I selected five eighth grade students; each of who displayed distinct behaviors in the art classroom. I will elaborate on each student's art classroom behaviors in Chapter 4. After identifying study participants, I spent a few minutes describing my study to each. I explained that I was interested in discussing their experiences in school and in their art class. I briefly explained that I wanted to see if there were any aspects of the art classroom that could potentially make school more interesting and improve outcomes for young black males. I then sent home consent forms for students as well as their parents to act as participants in the study. All of the consent forms were written in simple and concise terms as to be easily understood by teachers, parents, and students alike.

Once I obtained parental consent, I met with the students to offer more details on how, where, and when their interviews would occur. I had already observed the five student participants for several classes prior to their first interviews. The reason for this was to allow time for me to establish some degree of trust and comfort with the students. During initial observations, I posed preliminary questions to many students (including the chosen participants) about their perspectives on school in general. The data that resulted

from these discussion, observations, and interviews was then analyzed for themes and broader understanding of student experiences.

Data Analysis

As data was collected, it necessitated a return to previous information in order to piece together emergent themes. The data collected consisted of my observational data, student artwork, and transcripts of semi-structured interviews. The observational data set consisted of detailed daily field notes. The transcripts of all interviews (along with any artwork) were analyzed for bias on the part of the researcher. Any such occurrences were added to the existing data. It is important to report situations in which the researcher's biases impact the study. I noted any student explanations of their artwork, responses, etc. Data analysis looked for emergent themes for the overall study (O'Reilly, 2005). I also looked for particular thematic threads for individual students. Open coding was used for initial data analysis. Memos, field notes, and interview data were categorized and scoured for thematic similarities and contradictions. Coding focused on data that directly related to this study's research questions. Coding categories were centered on student perspectives about art, school, their family's involvement in their education, their family's background in the arts, and their experiences and thoughts about their current art class. Priority was given to interview data and direct student participant quotes from field notes.

Early codes for field notes included engagement, verbal communication related to the art class or projects, and interactions between students and the art teacher. As data analysis continued, emergent themes necessitated the addition of several new codes.

Student responses during interviews necessitated the addition of codes related to identity development and self-expression through art and other activities. Code families were established in order to keep coding focused on research questions. Initial code families included Communication, Engagement, and Experience. After student interviews, it became necessary to add a code family based on Individual Expression. Codes that fit into the aforementioned families included: family positive/negative/neutral involvement with arts, student past experience with art, student past experience in school, student self-expression, and student perceived factors of engagement (including art class environment, art teacher methods, family influence, and self motivation). Atlas.ti was used to manage data and establish clear commonalities, patterns, and inconsistencies among the responses and observational data for each student case.

Once data on each participant was collected and the resulting codes were analyzed, I conducted a cross case analysis. The purpose of such an analysis was to examine emergent themes, similarities, and differences between multiple cases. Cross case analysis also offers an opportunity to move beyond the limitations of a given singular case. I looked at the impact (or lack thereof) of diverse external factors on students and/or phenomena. Cross case analysis, according to Khan & VanWynsberghe (2007), enables an ongoing process of knowledge building and helps the researcher to note why some cases are similar while others are not. An in depth cross case analysis can further expose the nuances of the meaning making processes of the participants.

Coding focused on different types of engagement (as mentioned previously), student environmental and familial factors, as well as how the students saw their current

education fitting into their futures. While vital and thematic data was specified, no information was discarded. In an inductive research approach, any new information could create a new theme or redirect an existing theme for future examination. As noted by O'Reilly (2005), data was not "divorced from its context" (p. 186). This is to say that, while data was coded according to themes and occurrences, it still remained connected to its identifying characteristics within its original format.

Data Trustworthiness

Ultimately, the validity of this type of qualitative research is determined by whether or not it measures or represents the expressed purpose of the study. Does the study answer its questions and measure what it was intended to measure? The face validity of this study was maintained by ensuring that I was committed to creating a sincere representation of the data collected (O'Reilly, 2005). I confronted and noted issues of bias, and other ethical concerns throughout the data collection and analysis processes. In this case, acknowledging personal and professional biases would greatly contribute to the overall validity of the results by showing that I am aware of my own positionality.

Limitations

Small sample sizes are often an inherent aspect of qualitative research. Although appropriate for this methodology, the small sample size (5 students in a school of over 900) may not have been truly representative of the target group. The sample was also confined to students from the northeastern section of the city. This area and the school are in a state of flux; on which I will elaborate in the next chapter. This tenuous position

has created a unique environment in the school. This implies that the sample will not be representative of students from other parts of the city or other schools. The sample was also comprised of students (aside from one) whose art class schedule matched my availability. My schedule only allowed for visitation two days per week. These factors meant the students were chosen from a small number of classes.

Ethical Considerations

As noted in O'Reilly (2005), ethical issues are more likely to arise when the study is more covert (participants are not fully aware of the purpose of the study or the researcher acts as a complete participant observer). In the case of this study, student awareness and engagement in the research process were of the utmost importance. This study was known to all involved including students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. As participants were informed, I also had to expose my experience and bias as a part of building trust on-site. According to Kvale, the researcher must acknowledge their role in an effort to assess the benefits and/or possible harms of the study on the participant group. In this case, I was guided by a virtue philosophy of ethics (Kvale, 2008). I considered the impact and responsibilities inherent to extended contact with the participants. I was mindful of my perceptions and behaviors as they related to the wellbeing of the participant group. I was also open to understanding the social norms and ethical considerations of the participant groups as they pertained to interactions and negotiations during the study. Informed consent was discussed with parents, teachers and students in order to begin the trust-building process and display transparency. I

maintained confidentiality of all students and teachers except when in direct conflict with mandated-reporter and/or other applicable laws.

Positionality

Through my years of schooling two things have stayed consistent. I have always been a black male and many people have expected little of me. There were times when I felt that teachers and peers assumed I would be less successful, less knowledgeable, less persistent, and less talented. I determined that I would best serve students who were similar to me by exploring pedagogical options that could help them feel more engaged and enthusiastic in their school environment. As an artist, a former art teacher, and a former urban Philadelphia black male middle school student, my perspective was a valid point of reference (although not the focus of the study). It was necessary to assess how this would impact observations, interviews, and data analysis. During observations, I decided to only engage students in conversation when they were in need of assistance, at a lull in their work, or when they sought me out. I only occasionally advised students as a teacher might. I was concerned that my own teaching style and knowledge of this study would impact student behavior or engagement. I was also conscious of the fact that my diction and grammar might change when interviewing students. I understood that this could help or hinder dialogue with the students. If they felt I was trying to seem “cool” or too familiar, they might not be comfortable expressing their perspectives. Conversely, there was also the possibility that speaking in a cadence and dialect that was familiar to them might make students feel that I was sincerely working to address a shared concern. This could possibly be a key to establishing the “we” relationship with participants. It

was also pertinent to continue assessing my own positions and biases during data analysis. My own memory of and perspectives on the importance of art in the lives of students could have skewed the analysis of the data. In order to overcome this, I ensured that the data collection and analysis processes were transparent. The interview questions followed the suggested format, aside from attempts to get students to elaborate on their responses. When interviews did stray from the format, it was at the behest of the student. The data analysis process focused on sharing students' own words as well as my brief yet faithful interpretation. I attempted to ensure that the data spoke for itself in the form of direct quotes from students. My interpretations were meant to clarify, not define, student perspectives. This was intended to, although sharing my interpretation, allow the students to speak for themselves and show a clear logical connection to the study's findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter explores details about the site and participants. It will develop the relationship between the arts, the school, teachers, and the participants. This chapter will also explore art and school related themes from the data as well as how these findings relate to the existing literature on aesthetics, culture, and student engagement. As a phenomenological exercise, this study sought to examine students' lived experiences as well as the contexts in which those experiences took place. It was also pertinent to examine the resulting data in terms of both the research questions as well as relevant theoretical themes. I will discuss the participants in terms of their backgrounds as well as their overall views of education and the arts. This discussion will briefly introduce the teacher participants before moving on to a more thorough look at the student participants. While the teachers, much like the research site, will be presented as contextual guides, individual student profiles will initiate the process of building an understanding of their experiences. The analysis that follows will begin by using student interview data to answer each research question in turn. The analysis will then explore how student experiences and perspectives reflect the themes and theories from chapter 2. The chapter will begin with an in-depth exploration of the research site and its surrounding community. This exploration will also include a look at the environment of the art classroom.

Research Site

“ArtHouse” was an organization whose mission was to ensure that all students in Philadelphia receive high quality arts education. The organization focused on fostering

increased student engagement via the arts. ArtHouse acted as a liaison between community organizations and the School district of Philadelphia. The schools involved anchored their respective “Art Homes”. In each “home zone”, the schools, community partners, and residents committed to increasing the role of art in education. Students were provided with more opportunities to engage in art related activities and events. They were also shown how the arts could lead them in any number of professional directions. Within the schools, teachers who worked with ArtHouse provided educational enrichment via arts integrated instruction as well as external educational experiences. ArtHouse also worked to provide educators with targeted professional development to ensure that their pedagogies could evolve to meet the changing research and student needs. ArtHouse specifically chose middle schools because of existing data that relates to when students begin to feel less engaged in the classroom and consider dropping out. Unfortunately, as is the case with arts education across the city (Nelson T. J., 2005), ArtHouse eventually ran out of funding and ceased operations in late 2013. Before funding was depleted, one of the central coordinators at ArtHouse (Andrew) was essential in connecting this study with its eventual site. I connected with Andrew as I made calls to local arts education groups in an effort to find a home for this study. He explained the relationship that ArtHouse had developed with local urban schools. He suggested one specific school as a place with a high population of black males and a tradition of engaged art education. Andrew facilitated a meeting between the school’s principal and me. The principal’s regard for Andrew was apparent in how he greeted the gentleman and shared a brief discussion about how things were going on their respective

ends of the educational connection. During the meeting, the principal and Andrew talked about the culture around the arts in the school. They each lamented that several of their larger community based cooperative programs as well as the general art education program were also losing funding under the public schools' new budget. They each, however, felt that the overall school community and the remaining arts teachers remained dedicated to ensuring that all students experience consistent and robust arts education in school.

The site for this study was Henry O. Tanner Middle School. This school was one of Philadelphia's public schools that partnered with the ArtHouse organization to ensure that all students in the neighborhood received "high quality arts education." Part of the reason that ArtHouse reached out to Tanner was because of the school's history of arts-rich instruction. Tanner was one of the few non-specialized schools in Philadelphia that boasted multiple visual arts teachers, dance classes, a theater department, as well as general music and choral classes. The school hosted community art events. There were also large performances and recitals for the performing arts programs. Teachers in the school noted that Tanner used to be a feeder school for the different art based high schools around the city. Tanner has display and trophy cases filled with student art on display as one enters the front doors as well as in the second floor hallway. There are also several large student created mosaics and murals throughout the school.



Image 1-Student mural on front stairwell.



Image 2-Large student created mosaic that spans several meter across the second floor hallway. Also one of the small glass display cases filled with 3-D student art.

Tanner is located in the city's "Tennant" neighborhood. In the mid-20th century, middle class white residents predominantly populated Tennant. As "white flight" hits its peak in the 1970's and 1980's, Tennant and other middle class urban enclaves in Philadelphia saw white residents leave the city for the suburbs (Smalarz, 2014). Non-White residents from other areas of the city began to migrate into Tennant due to the lowered price of property and easy access to high-speed transportation. In 1990, prior to one of the largest cultural and racial migration periods in the city, whites made up over 83% of Tennant's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). At that time, black and Latino residents only accounted for a combined 14% of Tennant's residents. By 2010, although the overall population of the area had increased by over 11%, the number of whites had decreased to a remarkable 21% of residents (a 72% decrease). Also as of 2010, Tennant's black population had grown to 39% of the residents (a 404% increase). The Latino population also swelled, accounting for 33% of the population in 2010 (a 606% increase) (Philadelphia-Research-Initiative, 2011). Despite the racial makeup of the neighborhood at-large, Tanner's enrollment records show that 55% of its students are black, 31% are Latino, and only 10% are white (SDP, 2015). More than 42% of Tennant's K-12 students are enrolled in private schools. This may help to explain why, of the students who attend Tanner Middle School, 100% are considered "economically disadvantaged" (SDP, 2015).

Embodying the very definition of working-class, many of Tennant's employed residents work in the service (25% of males and 30% of females) or sales (14% of males and 36% of females) industries. The median annual income for Tennant residents is

\$32,555 (5% lower than Philadelphia's). This neighborhood also has a high number of adults who have less than a high school diploma (42%) while less than 8% have a 4 year college degree (City-Data, 2013). When these numbers are put together, the image begins to emerge of a "blue collar" neighborhood in a state of cultural, economic, and educational flux.

The principal and the art teacher at Tanner also explained that the population of students in the school had changed rapidly. The principal noted that part of the reason that ArtHouse chose to work with Tanner was that Tanner was establishing a unique school community that centered on a well-rounded education that included the arts. Due to cuts in the state's education budget, several schools in the city were closed in 2013. As a result, students from the closed schools were divided among nearby neighborhood schools. According to the principal, Tanner saw an influx of more than 200 students in the 2013-2014 year from Powell, a closed school that was 2.5 miles away. This, he continued, greatly affected the sense of community in the building. He implied that the new students did not share the same connection to the school as those who had been there for a year or more. These students were also trying to acclimate to a completely new environment after the abrupt and often messy process through which their prior school had closed. The impact of this process became evident in some of the student participants' interviews.

The aforementioned factors made Henry O. Tanner Middle School an ideal location for my research on how urban black male middle school students experience an arts centered learning environment. It was also a good location to ascertain how and if

the prior increased emphasis on the arts affected both observable measures and student perceptions of engagement. Henry O. Tanner was opened in 1925 and boasted an imposing yet elegant façade. Scaffolding currently surrounds the exterior of the large square building; but the imposing architecture is still clearly visible. Just above the main entrance hang three large (10-15ft long and 4-5ft wide) banners that give visitors an early glimpse of what sets this school apart.



Image 3-Three banners over the entrance to Tanner Middle School

The first banner (from the right) has the word “Athletics” written on top in blue letters. Underneath, there is an image of a girl playing softball surrounded by the names of that and other sports. This is intended to symbolize the school’s commitment to students’ fitness and overall physical wellbeing. On my first visit, there was an afterschool football practice happening in the lot next to the school. School leadership made it clear that Tanner recognizes the need for structured yet fun physical activities in order to build teamwork and leadership in addition to health benefits. The second (center) banner shows the word “Academics” written in purple letter just above an image of a boy reading a book. The words written around this image all relate to typical

academic topics (math, story, spelling, etc.). This banner symbolizes the school's commitment to academic excellence. Partnering with programs like AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), Tanner attempts to find creative ways to meet the academic needs of their students in order to prepare them for college. Through AVID, tutors come into Tanner and work with students to provide both instructional assistance and motivation that is intended to empower students to answer their own questions. The third banner (leftmost) shows the word "Arts" written in purple above an image of a child holding what appears to be a shekere (a West African musical instrument made from a large dried gourd that is wrapped in a net that is woven with beads or shells). Between the child and the word are a circular designs filled with musical symbols and the names of artistic mediums and subjects. This banner is intended to symbolize the school's commitment to the cultural, aesthetic, and expressive importance of the arts in school. As one of ArtHouse's original hub schools, Tanner has not wavered in its support for student enrichment through the arts. As soon as one enters the large marble entryway, Tanner's embrace of the arts is evident. Instead of trophy cases and academic plaques lining the walls inside, there are glass display cases filled with different types of student artwork.

According to the school's website, Tanner's mission is to create lifelong learners with high self-esteem and strong critical thinking skills. Those goals, as noted above, are not limited to the typical academic subjects, athletics, and the arts. Tanner is also in a partnership with the GrassRoots Community Foundation. This organization is focused on the health and self-esteem of urban girls and women. Through GrassRoots' CHICKS

program (Creating Healthy Informed Confident Knowledgeable Selves), Tanner has been able to create an after school program with workshops and lessons based on young ladies' physical development, healthy eating, financial literacy, and career guidance. At a time when districts like Philadelphia are losing funding and cutting extracurricular activities as well as classes that are considered non-essential, Tanner has maintained a focus on social skills, the arts, physical education, and individual development. In spite of its high rate of suspensions (over 200 in 2011-2012) and assaults (39 in 2011-2012), Tanner is a school that takes pride in its enrichment programs (SDP, 2015). While the school's connection to ArtHouse and the arts played the largest role in its selection, Tanner's partnerships with programs like AVID, CHICKS, and others serve as evidence of a lasting commitment to provide a well-rounded educational experience for all students. Tanner's approach to student enrichment in spite of its reputation makes it an excellent site for this study. The distinct background of the students also made Tanner an ideal site. With the local neighborhood's demographics shifting and other nearby schools being closed because of budget cuts, Tanner had a population of students from different areas of the city. This meant the study would have a broader set of student experiences and perspectives to potentially explore.

The Art Classroom



Images 4, 5, and 6-Clotheslines with student images crisscrossing the art classroom.

Tanner's art room is located to the right of the school's entryway. Hidden behind two large, dark-stained, heavy wood doors, the art room is approximately 25 by 50 feet. The first thing I noticed was how busy the room seemed. Not just busy in the sense of student activity; the room felt busy in its décor and layout.

Around the class hung posters of comic book characters, "classic" pieces of art (The Mona Lisa, Starry Night, etc.) as well as masks and objects that appeared to be in African and Caribbean styles. Student work was also hung around the classroom; they were on walls and cabinets as well as dangling silently from strings that crisscrossed the room...Directly in front of the entrance, there was a long, slender table that was covered in art supplies like paper, rulers, pencils, etc. On either side of the supply table, there were two larger grey tables where the students sat (2 left and 2 right). Past the student tables, just in front of the windows, there were 3 sets of large open metal shelves. The shelves held pieces

of 3-dimensional student artwork. Behind Mr. Clay's desk, there is a large whiteboard that is partially covered by student drawings.

(Field Notes, Tanner Middle School, 2/21/2014)

The décor of the room, however, was not its only energetic aspect. I noticed that the students' presence also enlivened the classroom's environment.

The students positively crackle with energy. Their speech, movements, and very presence made the room seem as if it had a living beating heart. Mr. Clay welcomed me with a handshake and showed me to my desk. I had met him twice previously to discuss this study but this was the first time I would see the classroom in full effect. The class prior to the one I planned to observe was just wrapping up. Students moved around in a haphazard cleanup dance. Many were new to the class and/or school (as I would find out later) but each had clearly done this dance before. Students flitted around the room putting their projects (on large white drawing paper) into piles or into one of the large metal cabinets by my desk. They joked, trash-talked, and recited song lyrics while Mr. Clay bellowed (and I use that word with esteem) directions and occasional redirections to the students.

(Field Notes, 2/21/2014)

The art room's energy was created by its layout, its decorations, the rules that the teacher enforced, the teacher's methods, and the children who filled it. The room was visually busy; filled with a mix of classic art, comic book and cartoon images, and students' artwork. The children were loud and in constant motion, but, as one of the students would mention in his interview, there was little misbehavior. There were only

one or two small verbal skirmishes in the art classroom during all of my visits. Even those never escalated past verbal jabs. Mr. Clay only had to call for a school resource officer once when I was there. On that occasion, he only did so because a student from another class came into the art room to bother a peer in Mr. Clay's class. It was clear that Mr. Clay was comfortable with students being loud and even using profanity as long as it was not directed in anger or in an otherwise pejorative manner. When that did happen, Mr. Clay would quickly redirect transgressors. The resultant classroom was chaotic. Within that chaos, however, students worked. More specifically, the five boys chosen for this study worked. Each had his own style of work, and each found his own motivations in this art room.

The Participants

Recruiting theoretically interesting study participants was not difficult; there were several students who fit my sampling criteria. In fact, the classes I visited were replete with interesting students. From the young man who screamed obscenities at random times to the boy who seemingly lived to antagonize his female classmates. There were also black girls, as well as boys and girls of other ethnicities, who livened up the art classroom.

The selected participants appeared eager to discuss their perspectives and experiences with me. I intended to gain student trust by establishing a consistent schedule and being involved in their daily activities. Instead, I found myself buried in note-taking and preliminary analysis. This was not a big problem for the interviews. As

stated above, based on their demeanor (eye contact, joviality, length of answers, etc.) participants were forthcoming and seemed comfortable.

During interviews and other small group interactions, I was more able to engage students in conversation. During these conversations, I noticed that I began to slip into a version of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I began to elide certain letters and use much more casual slang. This was an unconscious act that likely had roots in a normal desire to connect and fit in. Similar occurrences happen when I visit family in the same city. I also found myself engaging in extended conversations with interviewees about video games, anime, sports, and other things. It was in these moments that I, as a researcher, felt most comfortable and sincere. Of interest, students of other races also spoke in a similar way. Some did so in vocabulary only; using slang terms and pronunciation associated with AAVE while clearly speaking in the nasal patois of Northeast Philadelphia. Other students sounded just as comfortable with the dialect as many of the black students. One of the white female students went so far as to affect a complete performance of behaviors that might be stereotypically associated with black women. This included amplified vocal volume, the elision of words, AAVE vocabulary, neck movements when speaking, and hyperactive gesticulation. Her performance, and those of other students, demonstrated a desire for acceptance in a school that was predominantly black. This observation placed my own behavior into the context of seeking acceptance. More importantly, at no point did black students mock or disapprove of my “code-switching” or the way their classmates spoke and behaved. They were

accepting or did not notice. In either case, I know that speaking that way made me feel comfortable and may have done the same for the student participants.

The Teachers

Three teachers were interviewed in order to develop the in-school context of student perceptions. The school's art teacher (Mr. Clay), music teacher (Mr. Cookie) and the homeroom/reading teacher of one of the observed classes (Mrs. Claudia) were interviewed in the school on May 16th, 2014. Mr. Clay was also observed February 21st and 28th, March 7th and 21st, and April 11th and 25th as he taught in his art classroom. The other teachers were not observed during instruction. The teacher responses are a subset of data that will only be used to frame the participants' educational environments. This information will also be used in reference to relevant student quotes.

Mr. Clay

Mr. Clay rarely stopped moving. A man in his early 30's, Mr. Clay paced the room, interacting with as many students as possible in the brief periods. He saw some classes several times per week and others only once. This, he felt, made it very difficult to create and maintain rapport with the students.

Like my one seventh period class... I see them six times a week. They're tired of seeing me and I'm tired of seeing them. And then I have one [class] that I see once a week. What can I get done with that? Friday... 10th period.

(Mr. Clay Interview, May 2014)

Mr. Clay was also aware that scheduling issues were endemic of a larger problem. Although this school prided itself on providing a well-rounded education that included the arts, budget cuts in the city had hit the school hard.

The only time we were successful was right before the budget crash. We had music, we had dance, we had drama, we were supported by ArtHouse. We had theater. And then the budget crashed and we had to get rid of music, and dance, and it [the school's sense of community] just kind of collapsed.

(Mr. Clay Interview, May 2014)

In spite of this frustration, his approach to teaching was consistent and intentional. Much as Hetland, Winner, et al (2007) suggest, Mr. Clay used the typical studio classroom methods. He moved around the room speaking to and instructing as many students as possible. During observations, Mr. Clay's classes worked on three main lessons. The first was nearing completion in early observations. In this lesson, students learned how to create enlarged versions of images using a gridding technique. He allowed students to choose from a large collection of images that were based on things he thought students might like (music, comic books, cartoons, movies, games, etc.). The second lesson saw students creating three dimensional sculptures using metal coat hangers, small blocks of wood, and a piece of a stocking. Students bent the hangers into a shape of their choosing, attached it to the wood (with the help of Mr. Clay and his cordless drill), and then covered their hanger with the stocking. Students then painted their sculpture with a white base coat and, when that dried, created their own designs to draw and eventually paint. The third lesson turned the students into amateur cartographers as they explored both

perspective and map-making. After a tutorial on drawing in perspective, students created a bird's eye layout of streets in their own design. Mr. Clay suggested they use symbols, shapes, or words as the basis of their designs. Once their maps were drafted, the students were asked to add buildings using what they learned about perspective (Image 7). Mr. Clay gave demonstrations at the beginning of each lesson and helped students to understand the artistic and real world applications of what they were doing. He also showed students how to immediately put their new skills and knowledge to use. He found ways to encourage exploration and self-expression as a part of each lesson. He intentionally made sure that there were aspects of the lessons where students chose their own direction, subject, or design. He also injected other subjects into almost every class period. His lessons were open in a way that permitted each student to include aesthetics and or themes that they preferred.. While Tomlinson (2000, 2003), and Sheridan (2011) see freedom as a good part of studio methods, Mr. Clay lamented that student freedom can have negative consequences. The students who participated in this study argued that this freedom was not necessarily present in all classes. In the art class, however, they were allowed to speak, move, sing, rap, joke, curse, "buss", and otherwise entertain one another. But there had to be a level of respect and calm to these behaviors.

In addition to the above, Mr. Clay used other specific interaction styles and classroom management techniques to keep the room engaged. Most days he spoke with a booming yet calm voice. He would yell out project instructions or clarifications at different points throughout the class. He would also give students alerts as to how much time they had left to work. When he stopped to help students, his tone would drop and he

would focus on the individual student. There were times when he would tell stories about artists or other subjects that related to that day's work. On one occasion, he noticed a student was having trouble keeping his lines straight for a gridding/enlarging lesson.

“Trust the ruler”, Mr. Clay said as he bent over the student's work. “First, you have to hold the ruler near the center.” “Your hand is the fulcrum...do you know what a fulcrum is?” “Wherever you hold your hand is the point where the ruler will pivot...it's the strongest.” Mr. Clay showed that holding the ruler at the end will result in less reliable lines as the fulcrum is too far from where the line will end.

(Field Notes, Tanner Middle School, 3/21/2014)

This was the type of approach he used when a student struggled. He sometimes gave direct and simple answer, but many times he added more. He did not only do this for students who needed help with their projects; he also used these practices to deal with students who were having behavioral issues.

Mr. Clay's approach to discipline was more ethical than dogmatic. His central concerns appeared to be with escalation and respect. He did not want things to “get out of hand”. He also wanted the students to respect their classmates as well as their classmates' work. Mr. Clay was very proud of the fact that he rarely had to send a student out of the room for discipline. He also hadn't had any fights in his classroom this year. Mr. Clay and Mr. Cookie each felt that the students genuinely liked the arts classes. They just didn't always behave as though they did. On those occasions, Mr. Clay's approach would shift.

Mrs. Claudia

In order to provide a general baseline for students' traditional classroom experiences, it seemed important to speak with a teacher who saw several of them more than once each day. Mrs. Claudia was interviewed in her classroom during one of her preparatory periods. She was Randy, Rodney, and Lee's homeroom teacher. She was also the main AVID teacher for the school. In addition, Mrs. Claudia was also the eighth grade reading and writing teacher. She had worked at Tanner since the beginning of the previous school year. She taught at two other city schools for a total of four years prior to coming to this school.

A woman in her early 30's, Mrs. Claudia sat calmly behind her desk and occasionally moved papers or briefly interacted with students as she spoke. Although the interview occurred during a preparatory period, several of her students who were supposed to be at lunch chose to remain in her class. They quietly worked on different projects or played cards. When asked about teaching the class that included three of this study's participants, Mrs. Claudia focused on motivation.

This year with that particular class, that's an honors class, so I feel like it's been a little different than my past experiences. I feel like I'm always trying to break down for the kids that I teach. Whereas with this class this year, I feel like I need to push up more. I want to push; I want to do things that would be on the 10th or 11th grade reading level.

(Mrs. Claudia Interview, May 2014)

Mrs. Claudia repeatedly mentioned that her goal was to push students to do their best. She also said she tried to use activities to keep students engaged. Her focus, however, was on giving the students “high-level” work that would prepare them for high school.

In her class, Mrs. Claudia acknowledged, structure was very important. Class noise made her uncomfortable so she kept her room quiet (as it was on the day of her interview). She noted that the three of her boys who took part in this study were normally quiet and very focused during her classes. Randy rarely spoke and Rodney only spoke when he was allowed to move around the room, otherwise, she said, he might “zone-out”.

I don't know if you can tell...or if you've heard. I'm very structured... They're [the students] allowed to do very little. Apparently noise drives me crazy and that's just who I am.

(Mrs. Claudia Interview, May 2014)

Based on her interview as well as observations of the students who were in her room at the time, Mrs. Claudia’s classroom environment and methods differed greatly from art. I asked her about those differences and how they might impact her students.

I think when you give them more room to work and more different ways to be themselves, then they surprise you. No matter the class no matter the kids each class does kind of have a different dynamic and it evolves.

(Mrs. Claudia Interview, May 2014)

Mrs. Claudia had a similarly interesting perspective on the link between honors students and an aptitude for the arts. When discussing the importance of art class to her students, she offered:

...especially with the honors class. There's so many artists in there. There's so many kids who just thrive when they're given an art project. Whether they're an amazing artist or not, they just love to create things. So I think it's very important.

(Mrs. Claudia Interview, May 2014)

Mrs. Claudia was acutely aware of the distinctions and connections between her class and the art class. This interview provided a solid basis to which at least three student perspectives could be connected. This basis was in no way intended to validate or invalidate anything said by students. It is, however, a way to have a frame of reference to consider when students mention their other classes. Although she recognized the value of the arts in students' lives, she also noted that structures and projects needed to be in place. She preferred a classroom environment that was quiet and organized. But she also noted that those were her own perspectives and she understood that students needed varied instructional methods.

Mr. Cookie

A man in his late 20's, Mr. Cookie's presence in this study was mostly an addendum to Mr. Clay's interview. As a fellow arts teacher (music), Mr. Clay felt that Mr. Cookie's perspective could add to my research. The discussion with Mr. Cookie occurred at the same time and place as Mr. Clay's. While his input was much less than his peer, Mr. Cookie did provide a few insights into teaching the students at Tanner. He

echoed Mr. Clay when he noted that scheduling issues in the school meant that some students had arts classes multiple times a week while others had it only once (if at all).

...and it goes back to consistency. You're trying to build a consistent thing with them but our schedule is so inconsistent, man, it is impossible to do something like painting. You might only have them a couple times a week.

(Mr. Cookie Interview, May 2014)

Mr. Cookie argued that building a rapport with students was very important. The academic classes, like reading, were set up on a block schedule where they spent more time in one class on a consistent basis. This, he said, allowed the teachers to build a relationship with students and create a sense of community in the class. Mr. Cookie summed up the importance of rapport in one sentence. "In Philly you, to have the most positive outcomes, you need to learn more about each student." The key to this, from his perspective, was consistency in scheduling. He elaborated on this idea and incorporated concepts that I had heard about this school from the beginning.

I think that's where we're missing the community aspect of the school. I think art and music are very powerful and they can build a good community and when you don't incorporate us into building your community...I think that's where you have a lot of problems in the school. And I think that's just a struggle.

(Mr. Cookie Interview, May 2014)

Here Mr. Cookie reiterated the fact that the sense of community in the school had been lacking. This was partially due to an influx of new students but it was also due to the scheduling inconsistencies that such a huge change in population required. Several parties

had already mentioned the importance of community at this school. Those same individuals noted that budget cuts across the city were the initial cause of their community's disintegration. Mr. Cookie saw the arts as a central aspect in Tanner's school identity. He also argued that a clearer focus on (and support of) the arts in the school could play a major role in reestablishing that identity and subsequent sense of community.

Each of the three teachers acknowledged that there are differences between art classes and academic classes. Mr. Clay and Mr. Cookie saw that scheduling issues brought on by an influx of students were affecting their ability to build a rapport with their students and really engage them in artistic processes; whereas other classes were given scheduling preference and thereby able to create more stability. Mrs. Claudia noted that the arts were expressive spaces where many of her students thrived and often surprised themselves with what they could do. Her classes, however, were quiet, controlled, and structured. These perspectives can act as a frame of reference when considering what students say. They can also shed light on the overall educational environment at Tanner middle school.

The Students

The students who elected to participate in this study came from various educational and personal backgrounds. From the son of a police officer to the child of a local teacher, the students had unique factors that helped to shape their perspectives. For some participants, family members greatly affected their perceptions of school and art. Other participants cited their own intrinsic motivations when discussing their views on

these topics. These students consistently cited the art class as a place where they felt freer to express themselves. They differed in which aspect of the art classroom led them to feel this way. These unique combinations of factors yielded an abundance of pertinent data. Of the student participants, Cletus' interviews were the longest and most in-depth. It is for this reason that he will be this study's informal key informant. Each student's responses were distinct and compelling. Cletus' story and thought processes, however, were different from those of the other participants. His words and those of his peers will help to illuminate how these black males perceived school and the art classroom

Lee

At 13-years old, Lee stood about 5'3" tall and weighed approximately 100lbs. He seemed small for an eighth grade student. Lee wore a short hairstyle and consistently dressed in his school's uniform...black pants and a red polo. Lee lived with his mother, his two younger sisters and three older brothers (ages not given). He had been a student at Tanner sixth grade (almost 3 years prior to this study). Lee had plans to become a firefighter but he is also hoping to go to school for culinary arts. His high-pitched voice was often one of the first I would hear as his class entered. He was always part of the basketball conversation. He was usually the loudest and most physically animated talker in the group. What made Lee a compelling participant for this study was how he worked through his performance/attention-seeking. I noted during one of my earliest visits that Lee was "a smallish boy with short hair and a broad, mischievous smile who wandered the class. He recited rap lyrics, picked up supplies, chatted with classmates, and helped other students." Of note in this quote is that each of the behaviors he displayed in no way

detracted from the work he was doing. The performance was a part of the task. Even when he sat and worked, he talked, he looked around the class, he gesticulated, and he laughed...loudly. But he worked...almost as if art was reflexive to him. When he walked around the room, he appeared as if he just wanted to connect with as many classmates as possible. As he walked to get supplies, he added to conversations at the tables he passed or he leaned close to a classmate as they spoke. When they noticed his proximity, he would laugh and go back to his table. All of these interactions were brief, taking no more than 5-10 seconds. He often carried his work with him as he moved around the room. During his interview, he admitted that he loved to do anything that would keep him physically active. In that case, he was talking about the many sports he plays, but that active nature was also visible during my observations in the art class. He was not the only student who displayed these tendencies; but he was the most boisterous.

Lee was a student for whom the art class was fun and informative. It was also a place where he was able to assert his own will and draw what he wanted. Nathan (2013) would argue that this freedom of expression was healthy for an adolescent black boy. It was not only the freedom of the class that appealed to Lee. He also felt that the environment in the art classroom was pleasant and endearing. Echoing (Cunningham, et al., 2013), Lee argued that his appreciation for art was wholly intrinsically motivated. It would come to light that his mother also appreciated his artistic endeavors.

During his interviews, Lee seemed excited to have a chance to speak. In the classroom, he spent a great deal of energy making sure he was heard. In this instance, he would have a captive audience. The discussion began with a look at his family's view of

school. It quickly became evident that Lee saw his mother as his main educational advocate.

DS: How does your family talk about education?

Lee: For me, it's basically my mom... My mom basically wanted me to try everything. Just don't give up...if you need help, just keep going. I didn't ask the teachers. It's like, stay after school if you have to, stay after lunch if you have to.

DS: Does she check your homework?

Lee: YES! (speaking more loudly and emphatically, nodding, clapping his hands, and smiling as he speaks)...she asks me about my homework every time I come home.

DS: Does she get mad at you if you don't finish it?

Lee: Yeah but...this how my mom do it...as long as I start before I go outside and finish it before the day's over, my mom don't have a problem with it.

DS: Oh that's nice. So she's letting you build your own responsibility so you know how to get things done?

Lee: Yeah, if I did start it, then I can go outside and play for a little bit then come back and finish it and eat dinner.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Lee saw his mother as an encourager and motivator. Not only did she encourage him to persevere in school, she also told him to stay late or seek out help when needed. Lee saw his mother as both helping him and teaching him responsibility. As long as Lee started his homework when he got home from school and finished before dinner, his mother

didn't mind. Lee was very excited when discussing his mother's role in his education. His eyes were large, he smiled and spoke loudly, and at one point he clapped his hands with each word. This appeared to be an indication of the fact that his mother was very serious about his education. He spoke almost as if he were echoing his mother and attempting to display her authority as he discussed her. She was someone who knew that Lee had sometimes needed encouragement and extra help to do well. As the interview turned to his experience in school, it became apparent that Lee also understood that he had room for improvement.

When discussing his prior education, Lee expressed a sentiment that was common among this study's participants. His view of school had changed and he was no longer excited about his education.

DS: What school did you go to before Tanner?

Lee: Before Tanner I went to [a local middle school]. I started sixth grade there and I finished it here.

DS: How did you feel about school when you were younger?

Lee: I felt excited because I got to learn new stuff that I didn't know. But now I don't [feel excited]. I thought it would just be easy but now stuff is getting more complicated. More harder. And right now I'm getting way more frustrated cause I'm preparing for the Keystone [PA standardized test].

(Interview 1, May 2014)

In Lee's prior school, he felt excited about learning. He quickly noted that he did not feel that way anymore. Lee attributed this feeling to the fact that the work that he was doing

was getting harder. He acknowledged the feelings of frustration, especially in relation to the Keystone testing. The preparations for the test were causing Lee anxiety. He also admitted some initial confusion about school.

Lee: When I was younger...basically, I was just wondering...why do I have to go to school and all that. And all the other type stuff. But now I know why I got to go to school. So I can get a so I can get a good education. And go to college...graduate from college, getting the job.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Lee noted that he did not really understand why he had to go to school when he was younger. Now he had a better idea. That idea included the “good education, good college, good job” trope. He had developed a perspective that fell in line with Labaree’s (1997) idea of “social mobility” in which students could aspire to move from one socioeconomic level to the next via quality public education. Although Lee’s actual family income and socioeconomic status were not discussed, he made a clear connection between how well he did in school and his future success.

Patrick

While Patrick was not among the more poorly behaved students whom Mr. Clay suggested I avoid, he had disciplinary and academic issues in other classes. Mr. Clay recommended Patrick based on how those behavioral issues did not seem to exist when he came down to the art class. After meeting and speaking with Patrick, I decided to interview him to learn more.

Patrick was a Haitian-American 14-year old eighth grade student. He lived at home with his mother, two brothers, and two sisters. Patrick's biological father still lived in Haiti and his mother has remarried. Patrick did not mention any details about his stepfather but other family members came up several times during his interviews. Patrick was a tall boy for 14; standing at about 5'10" inches. Patrick was growing into his boxy muscular frame. He played tight end and defensive tackle on Tanner's football team and considered sports to be one of "his things" (the other being art). In fact, he said, his performance as a football player at Tanner got him accepted to several city high schools. Although he loved art and hoped to play football professionally, Patrick eventually explained that he saw becoming a lawyer as a much more likely future.

Patrick's perspective on art placed it squarely in the center of his daily life. He drew consistently and openly admired his sister's artistic ability. He also acknowledged that he had visited museums and shown an affinity for the art in his house growing up. This made it seem likely that he would express a particular "comfort" in the art class. Not only did he express that sentiment, he also found the way that the class was taught to be "fascinating". Before exploring his experiences with art any further, it was important to understand the context in which Patrick had developed his meanings and sense of self (Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2002).

According to Patrick, multiple factors impacted his feelings about school and the arts. Patrick acknowledged that his mother had a very serious view of education. Being from an immigrant family, she did not want Patrick to waste the educational opportunities that America provided. This became evident very early in our first meeting.

DS: So the first question is how does your family feel about education how do they talk about education?

Patrick: Well, my mom feel strongly about education. She said America brings you a lot of opportunities so you gotta therefore take those opportunities to make it your own. So she always trying to motivate me to do better in school and do what's best for me so I can get a lot of opportunities for the future like better high school, better colleges.

(Interview, June 2014)

Like Lee, Patrick's mother was his primary educational motivator and placed a great deal of importance on his academic performance. She saw doing well in school as a necessary component of his future success. David Labaree (1997) drew out three distinct purposes, or rationales, for the American education system; among those was "social mobility". This specific argument centered on the idea that education could act as an equalizer; allowing less fortunate students to move from one socioeconomic stratum up to the next, higher, level. Patrick's mother operated much on the same principle. To her, doing well in school was a path to opportunities that her son may not have otherwise had in Haiti; a country whose poverty level is four times that of The United States (World-Bank, 2013). Although Patrick made no allusions to living in poverty in Haiti, he did imply that his mother saw this degree of freedom and educational opportunity as distinctly American. Not only did she want him to aspire to go to college, she wants him to go to one of the "better colleges." Her intentions, to Patrick, were quite clear; do well in school to do well in life. His mother was not the only family member who was interested in his

academic success. Later, while reiterating that his mother was one of his primary educational motivators, Patrick added that another motivator was his older (17 year old) sister; who routinely helped him with his homework.

When discussing his earlier educational experiences, Patrick again showed his interest in art class.

DS: What school did you go to before you came here?

Patrick: I went to Powell.

DS: So it's your first year here? How did you feel when that school closed? Were you upset?

Patrick: I kind of was upset because my old art teacher...she was fun.

(Interview, June 2014)

Patrick was one of the many students at Tanner who had been displaced by the closing of Powell Middle School. These students had shown various levels of frustration at this transition. The part that appeared to bother Patrick the most was losing contact with his former art teacher. He mentioned the art teacher, not the class, so it seemed apparent that the teacher's methods or overall demeanor were what Patrick missed. It was unclear if the teacher played any role in Patrick's general affinity for art or if his affinity for art made him partial to the teacher of that subject. In any case, when discussing his prior school experience, Patrick's mind returned to the arts.

Understanding that Patrick would have a chance to expand on his relationship with art, the interview briefly shifted to how Patrick perceived school when he was younger. Like some of the other participants in this study, Patrick recalled a general

“like” of school when he was younger...in spite of some setbacks. The conversation then took, what is now becoming, a familiar turn.

DS: How did you feel about school when you're younger?

Patrick: When I was younger I liked school a lot. I always [liked] learning new things.

DS: How did you do in school?

Patrick: I did okay. I had A's and B's and I always got advanced in math and reading. Advanced or proficient.

DS: Were you interested in school, did you feel that what you're learning was important?

Patrick: In some aspects I was interested, but in others, they kind of bored me.

Like, I already know those things. I was doing really good at math so the teachers really wouldn't mind so...sometimes in class I will be drawing or doing something else. Because math was just...I was really good so I didn't need any help.

(Interview, June 2014)

Patrick acknowledged that he enjoyed school as a younger child. He was excited about the idea of learning new things. As he discussed his good grades, Patrick, unsolicited, also mentioned his “advanced” or “proficient” scores on standardized test. Although he was not the only student to mention these tests, he was the only student to mention his test scores as an aspect of his prior academic success. Patrick felt like he did well in school. He was, however bored in some classes. This boredom did not appear to be

related to the methods of the teachers or the content itself. Patrick's boredom stemmed from feeling as if he already understood what was being taught. Again, Patrick turned to art as a place of solace.

Rodney

Rodney was a broadly built young man who lived with his mother and nine year old sister. Although he was only 13 at the time of the study, he had the strong physique of a late teenager. His eyes were small and dark and the areas around them seemed to be a bit puffy, as if he were consistently tired. The rest of his face had begun to lose its youthful softness. He looked down most of the time...even as he spoke to classmates. His voice, a deep monotone, often seemed to reverberate off his own chest as he spoke. I selected Rodney because, although he generally participated in the class conversations, he rarely made eye contact with anyone. When he did look around (while speaking), he would only offer a brief sweeping glance in the general direction of those with whom he spoke. When he had something to contribute to the discussion, he would just speak. His head might rise and turn towards his classmates. Then he would just speak then go back to what he had been doing. Other students might speak then listen for responses or at least look at the next person who was speaking. Rodney did not. There were a few occasions when Mr. Clay had to tell Rodney to get his work started, but once he began, he kept working until the end of the class. He was very serious and deliberate as he worked. There was one day when Rodney did not do any work, but even that day, during the sculpture lesson, he sat in his seat and stared intently at his work. He turned it over and over in his hands as if he were contemplating what to do next. He did this for the entire

period, and after one prompting to start working, Mr. Clay allowed Rodney to just sit quietly for the rest of the period. That day, however, was an anomaly for Rodney in this art class.

Rodney did, however express his broad interest in art. As Harter (1981) suggested, it was important to Rodney that he be able to build on and include his burgeoning impression of who he was in his daily experience. The art class became an outlet for that development. He noted that he was glad that he got to put aspects of his identity into the work he created in art. He was also aware that his familial experiences with art and school played a role in how he felt.

When discussing his family history with art and school as well as how he was doing in school now, Rodney made it clear that his education was a priority for him as well as his family.

Rodney: They serious about it [his education]. They make sure I get to school and get a good grade and graduate school and go to college. They want me to be the best I can be...at all times. And take school very seriously.

DS: Do they tell you what they want you to do in college?

Rodney: Nah, they just say... take the course I want to take and make sure I know what I want to do. They want me to go to college. It's something I want to do too.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Rodney also acknowledged that his mother was the family member who had the greatest impact on his education.

My mom is the one who...she's the one always push me and make sure I do what I got to do to stay out of trouble and focused. She just tells me to do what I want to do and take school very serious.

DS: She check your homework?

Rodney: Yeah, she does. She makes sure I do it and she checks it.

DS: She gets you up early?

Rodney: No, I wake myself.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Rodney saw his family as strong force in his education. To him, his family set a broad, general set of guidelines but still allows him the freedom to determine his own path.

Their goals were not shortsighted and neither are Rodney's. By providing what he saw as unflinching support, Rodney's family's goal of him attending college became his own.

As the interview continued, Rodney began to take even more ownership for his education. From Rodney's perspective, although his family influenced his schooling experiences, he often spoke of his prior education in terms of his own performance and preferences. I asked Rodney how he felt about his education in the years before he came to Tanner.

Rodney: School? I liked going there. It was fun for me to go there. I really enjoyed myself.

DS: Is there a particular subject you like most?

Rodney: Just school, period...keep my grades up.

DS: Why do you think you enjoyed school so much?

Rodney: Probably because it was like a way for me to be myself, be around kids my age, get new friends and at the same time learn new stuff too. And I like learning new stuff because... It made me feel better about myself. Made me feel smarter.

DS: And when you were in your classes, in the school, how did you feel?

Rodney: I didn't really feel a way I just...wanted to learn, do work.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

I thought Rodney began to show an intriguing inconsistency. He saw school in terms of his future, he wanted to be accepted by friends and follow the rules, and he was excited about learning new things, but then he was unable to elaborate or rephrase the feelings that he had just expressed. I was originally concerned that the interview process was making him uncomfortable. But Rodney's demeanor (little eye contact, mumbled words, short answers) was the same in interviews as it had been during my observations. I originally assumed that his answers were "safe" and intended to share as little as possible. Upon reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, however, I began to think differently. As noted above, Rodney began to refer to school in terms of what he liked and how he felt. He mentioned the fact that learning and feeling smart made him feel better about himself. He reinforced the idea that his own desires (belonging, acceptance, and learning) and self-esteem played a large part in how he saw his early schooling. This tone changed when he discussed his current education setting.

DS: So, how are you doing in school right now?

Rodney: I'm doing good right now. Still a good student. Still keep my grades up.

DS: Okay. Good. Do you still feel interested in all your subjects?

Rodney: Not as much as I used to.

DS: No? Is there a reason?

Rodney: Probably because it got harder and I don't understand it as much anymore. I'm not interested because it's like the curriculum got boring.

DS: Meaning?

Rodney: It's just not it's just not fun anymore.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

As is the case with many middle school students (English, 2007), Rodney intimated that the curriculum had gotten harder and less exciting as he got older. He saw that the path to college education might be less interesting and engaging than he thought. For some students, this realization, combined with the burgeoning individuality and freedom of adolescence, leads to thoughts of leaving school. This is important to consider since Rodney does not mention any sense of belonging, comfort, or esteem in relation to his current educational setting...except when he discussed Mr. Clay's art class. A large part of Rodney's newfound educational disengagement may be traceable to the fact that his social and emotional needs are not being met inside school. This made his art related responses all the more important.

Randy

Randy was a light-skinned, biracial (the child of a black father and white mother) young man. He was lean and angular but still athletic. At the time of this study, Randy was 13 years old and in eighth grade at Tanner Middle School. Randy often wore a very loose fitting version of the school's uniform (red polo shirt and khaki pants). Since art took place just after gym, the boys in Randy's class were usually sweaty, disheveled, and boisterous as they entered the art room. Randy was one of the quieter participants in this study. Not shy; just quiet. During post-gym-class conversations about basketball, his contributions were generally less hyperactive and hyperbolic than his counterparts. Based on the amount of times his name was mentioned positively, he was clearly considered by his peers to be the best basketball player in the class. This made him a central player in the stories as well as the subsequent energetic conversations. What made Randy a compelling selection for this study was, in spite of his obvious relative celebrity and esteem, he remained calm and focused throughout the art classes. He attended his work with an intensely focused demeanor that was interspersed with brief responses to classmates. Randy disputed or added facts to stories about the day's games. He did so calmly and in a lower tone than his peers...then he would work. He sometimes spoke quietly to nearby students as he worked. I could rarely actually hear these exchanges. Randy appeared remarkably calm and focused as he drew or painted. He looked directly at his work while wearing a serious expression (eyebrows slightly furrowed and lips pursed as if concentrating). He often paused and seemed to consider what he needed to do next before returning to work. During these pauses, he would stare

at his work, the materials, and sometimes he would glance around at other students' work. Randy also helped classmates. He drew on a few classmates' work when asked and even painted some details on one young lady's sculpture at her behest. If any of the students represented a traditional descriptions of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, it was Randy. His effort and concentration were apparent. He also seemed to enjoy what he was creating.

Randy later acknowledged that he did, indeed, enjoy the work he was doing in art class. Having just found out that he enjoyed painting, Randy's focus when working was obvious. Although engagement is often seen through the lens of student focus and other observable indicators, it is more important to look at as many factors as possible (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Randy would acknowledge that his focus on the project was how he approached most of his schoolwork. His feelings towards art were better displayed in his words. Through his words, Randy would clarify that the art classroom was a place where he could make friends and be himself. As suggested by Harter (1981), Nathan (2013), and Maslow (1943), that sense of "fitting in" or feeling accepted by one's peers is immensely important...especially to adolescents. Art, however, was not as central to Randy's daily life as it was to some other participants.

Randy expressed his love for sports as well as school. He also elaborated on the role his family has played in his education.

DS: How does your family talk about education?

Randy: Well... my mom a teacher so...she take education serious. She always make sure my homework and stuff is done.

DS: What grade does she teach?

Randy: Right now she teaches second. She used to teach pre-K.

DS: Does she check your homework?

Randy: She checks my homework she checks my projects. And she make sure I'm on time everyday. She make sure I'm never late or absent.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Randy credited his mother with showing him the value of his education. From his perspective, just the fact that she was a teacher meant he had to take his education seriously. He also cited her as the main reason he gets his homework done and generally stays out of trouble in school. Since she had experience as both an early childhood and elementary educator, Randy's mother may have given him an advantage distinct from the other students in this study. More specifically, teen children with mothers who teach are more likely to get help with their schoolwork and do better in school than children whose parents don't (Denny, 2011). These students also do better than those with fathers who taught. This implies that the direct intervention of an educator-mother may lead to improved educational outcomes. Randy partially confirms this idea by attributing much of his behavior and educational perspective to his mother

Whether it was solely due to his mother's interventions or a confluence of other factors, Randy felt that he had been a good student since early in his education. Randy explained how he felt about his education prior to attending Tanner.

DS: What school did you go to before you came here?

Randy: I went to Powell.

DS: And how did you feel about school when you went there? Did you enjoy it?

Randy: I enjoyed it but I just thought there wasn't as organized...last year it was not as organized. Powell used to be organized...but last year...the middle school... It got separated from the elementary school. It was two different buildings. Our building was at [a local church]. And we had different principals. So...it was so unorganized.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Randy is one of the many students who had only transferred to Tanner that school year. His previous school, Powell, had been in disarray in the year or so leading to its shuttering. From classes in different buildings to teachers who were unsure of their own future, Powell's students were faced with a daunting challenge. To Randy, this challenge of physical and personnel changes at Powell seemed to override the fact that he, at some point, "enjoyed" going to school there.

Cletus

Cletus was the most loquacious of the participants in this study. He shared his ideas openly and thoughtfully. He even offered personal information freely. The only moment of hesitation and discomfort in Cletus' interviews related to an older brother whose situation he wished not to discuss. Aside from that topic and a brief exchange regarding his parents, this young man appeared comfortable and confident through most of the interview process. Cletus was one of the many students I observed who was completely out of uniform. This day he wore a red and blue plaid button-up instead of the required red polo or tee. He was also wearing blue jeans instead of the normal black

slacks. He is a medium built boy who stands about 5'8" and wore a short afro. Cletus was selected for this study because he also had a unique way of engaging in the art class. During my first visit, Cletus displayed an almost protective and solitary approach to art. Unlike Randy, who was similarly focused, Cletus seemed almost protective of his work whereas Randy leaned back in his seat and worked openly. Cletus worked diligently to complete his gridded drawing but kept his work shielded from others. When he sat at his table he leaned forward so that his eyes were only inches from his work. His head hovered just above his left shoulder while that arm reached out and around his drawing as he drew with his right hand. In order to actually see what he was drawing, one would have to stand on the other side of the table to Cletus' right. Even then, you would have to guide your eyes around his moving (drawing) hand. Cletus had a calm, serious demeanor. The only time he walked around the art room was when he needed supplies. Even then, he would get his supplies and calmly walk back to his seat. Once he sat, his head went back down, his arm again took its shielding position, and he would go back to work. Cletus never engaged in any of the larger class conversations. Occasionally, when another student yelled about something, Cletus would raise his head and look around. On another occasion he engaged a Latino classmate in a debate about whose jeans were cheaper and whose shoes were better. Even during this discussion was short and businesslike. Cletus only truly engaged Mr. Clay in extended conversation. Those conversations were usually instructive. Cletus seemed to be focused on completing his work as diligently and neatly as possible.

Cletus and his brother shared a healthy appreciation for one another's artistic abilities. Though his brother was younger, Cletus spoke of his sibling's talents with high regard. Cletus looked at art as something that was just part of who he was as a person. His appreciation for art, in his eyes, was wholly intrinsic. He looked at art and school as arenas in which he was already skilled, but he still wanted to constantly improve. He spoke of his own artistic skills with confidence and clarity. He knew how he wanted his work to look and had every intention of working until it was as he visualized. He had a similar perspective about his other classes. This latter assumption turned out to be a problem at home.

Of the more intriguing aspects of Cletus' interviews, he was very straightforward and open about his family life. At 14 years old and in eighth grade, Cletus lived with his father and brothers. His parents had divorced when he was younger and his sister moved with his mother. Cletus shared his feelings on what transpired between his parents in during the first interview.

Cletus: My mom and dad, they split. Because they thought they weren't living happily so my mom moved and I just live with my dad and my little sister. She just went. So it's like...my dad took the boys and my mom took the girl. I think they should just stay together...for us but...they didn't. They just moved because they were unhappy.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

It was apparent that this was a solemn topic for Cletus. This sense of seriousness and responsibility would be a recurring theme for Cletus. His voice was low as was his head.

Still, he volunteered this information almost as a catharsis. He seemed resigned to the fact that it happened but still unsure of why. In spite of the fact that they did not live together, Cletus' mother still had a strong presence in how he saw education. He mentioned her educational status and accomplishments several times during his interviews. It was clear that Cletus' family influenced his view of education.

DS: How does your family talk and feel about school and education?

Cletus: They really serious about it. I mean, my mom, she got her masters degree...actually she's working on a doctor[ate] right now. She's still in school...I don't know what it's called but she still in school and she's getting paid to be in school. She's like 30 something years old.

DS: Do you know what school she's in?

Cletus: Nah. Sometimes she would just leave and go to school and make money and stuff. She was probably doing research and paperwork. But, I mean...sometimes she had to study. When she lived with us...sometimes she have to study for something. But as far as I knew, she got paid to be in school.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Putting some extra emphasis on the word “really” Cletus attempted to show exactly how important school was to his parents. He then spent some time trying to explain his mother's level of education. Based on his description of her being “paid to be in school” and “doings research and paperwork” and then needing time to study, it seemed that his mother held a position as a research assistant as she worked on a graduate degree. His mother's estrangement may have been evident in the fact that Cletus was not sure of her

age, what school she was attending, or what type of degree she was pursuing. Later in the interview process he also noted that he wasn't sure of her major. Regardless of these knowledge gaps, Cletus displayed respect and pride in her academic accomplishments. Her impact on his view of education resided in his perception of how far she had gone. His father's educational influence, however, was much more direct.

Cletus' father used a behaviorist approach to motivate his son. The focus of his father's approach to use extrinsic motivation to guide Cletus towards decisions that would benefit him in school.

DS: How does your father talk about education?

Cletus: Yeah, he serious too. That's why he took away the 360 and the PS3 [video game consoles]. Because he thought I was acting up in school. Well, not my behavior but my work ethic.

DS: Did he think it was because you're not working hard...did he think it's because you're just not paying attention?

Cletus: Neither. It's just that I'm not asking for help and it's affecting my grades. Because my dad feels that I think I can do it by myself. Which sometimes actually happens. I can do it by myself but I do great if I asked for more help.

DS: Do you find it hard to ask for help? Does it make you uncomfortable?

Cletus: No, no...I just don't do it. I'm doing it now. I feel like it's in the past.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

His father worried that Cletus' pride or confidence was interfering with his academic potential. Cletus' implied that his father tried to motivate him by taking away his game

systems. As Cletus mentioned later, he really liked to play video games. Knowing that, his father used the game consoles as bargaining chips to get his son to seek out help and thereby do better in school. Although he used to think he never needed help, he was doing better now because of his father's advice. It eventually became apparent why Cletus felt like his father was so "serious" about education.

DS: Who would you say is most involved in your education? Out of everyone in your family. Anybody at all.

Cletus: My dad.

DS: How do you know that he's the one who's the most involved?

Cletus: He's real serious; like as soon as I come home he want us to get right to our homework.

DS: Does he check your homework?

Cletus: Yeah, every day.

DS: Every day? What does your dad do?

Cletus: Oh, he's a police officer.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Cletus also came from Powell after it closed. He had only been at Tanner for that school year. Cletus echoed Randy's thoughts when he mentioned that Powell had been split into two schools just before it closed which caused a great deal of disorder. As we discussed his time at Powell further, Cletus offered an intriguing educational philosophy.

DS: What did you feel about school when you were there [at Powell]? Did you like school?

Cletus: I just feel normal. Like I was ready to learn.

DS: So you didn't feel...uncomfortable, you didn't necessarily feel overexcited.

It's neither of the extremes is right in the middle?

Cletus: Yeah right in the middle.

DS: How did you do in terms of grades and of the school?

Cletus: It's always been about improving. But my dad...he always wanted me to be good all school year around. But my grades, almost my whole life just been about improvement. I do bad and my grades keep going up second third fourth marking period.

DS: So you always started out rough and then get better?

Cletus: Yeah.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Cletus made it seem as though he was relatively unmoved in school. He was neither excited nor uncomfortable. He gave the impression that he was calm and simply “ready to learn”. His father’s perception (and Cletus’ own passive implication) that he may be overconfident in terms of school seemed to be reinforced here. Cletus then surprised me with a more philosophical perspective on his educational performance. To his father, Cletus should have been able to do well in school all year round. To Cletus, however, what should have mattered was improvement. He noted that each year, his grades may have started off low, but they consistently improved. Cletus seemed to want his father (and me) to understand that he was trying to do better, and that should have been what was noticed. Considering research on how much knowledge students lose over the

summer (Kerry & Davies, 1998), Cletus' logic might appear sound. Students do often return to school having lost some of what they learned during the prior school year. This exchange about his prior education led Cletus to ask me a question about this study and my education. He seemed to be looking for a better understanding of what I was intended as well drawing a correlation with what his mother and other relatives were doing.

Cletus: I got a question

DS: Yeah?

Cletus: When I do this interview is it like to help you like get like a degree or like scholarship?

DS: This is for my doctoral dissertation. So what I'm going to do is I'm writing... A dissertation is like a small book on one study. This study is about black males in urban Philly...adolescent black males in Philly. I also wanted to look at art classes to see if this is an environment that could help you learn. But this is for me to complete my doctoral degree.

Cletus: My aunt sort of does the same thing. She just graduated on Saturday right before Mother's Day. At Eastern University. She is researching stuff. I remember now. I think she got her masters degree in...science. All I know is it's just mastery of science. In psychology.

DS: Do you have a lot of people in your family who have degrees?

Cletus: My mom, I think she's working on her doctorate or maybe she got it already, I don't know. She's really smart. My mom has her masters [already]. My uncle, I think he's probably where my aunt is.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Even though we discussed the reason for our interviews at least twice prior to beginning (in addition to the discussion and signing of consent forms), Cletus still sought clarification about the study. This concerned me at first as I worried that I had not been clear about my research. That fear was allayed when Cletus started to talk about his family's academic pursuits. He seemed to know a great deal more about his aunt's education than his mother's. He knew what school she went to, when she graduated, and what her major was. I presumed that this was largely based on the fact that the graduation had only happened the week before. It was still interesting that he reiterated that he was not completely sure about his mother's status. What mattered to him was that she was pursuing her higher education and he wanted to understand it better.

Analysis

The following sections will attempt to answer this study's research questions as well as providing broader thematic analysis of the data. This analysis will consider student responses in relation to relevant literature and theory. The research questions sought to explore the experiences of black males in the art classroom, to examine how these students communicate their prior experience with the arts, and to determine which aspects of the art classroom these students might find most engaging. Via interpretation and analysis of student interview responses, I hope to build a framework for a deeper

thematic analysis. The analysis places student perspectives into the context of existing literature on aesthetics, culture, and the argument for the arts. Aesthetics will look at student definitions and understandings of art. The cultural theme will consider the relationship between student families and their views and experiences related to art. Finally, the argument for the arts section will build on how their experiences with the arts inside and outside of school might affect students' futures. The focus throughout will be valuation of student perspectives and motivations.

Art Class Experiences

Here I will address the questions of how these black male students perceived their own engagement in the art classroom in contrast to traditional academic classrooms. Evidence from the interviews revealed the art class was a positive environment for these student participants in this study. In this environment, some of the restrictions of other classes were gone. In other classes, students felt that pace, workload, behavioral restrictions, and overall boredom made it harder for them to concentrate. In the art class (including previous years) students experienced increased freedom and camaraderie in comparison to their academic classes. Freedom in Mr. Clay's room mirrored the suggestions of Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007) about art classroom instruction as well as the approach that Boykin, Tyler, et al. (2009) noted as important for engaging black students. It included behavioral latitude like allowing students to speak during class and move freely around the room as well as permitting them to sit with friends instead of in assigned seats. This freedom, from the students' perspectives, also included projects that allowed them to draw or paint what they wanted or found most interesting. Building on

the ideas of Harter (1981), Axelson & Flick (2011), Fredericks, et al. (2011), Goldspink & Foster (2013), and others, this section will examine engagement from the perspective of adolescent urban black males as it pertained to their art classes at Tanner middle school.

Lee clearly described the art class as a unique place but did not necessarily perceive that difference consciously.

DS: What's the best part of this art class?

Lee: You can draw what you want to draw without getting in trouble and all.

Like when we want to draw what we want to draw, you control what you want to...without getting in trouble.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

As suggested by Harter (1986), several participants had responses that appeared to be in a state of conflict with each other. In one statement Lee argued that art class was a place where he could be free and not get into trouble as easily. He was embracing the fact that he was the person who was deciding his artistic direction in this class. He was also happy that he would not be punished for experimenting as he might in other classes. As Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007) suggested, Lee wanted to be able to try different approaches to creating his artwork. Experimentation, Hetland, Winner, et al. argued, was one of the central tenets of art classroom instruction. Students use knowledge and skills from the art class to engage in visual problem solving and innovation. Throughout the process of completing his sculpture, Lee changed the shape of his hanger, erased and redrew his early designs several times, and painted over previous work until he felt like

he had it right. He did all of this without any outward indications of anxiety or getting it wrong. Mr. Clay offered feedback when asked, but rarely suggested changes to Lee's work or that of any other student. Instead, Mr. Clay offered next steps that the student could take to get to their own goal. Lee had more independence in art and saw that as one of the features of the class that he liked the most.

Patrick had already expressed his appreciation for the arts and his current, as well as former, art teacher. During this interview, he was given a chance to discuss his time in art class at Tanner in more detail.

DS: You've been in this class for one year. This is your first year with Mr. Clay?

(He nods) What would you say are the most enjoyable parts of this class?

Patrick: What's the most enjoyable part? Having the freedom to express yourself and any way you're feeling.

DS: What do you mean by "express yourself"?

Patrick: Mr. Clay, he doesn't just tell you to draw something, he let you draw what you want.

DS: So how is this class different from other classes that you take in this school?

Patrick: I think it's more interesting. Because in this class I focus more. And other classes sometimes I'm just like "this is boring"... but in this class I focus more. I listen because I be interested.

(Interview 2, June 2014)

Patrick's responses were given with a mixture of excitement and "matter of fact-ness" that made it seem as though what he was saying should have been obvious. Being the

one student in the study who sometimes dealt with behavioral issues in other classes, his perspective here echoed Nathan's (2013) theorizing that the arts could be particularly beneficial for at-risk students. Patrick, like the boy in Nathan's story, saw art as a place where he could feel connected. Although he felt bored and disconnected in other classes, Mr. Clay's classroom was a place that was inherently interesting to Patrick. He would also express views that were more in line with Maslow's theories on motivation.

Given a chance to discuss his more visceral reactions to the art class, Patrick took an opportunity to clarify differences he saw between art and his other classes.

DS: How do you feel when you're walking into this class [art]?

Patrick: I just feel relief because sometimes [his homeroom teacher's] class...she gives a lot of work. And this class (nods head towards art room door) you work at your own pace. I feel relieved that way.

DS: Are there any specific words...aside from relief...that go through your mind when you're in this class?

Patrick: Comfort.

(Interview 2, June 2014)

Patrick veered away from the themes of freedom and expression. Instead, he discussed the relief he felt in the art classroom. This relief was due, in part, to the more individualized pace of the art classroom. It was also partially due to the sheer workload. In the other teacher's class, he felt overwhelmed. This was evident in the way he rolled his eyes up into his eyelids and exhaled as he discussed that workload. Maslow might agree that an environment that makes a student feel more comfortable will be a place

where they feel more attentive (1943). With that base need for security satisfied, a student could then focus more on the concepts and skills they are learning. Art class, thereby, became a place of relief for Patrick. Not only was the art class more comfortable, it was also more interesting and “new”.

When discussing his experiences in art classes at Tanner, Randy focused on communication as well as his own interest in the subject.

DS: What would you say is the best part of this [current art] class?

Randy: Well... I think... I don't know... I like that Mr. Clay shows us different ways of drawing. Like from different views and he teaches you things that I never thought of. I never thought of trying like he does, like the way he paints. How he mixes the colors and makes it darker. Like “this is the shade.” I can't explain it.

DS: And you haven't had any problems in this class at all?

Randy: No

DS: No problems with classmates or the way the classes start [referring to noise and movement at the beginning of class]?

Randy: No

DS: Do you feel like this class is different than...the other classes you have?

Randy: Well... I think my class talks more in here.

DS: Your whole class talks more?

Randy: Yeah.

DS: Is that a problem or is that okay?

Randy: I think is okay because it's not like fighting or anything.

DS: So in your other classes you have to be quiet?

Randy: Most of the time.

DS: Do you have to raise your hand to speak and everything?

Randy: Yeah

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Reminiscent of Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007), Randy's responses in regards to his art class at Tanner began Mr. Clay awakening his love for painting. He specifically mentioned ideas like color mixing and shading as they related to his newfound love, painting. He also seemed enthralled at the prospect of creating art in a new way and based on something he found interesting and important both inside and outside of school. Randy was at his most quiet and focused when he was working on painting his sculpture. He decided on a basketball themed design that included the NBA logo, many different colors, and references to his favorite players and teams. During this project, Mr. Clay would often check in on Randy and offer guidance or compliments, respectively. Randy often held his work out to Mr. Clay as he walked over. They would both calmly examine the work before Mr. Clay would offer brief comments and move on. Randy's questions to Mr. Clay were usually related to minute design or color choices. After Mr. Clay left the vicinity, Randy went back to painting. He worked on details in his painting with an intensity that eclipsed his focus during the earlier gridding project. He held the sculpture close to his eyes as he worked and barely ever spoke or put it down. He was learning new skills and putting them to immediate use in this class. Randy was also once again

excited that he and his classmates were allowed to speak during class. He made an interesting distinction between loudness and aggression. The implication was that loud students might be mistaken for angry, aggressive, or unruly students. This type of assumption (that boisterous means aggressive or disorderly) might be an aspect of the social barrier between many teachers and black male students. This might also play a role in why black males are referred for disciplinary action so often in many schools (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003, 2009). In fact, Mrs. Claudia noted that she “just cant handle noise” in her classroom (Mrs. Claudia Interview, 2014). She understood that her students were louder and more expressive in art class. She also noted that the art class environment allowed students to innovate and “surprise themselves” with what they created. She did not, however, make the connection between their volume and their overall sense of comfort in the class. At this stage in their development, the students appear to be looking at the art classroom as a space where they can express who they are becoming without the consequences and structures of their more rigid traditional classrooms. Randy would elaborate on these ideas.

I asked Randy to describe how the art classroom affected him, emotionally.

DS: When you walk into class how do you feel?

Randy: I kind of sometimes I feel excited cause I get to express myself in my drawing.

DS: Okay...and when you say, "express yourself", you feel like you don't get to express yourself and other classes?

Randy: I do, but with different things. I can't explain but it's just like, I'm trying it out so it's like expressing myself more. But in other classes all you doing is...learning math and reading stuff. Art class you control what you want.

DS: So you get a little more freedom?

Randy: Yeah.

DS: So when you're in that classroom [art]...you feel...

Randy: I feel like... I feel like I can talk to my friends. I just feel like...[I can] show who I am and talk to people I want to talk to. I can do what I want to do.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Randy again drew distinctions between art and his other classes. To him, art class was a place where he could express (and be) himself. It was, indeed, the safe space where he could experiment and explore his own artistic growth and development. Grant & Dieker (2010) argued that students at this age are dealing with feelings of helplessness and an overall lack of control in their school environments. At this point in their life, they are seeking agency and a better understanding of their own drives and motivations (Harter, 1986, 2012). Randy was pleased that in this class he could create the type of work that he desired and was not concerned about the repercussions of failure that might have affected him in other classes. Other classes were places where students had to take in the information they were given. Art class was the place where Randy was allowed to show the most of his perceived self. It was also the place where he could control his own learning and communicate with his friends. That communication is an important aspect

of both acceptance (Maslow, 1943) and identity development (Harter, 2012). Although Randy did not seem conflicted about his views of his classes, Cletus was not as sure. Interestingly, Cletus began to explain what he liked about Mr. Clay's class...but then he argued that art was just like his other classes.

DS: What are the best parts of this [art] class to you? Mr. Clay's class specifically.

Cletus: Well, basically you get to draw whatever you want. And Mr. Clay, he doesn't judge on how good or bad it is. That's a good part about the class. He doesn't "oh, your art is bad so you don't get a good grade". At least if you try, maybe you'll get an A or something.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

This passage is an encapsulation of the apparent duality of Cletus' relationship with art in school. Prior to this quote, he had briefly denigrated the class by calling it an "easy grade". He then lauded the fact that Mr. Clay did not judge students and allowed them freedom to create what they wanted. Like Randy, Cletus was experimenting with expression. The art class appeared to him to be a place to do so without the same judgment or repercussion as his other classes. Also, similarly to Nathan (2013), Cletus also acknowledged that effort was an important aspect of the art class. As an aspect of adolescent development, learning that one's effort could be rewarded was a vital part of engagement. As long as a student tried, they could succeed. Cletus went on to say that he did not really see a distinction between art class and other classes in spite of the freedom and non-judgmental environment he just mentioned. Axelson & Flick (2011)

might agree that this is one reason that self-reported measures of engagement are problematic. Adolescents, who are in the midst of tumultuous life changes, are wont to be confused about their own perspectives. How, then, can this be reconciled with a phenomenological approach that prioritizes the student views (Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2002)? The context becomes even more important. In this case, I chose to explore this topic more. The goal was to see if Cletus could elucidate on the perceived discrepancy. It was pertinent to see whether or not Cletus considered art and other classes to operate in a similar fashion.

DS: What about the structure [of the classes is the same], like how the teachers teach?

Cletus: My advisory...reading and social studies teacher [the same person for all three periods]. She kind of like teaches real fast. You know how when you're in college they teach you like real fast...it's kind a like that. She doesn't give us time. I don't blame her... We should be doing our work.

DS: Other classes go fast? Kind of like college?

Cletus: Yeah, I just realized he [Mr. Clay] doesn't really move fast like the math teacher.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Evoking his earlier interview and discussions about his family members' educational achievements, Cletus likened the fast paced nature of his math class to a college course. His esteem for this approach was apparent in how he defended his math teacher's methods. He did not "blame her" for the pace. That was how middle school classes were

supposed to be run...just like a college course. It became clear that Cletus was looking at the structure of these classes as being more mature or associated with adulthood. It is normal, alongside the general confusion that accompanies adolescence, for a child to respect or seek out structures and behaviors that they see as more mature (Harter, 2012). For Cletus, it was the college-style approach to education that he was rationalizing. He felt that this was how school should be. He had previously placed art alongside these other classes. After discussing this, he seemed to realize that Mr. Clay's class bore little or no resemblance to the college-style class. The pace was slower in art and, as Cletus stated previously, students could do what they wanted. Upon recognizing his possible misperception, Cletus nearly shook his head comically. What was visibly was a small left to right head turn as he acknowledged that Mr. Clay's class was, indeed, different...at least it was different from his math class.

The experiences that students shared in interviews were partially based on intentional pedagogical decisions by the teacher. As suggested by Tomlinson (2000, 2003) and Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007), Mr. Clay made specific choices in how he managed his classroom. Students had some degree of freedom in the artwork they created and the speed at which they worked. He also allowed students to work without fear of judgment. Although Cletus disparaged this briefly as "an easy grade", he eventually acknowledged his appreciation for the artistic leeway. Cletus, Lee, and Patrick also noted an intrinsic motivation to "do art". They saw art as something they "just liked" as well as something they wanted to be able to do well. This seems typical for a group of students who are in the midst of developing a true sense of who they are as

individuals (Harter, 2012). Any inconsistencies could also be based on the fact that these students are between childhood and adulthood as well as between the traditional classroom structure (as represented by Mrs. Claudia's classroom and Cletus' math class) and the more adolescence-friendly experience of Mr. Clay's art class. All five of the interviewees mentioned that they were "fascinated" by art, wanted to learn more, and/or wanted to improve the quality of their work. Cletus elaborated further and described his experiences in art class in terms of his own internal drive and focus. Of the students, Cletus seemed to be the one who was most striving for adulthood. He showed esteem for the college-style environment of his math class. He also wanted me to understand that his academic and artistic success were a product of his ability to focus and work hard. In class as well as interviews, Cletus was calm and almost stoic. He went about his work and discussions without conveying much emotion. He did seem excited during some parts of the interview process but those moments were normally related to games, movies, or other topics. When it came to school and art, Cletus was serious and focused. Even the students who prided themselves on overall educational prowess noted that the art class had its own allure. Each student was able to pinpoint aspects of the art class that they enjoyed the most. Students' varied responses quelled any concerns I may have had about them answering in safe ways or speaking in generic terms. Most of what the students said had clear connections to their prior experiences with education and the arts. The next research question examined the students' background with the arts in order to better understand how the above perspectives may have been formed prior to attending Tanner Middle School.

Prior Experiences with the Arts

The following section will address the question of how black male middle school students communicate their prior experiences with the arts. The students in this study used highly descriptive language when discussing their prior experiences with the arts. Their perceptions about prior art classes differed; as did their family and personal histories with the arts. For some, art was an integral part of their daily lives. For others, art almost seemed to only exist within school walls. In this section I will examine student's views of art classes at their prior schools, how and if art was discussed or displayed in student homes, and any other relevant experiences that students may have had with the arts in the past.

When discussing art in his prior school, Lee compared that experience to his (then) current situation at Tanner. Lee's perspective also hearkened to Harter (1986, 2012). He seemed to be describing the process of learning and growing and the inherent confusion embedded in that transition.

DS: Did you have art classes at your old school?

Lee: Yeah.

DS: How did you feel about them?

Lee: When I was younger...I was just confused. But as I got older, I started learning more what art is.

DS: So did your art classes feel interesting or you said there were kind of confusing?

Lee: At first it was confusing but then it got interesting.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Lee offered a comparison of how he used to feel about art and how he saw it at the time of the interview. When he was younger, he argued, he did not quite understand art. As he got older, he felt he developed a grasp on art. Piaget's concept of cognitive equilibration argued that in a dynamic system, life becomes a constant quest for balance; in this case a balance of understanding the concepts in an art class (Muller, Carpendale, and Smith, 2009). Lee's confusion might have been indicative of not yet having an understanding of all of the concepts, obstacles, and possibilities of the subject. As he aged and gained experience, those possibilities and obstacles became known and he began to achieve balance. That balance leads to a new search for advanced understanding, which might explain why said art had become more interesting. Cognitive equilibration can be especially tenuous in the adolescence of a black male as attaining balance is linked with new social needs, independence, external perceptions, and physiological changes (Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013; Harter, 2012; Uhlin, 1962). Cognitive equilibration can also help to explain why Lee and others noted that their affinity for art was wholly intrinsic. Piaget argued that equilibration was a natural response to context and experience, therefore it was not motivated by specific rewards...it was an innate adaptation (Muller, Carpendale, and Smith, 2009). When asked if anyone else impacted his view of art, Lee offered, "I just feel that way." Lee naturally perceived his interest in art as being intrinsically motivated.

Conversely, although he did not think that his view of art was impacted by anyone else, Lee's mother did take an interest in his artwork. Lee had previously only mentioned

his mother as an educational motivator. He would also add that she treats his artwork with an interesting regard.

DS: Do you bring any art home?

Lee: Yeah, last year...and this year yeah too.

DS: That's interesting. Does she hang your stuff up?

Lee: No. My mom just...keep it with all the other awards

DS: Oh, so she keeps it with...your other achievements? Your accomplishments?

Lee: *Nods*

(Interview 3, May 2014)

Lee's mother, in spite of being mentioned mostly in terms of his motivation and homework, also showed interest in what he created in art class. She treated the artwork he brought home as if it were an award and kept it with other prizes he had won or been awarded. Once again, Lee looked proud as he made this statement. His chin was raised and he wore a thin smile and raised eyebrows. His mother displayed a value for his artwork but that valuation seemed different than that of Lee. Lee saw art as an expressive medium whereas his mother saw it as an accomplishment. Taylor (2010) and Crowther (2010) might note that a traditional role for art was as cultural capital to gain acceptance or prove one's worth in society. In that vein, art would be seen as proof of civilization and accomplishment, especially among blacks. Lee's mother treated his artwork as she treated his other accolades, but her motivations were not definitively clear.

I also asked students some general questions about their non-school related prior experiences with the arts.

DS: Does anybody in your house talk about art?

Patrick: Yes my [older] sister, she loved art. She likes to draw a lot.

DS: Your little brother, does he like to draw too?

Patrick: Yeah.

DS: So it's just you, your, sister, and your brother [who draw]...do they draw something in particular?

Patrick: My sister like drawing landscapes. There's this tree in front of our house...she had this notebook...she be drawing and make it look really nice.

(Interview 1, June 2014)

Patrick's older sister didn't just "like" or "enjoy" art; she "loved" it. This distinction seems important in the context of how Patrick viewed his sister and how he views art. His descriptions of his sister and her art were delivered in a more serious, yet still excited tone. His voice was not as animated and emotive. He appeared to be using his voice and face to invest these moments with gravitas and near reverence. Patrick's regard for his sister's talent was most evident in his description of her drawing. He noted that his sister also drew a great deal and had the ability to create "really nice" drawings. An underlying implication could be that "really nice" meant "realistic", considering the subject of her drawing. Another interesting point could be seen in Patrick's use of the word "landscape" followed by a description of his sister drawing what she saw outside. This

accurate use of art terminology appeared to be connected to his sister, as he used no other such terminology in later interviews.

Rodney's prior experience with art in elementary school led to other interesting points. These points related to ideas of transitioning from a child to an adult and art as a place for agency and self-expression.

DS: Did you have art class in that [his prior elementary] school?

Rodney: Yeah.

DS: How did you feel about that class?

Rodney: I liked it because it was a way for me to express myself and every time we had it...we can always put a little bit of myself into it into what we're doing. I liked it the most. Because in that school it was like elementary art. Like drawings, like coloring. But here...it's more advanced.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

In his prior school, Rodney noted that the art classes were a good place for him to be himself and go in his own direction. He was embracing the chance to communicate his thoughts and feelings in this class (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Feldman-Farb, 2012; Harter, 2012). He also mentioned that the classes at his former school were not as hard as they are at Tanner. He expressed a similar thought when discussing his academic classes. The difference was in how he described the easier art classes. He liked them, he enjoyed them, he felt personally invested in the work, but he still used the word "elementary" as a pejorative term. Again, Cletus expressed an eagerness for maturity and advancement. Even though he slightly misunderstood the question, (I was not asking

about his current school yet) his face lit up when he mentioned the “advanced” art classes he has at Tanner. He lifted his head briefly, as if feeling pride, and raised his eyebrows. As Harter (2012) theorized, Cletus was looking at his past as more childish and less appealing whereas “advanced” work was more esteemed as it symbolized his ascension to adulthood. This mirrored Cletus’ perspective on the advanced and more college-style instruction in his academic classes.

Cletus expressed similar views about his previous experiences with art in school. He spoke of his own preparation and competence. He also saw his previous art classes as no different from other classes. Where Cletus’ past experiences with art differed greatly from his peers was in the following discussion of one specific artist whose work he remembered.

DS: Did anyone ever take you to concerts, museums, galleries?

Cletus: Yeah, I...went to every museum in Philadelphia. Like the Franklin Institute the Please Touch Museum.

DS: You been to the Philly Museum of Art? The big one?

Cletus: No. No I haven't heard of that one.

DS: Think about classical artists that you heard of...do you think of any names?

Cletus: Chuck...I forgot his name...he's bald and he's like sitting and...

DS: Chuck Close!? [a wheelchair bound portrait artist]

Cletus: Yeah!

DS: Chuck Close is ridiculous [amazing]. Have you ever gotten up close with his work?

Cletus: Yeah, yeah I did!

DS: Did you know he has face blindness? He can't remember a face once he seen it so he does these works and wouldn't recognize the people.

Cletus: Yeah, he also has these blurry kind of paintings too. Some of his paintings is blurry. Most of his paintings are some random people he gets.

Random people.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

What began as a brief foray into the museums he visited turned into an interesting and animated discussion about the artist, Chuck Close. I was taken aback, not by the fact that Cletus knew who Mr. Close was, but by the excitement he showed when he realized that I knew who he was talking about. Of all of the participants, Cletus was the only one to mention a particular artist by name. He was also the one who seemed most genuinely happy during this portion of the interview. His normally flat voice became loud and his and calm demeanor became energetic and filled with gesticulation. His eyes were fixed on mine and he smiled vibrantly. It was clear that Cletus was happy to be having what he might consider an “advanced” conversation about art. He had previously shown a respect for higher education or college-style work. He also repeatedly reminded me that he was mature and responsible. Cletus was embracing the adult side of his adolescent transition (Harter, 2012). This conversation began to act as a symbol of that ascension as well as possible sign acceptance on my part. When I asked Cletus if he had ever gotten near Mr. Close’s work (some of his pieces are several feet tall and equally wide), I wanted to see how he would describe the artist’s methods. Chuck Close uses small shapes of different

colors to create large, hyper-realistic portraits various people. To Cletus, this method was summed up as “blurry” images of “random people”. He did not seem to mean this as a pejorative. Although he was able to discuss the work broadly, he had not yet reached the point of being able to explore the artist’s motivations or methods. Since Cletus appeared genuinely excited and impressed by Mr. Close’s work, I decided to see if I could relate his perspective on this artist with his overall interest in art.

DS: Now you said you been to these museums...and even just bringing up the name “Chuck Close” implies that you have some kind of a relationship with art.

Do you look up art when you're not in art class...like when you're at home?

Cletus: Yeah, yeah I do and sometimes I copy it. Sometimes when I look on Google and look on images I take whatever image I like and kind of copy it.

DS: Do you trace or do you try to draw it without tracing?

Cletus: No, I don't trace, I copy it! I look it up on the computer and I just copy it.

Like, for example, when I look at...hybrids. Like [a] werewolf and vampire mixed together, I try to copy that. And that is kind of difficult.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Given a general question about seeking out art on his own (outside of art class), Cletus said he likes to find images and copy them. When asked if he traced images, Cletus became indignant. He wanted to be clear that what he made was a result of his own skill and competence as opposed to something that he had recreated in a, seemingly, less savory way. It was, again, an assertion of his control and maturity (Muller, Carpendale, and Smith, 2009; Harter, 2012). He made it clear that he was in charge of what he

created and how it was completed. He then relented and reservedly acknowledged that copying the creatures he liked was not an easy task. Cletus' duality existed throughout his interviews. As suggested by (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003, 2009; Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013), these internal conflicts might be intensified for black males as they are transitioning into adulthood in a school system and a society that sees and treats them as somehow less competent and yet more worthy of punishment and scrutiny.

Student participants' artistic backgrounds varied. They discussed talented family members and their own memories of art in their prior schools. While Patrick's use of artistic terminology and clear affection for art made him an intriguing participant, Cletus' responses stood out. He had a more detailed and pronounced experience with art. He discussed one specific artist's work and spoke of his own museum trips with great pride. Cletus also expressed pride in his own artistic skill. He spoke confidently and shared compelling insights. Cletus was also one of the students who did not always see the art classroom as any different than any other subject. For him and Randy, school was school and they described themselves as ready to learn and do their work no matter the class. These two students wanted to be seen as more mature. They spoke of expression in art class but their responses ultimately came down to the fact that their prior experiences were steps in their ascension to adulthood. Each student was able to eventually note differences between art and their other classes. That did not necessarily mean that they felt the art room was more engaging...to them, it was just different. In order to better

understand those differences, it was important to examine the factors that students said affected their art classroom engagement.

Increased Engagement Factors

This section will address the question of which aspects of the art classroom environment, if any, students attribute their perceived increase in feelings of engagement. I noticed early in the study that visual and audial measures of engagement would be rendered inconclusive due to the boisterous and diverse nature of the classroom environment. Attempts at creating rigid instruments for measuring engagement were intended to remove the pitfalls of self-reported engagement surveys. Among those pitfalls was the assumption that student self-perception, lack of understanding, acumen, or other factors might skew otherwise reliable data (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster, 2013). The participants in this study, however, were astute and differing in their assessment of their own engagement. Adolescents may be at an especially delicate stage in development as they are attempting to prove themselves as blossoming future adults (Harter, 2012).

The students were asked about how the art classroom may have been different from their other classes. Responses varied based on several factors. One of the most noticeable factors was the students' own perception of preparation. The students took responsibility for their behavior and performance. Each student also displayed their own personality (quiet, calm, loud, oblivious, etc.) as they worked on their art projects. Each heeded directions and remained focused on their work in spite of their unique behaviors. Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007) & Tomlinson (2000, 2003) built frameworks for

understanding how the art classroom's environment and practices can impact student learning. While other classes may have a physically and/or visually similar atmosphere, the art classroom often intends to invoke a sense of comfort and freedom. Non-arts classes tend to still function using the "assembly line" model of education that puts a premium on learning and behaving the same as other students (Robinson, 2009). The art classroom is also a place where the teacher finds ways to engage a broad set of student aesthetics using intentional teaching choices. Several students expressed simple responses to questions of engagement. Several simply "just like art [class]." Others feel like they just have a desire to do as well as possible in all of their classes. There were several quotes that addressed the idea of engagement directly. Those responses focused on specific aspects of their art classroom experience.

In this section I will discuss themes that emerged from student responses to questions about what part of the art class they enjoyed most or kept them engaged. Building on the phenomenological idea that experiences and perceptions should not be divorced from their context, I will examine how the students portray these factors and their impact (Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2002). This will also be done in an attempt to "revalue" the voice of the participants (Endress, Psathas, and Nasu, 2005). The subject of art, the art class environment, and the art teacher's methods and allowances were the main reasons that students noted when arguing that they felt engaged, interested, focused, or attentive in the art classroom. I will elaborate on each factor below.

The Subject of Art

“When I do art, I always want to keep myself focused. No matter if it's distractions or anything. I just want to keep myself focused. I just like keep my focus.”

(Cletus, Interview 2, May 2014)

Visual art, although only a small aspect of aesthetics, is pervasive. In *The Craftsman* (2009), Sennett explored the very human struggle of creating as well as understanding the processes through which we reflect upon our creations and their value. Art and craft become a pursuit of doing for the sake of doing it “right”. Art is its own pursuit. Aesthetics, however, is a much more comprehensive and experiential topic. Beyond the general idea of “the arts”, aesthetics has been argued to encompass social spaces, social roles, lived experiences cultural practices, and even the very idea of human existence (Becker, 1980; Bourdieu, 1986; Burns-Coleman, Hartney, and Alderton, 2013; Schusterman, 1997, 1999). Students in this study expressed their feelings about art as a classroom subject. They also discussed their broader experiential and naturalistic responses to “aesthetic triggers”. Ken Robinson’s work on creativity (2009, 2011) mentioned the idea of aesthetic triggers as things that grab a student’s attention and help them to feel like an enjoyable part of their brain is switched on. The non-school world is replete with these triggers. Constant digital and media stimulation, Battro (2000) argues, is rewiring the way human brains work. From that world of constant stimulation and connection, students move into the “anaesthetized” world of school (Robinson, 2009). The art room becomes an oasis for students in which they get to engage and create artwork that “switches them on”.

Cletus acknowledged that he felt engaged in art as a subject because he wanted to learn something new about art each day. He actually got frustrated that Mr. Clay gave students so long to work on their projects. Cletus wanted to know as much about art as he could...and quickly. He also had a desire for his work “to be done, like perfectly.” Although he appreciated not being judged on his skills in the art class, he still wanted his art to be as perfect as possible. To him, “perfect” meant creating an image that was accurate and clearly recognizable as the character he intended. As Becker (1980) suggested, Cletus’ pursuit of perfection in his art was based on his own interpretation of reality. This was clear in the way that he meticulously and studiously drew and painted. He kept his head down and took longer than his classmates to complete his work. His pursuit of his own aesthetic truth was also reflected in his interviews as he discussed creating images that looked, to him, exactly like what he had intended. Cletus had incorporated the visual and creative aspects of art into his broader worldview.

Patrick, Cletus, and Lee made it clear that one of the main allures of the art room was the ability to “draw what you want.” The ability to establish their own agency seemed to be important to these students. They had previously referred to the overall freedom of the classroom. In this case, they were focused on the idea that what they were creating was a reflection of them and how they saw the world. In essence, it was their chance to begin establishing their own sense of self within one of their most important social spaces...school. These students, and many of their peers, were using the atmosphere of this class and subject to examine their roles, performances, and creation of individual interpretations of aesthetic truth (Becker, 1980; Burns-Coleman, et al (2013).

Patrick and Cletus specifically mentioned their intrinsic drive to learn more about art and create art that represented them as individuals. This is especially relevant given the age of the participants. At this stage in their physical, emotional, and cognitive development, it is pertinent that they have an outlet that allows them to explore and express aspects of their self-perception and aesthetic preferences (Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013; Nathan, 2013; Robinson, 2009). Mr. Clay accomplished this by always planning a degree of choice in his lessons. The students saw these choices (in things like color, shape, theme, design, or technique) as freedom. It was to this freedom that the students consistently returned. This freedom allowed them to explore their budding social and artistic identities. It is also important to allow students' voices to be the source of expertise on their perceptions (San-Martin & Calabrese, 2011; Grant & Dieker, 2010). It was the students who repeatedly argued that art acted as an outlet for their self-expression. Their expression and exploration was not only linked to the subject of art. It was also embedded in the environment and social space of the art classroom.

The Art Class Environment

"I feel like it [the art classroom] just brighten up your day. When you walk into class, you see all the colors and see all the art it just makes you feel happy."

(Rodney, Interview 1, May 2014)

The participants in this study consistently saw environment as an important aspect of their engagement in the art class. Environment in this case includes the behavioral atmosphere as well as the actual physical room. This atmosphere was exploratory, fun, and triggered moments of aesthetic engagement that went beyond what the students were

creating (San-Martin & Calabrese, 2011; Grant & Dieker, 2010; Robinson, 2009). The room itself, along with the students' expectations of and responses to the room, was able to affect student engagement. The art classroom environment was also subject to the behavior of the occupants.

Patrick worried that the behavioral freedom of the art classroom could sometimes be problematic. Too many voices and too much freedom created distractions.

DS: Is there anything you dislike about this class?

Patrick: Sometimes the kids make a lot of noise so you can't focus.

DS: That's interesting. You get some freedom but at the same time some people, when they get too much freedom...

Patrick: Yeah, they talk too much and you just can't, like, focus.

(Interview 2, June 2014)

Some students were not able to control themselves and it impacted the class' environment. Patrick appeared to intimate that not all of his peers were mature enough to handle the responsibility that came with a more loosely structured (in terms of student movement and speaking) classroom environment. This was one of the difficult aspects of loosening the behavioral structure for students. As was the case with some students, attention seeking or aggressive behavior, when unchecked, can escalate quickly. Mr. Clay's intervention strategy, when students' behavior exceeded what he considered acceptable, was to raise his voice and redirect the students in order to reestablish the general tenor of the room. If the students did not respond, he would move closer and intervene in a calmer, quieter manner. Mr. Clay was intent on ensuring that the room

remained in a state of “controlled chaos” where students felt comfortable but respectful. When asked directly about when and why he chose to challenge student behavior, Mr. Clay offered, “If I challenged every aspect of their behavior, nothing would get done.” (Field Notes, February 22, 2014) Patrick’s perspective examined the aesthetic experience of students’ performed behavior in a specific social space (Burns-Coleman, Hartney, and Alderton, 2013). In this case, Patrick felt that, although talking was allowed, if talking was not regulated, it could negatively impact other students. During observations, no students verbalized or showed physical indications of frustration regarding classroom noise. If anything, they seemed to enjoy speaking and moving. Mr. Clay, however, clearly acknowledged that he knew the class could be unruly, but he had to choose his battles. Conversely, some student participants felt otherwise..

As suggested by San-Martin & Calabrese (2011), Randy appreciated the camaraderie that accompanied the freedom of the art classroom. Randy had previously noted that several of his other classes were structured more rigidly. Mrs. Claudia (who was Randy’s homeroom and reading teacher) confirmed this when she elaborated on how quiet and orderly she prefers her classes to be. In the art classroom, Randy noted, his entire class talks more than they do in other classes. This gregarious environment, which was partially created by his classmates, helped Randy (who was normally quiet in school) to feel more comfortable speaking. When asked what he liked most about the art room, he answered that in the art class:

Randy: I just feel like, I mean, like, show who I am and talk to people I want to talk to. I can do what I want to do.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Maslow (1943) might argue that an environment in which a student feels an increased sense of belonging, fellowship, and creativity moves them closer to self-actualization. For Randy, the art classroom environment, with its liberal talking policy, in addition to the level of expression allowed through the artwork, made him feel more comfortable. He spoke more and got to explore painting while conversing with his friends. He felt that he could do neither in his other classes.

For Lee, the visuals around the room were what kept his attention. In addition to his own desire to learn to draw, Lee noted that he liked the art room's décor.

DS: Is there something in that particular in this that keeps you most interested?

Lee: The drawings he [Mr. Clay] be hanging up sometimes.

(Interview 2, 2014)

When I first entered the art room at Tanner, I noticed that the layout and decoration of the room seemed to be intended to keep the eye moving. Paintings, posters, student art, and supplies made the room visually engaging. The students who populated it also imbued the room with energy. That energy could be positive or negative. The consensus was that the students acknowledged the importance of the art classroom environment as a factor in their overall engagement in the art class. This intentional arrangement of social space created an encompassing aesthetic experience where in which students actually contributed to its maintenance. On at least one occasion, students in the class admonished their one of their peers for not listening to Mr. Clay or damaging part of the art environment. Students also repeatedly took credit for the work of others. Several

times during observations, students pointed out work they claimed to have completed only to have Mr. Clay later acknowledge that other students had been the creators. In some cases, the work was quite good (as seen in images 4, 5, and 6). On other occasions, the work that students claimed were unfinished or not completed with as much skill. It appeared that the students wished to not only connect with the subject or the teacher... genuinely wanted to be associated with some aspect of the room itself. The environment was not only affected by the décor and students' presence; the art teacher also played a role in making the students feel connected to the subject.

The Art Teacher's Methods

"When Mr. Clay is going over things like that we haven't learned yet I find that really fascinating so I focus more so I could know how to do it right."

(Patrick, Interview 2, June 2014)

Mr. Clay had a distinctive way of connecting with students while maintaining an authoritarian tone. His methods, as advocated by Robinson (2011), Winner, Hetland, et al. (2007) and Tomlinson (2000, 2003), were an intentional attempt to guide as many students to success in the class using as many approaches as possible. Mr. Clay's actual instruction appeared to be straightforward. He was calm and professional most of the time. He demonstrated methods and lessons, but only briefly. When he verbally introduced lessons, students paid attention. As students worked, he engaged as many of them as possible. He offered the level of guidance and prodding that he felt individual students needed.

Although the field notes for this study are filled with descriptions of Mr. Clay's methods, students tended to speak of him in general terms. To them, he just did things a certain way. They were not conscious of his intentions or interventions. His classroom management style ranged from playful to very professional. During his playful moments, Mr. Clay joked with students and engaged them in conversations about comics and sports. During his more professional moments, he became a diplomat who sought compromise and peace. He carried out each with a detached and businesslike manner. Mr. Clay rarely showed much emotion. When he did, it disarmed students. When one student was yelling and cursing at classmates, Mr. Clay threatened that the student's behavior was going to get him sent to the disciplinarian. The student, undaunted, walked to the door and began to leave. Mr. Clay then softly offered, "I want you here. I want you in my class" (Field Notes, February 28, 2014). The entire class was quiet and the student stopped, muttered something indecipherable, and returned to his seat. On another occasion, Mr. Clay's methods helped to defuse an escalating incident with the same student.

As Mr. Clay attempted to get one student settled and caught up on work he missed, another stood directly behind the teacher furiously rubbing two long wooden rulers together. He asked Mr. Clay if he would be able to make fire if he kept rubbing them together. Mr. Clay ignored him and continued to speak to the student he was helping. As he did this, another student at the table was working to recreate a Shepard Fairey "Obey" image. Mr. Clay began to discuss Fairey's rise to prominence via "Obey" images and stickers as well as his portraits of the

president and others. The conversation engaged the students at the two adjacent tables. Several stopped working and turned towards Mr. Clay as he spoke. The students listened intently...all but the boy with the rulers. He looked around at the attentive students with visibly increasing frustration. Mr. Clay usually spoke in a conversational tone when he was sitting at a table working with one or more students. When the Fairey conversation began, Mr. Clay spoke in an intermediate tone...not as loud as when he wanted to get the attention of the entire class and nowhere near as quietly as when he was talking to just a few students.

The student began rubbing the rulers together faster and closer to Mr. Clay's head. Mr. Clay attempted to get the boy involved in the conversation without success. After a few moments, Mr. Clay put his hand firmly on the two rulers that the boy was holding and told him to, "stop". The ensuing physical contest showed an interesting dynamic. Neither person let go of the rulers. They each stood by the table and (relatively) calmly pulled in their own direction. The boy, being the smaller of the two, had to exert considerably more energy as evidenced by his quiet grunts and facial expression. He also leaned his body back to pull harder. Mr. Clay, conversely, used one hand to pull the rulers. The veins in his hand were prominent and his knuckles paled. The muscles in his forearm were tense and his arm was stiff. But he did not look at the boy after his initial request that the student stop. Mr. Clay turned his body so that he was facing other students. The arm and hand that were holding the rulers was behind him. His face showed little evidence of the struggle as he answered student questions and

gave directions. Eventually, the student let go and Mr. Clay walked away to check on other students without acknowledging what had just happened. As he walked, he picked up all of the other rulers that were around the class.

(Field Notes, March 21, 2014)

Multiple aspects of Mr. Clay's methods were on display here. He was providing direct assistance to a student who came to class late and was behind in his work. He was making an effort to individualize instruction when a disciplinary issue arose. As mentioned previously, Mr. Clay allows the students to speak and move freely around the class. When the aforementioned student began to speak loudly, curse at classmates in an angry fashion and attempt to antagonize the teacher by rubbing the rulers together near his face, Mr. Clay reacted in three distinct ways. First, he did not escalate the situation by yelling at or overtly admonishing the student. Second, he started a broad topical discussion related to interesting aspects of a particular artist's life and tried to engage the nearby students (including the boy) in an educational dialogue. Third, when he realized he would have to physically intervene, he did so calmly and without aggression or intimidation. These observations may not seem related to Mr. Clay's overall teaching methods. One could argue, however, that general instructional practices are only a small part of teaching. Classroom management and engaging students in more in depth discussion are also large parts of teaching. Treating the student with an understanding that he may just be acting out (Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013), engaging students in a real-world dialogue related to the work (Freire, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003), and maintaining a professional demeanor in the midst of reflexive instruction

(Hetland, Winner, et al., 2007) are all seen as key elements of effective classroom management and student engagement. The methods that students mentioned explored Mr. Clay's classroom presence more broadly.

Randy seemed grateful that Mr. Clay showed students multiple paths to reach project completion. He did not demand or expect students to do things the same. Randy also noted that Mr. Clay had a way of teaching kids things of which they never thought.

Randy: I like that Mr. Clay shows us different ways of drawing. Like from different views...and he teaches you things that I never thought of. I never thought of trying like he does, like the way he paints. Like how he mixes the colors and makes it darker. Like "this is the shade."

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Randy was enamored by the idea of learning through discovery. He saw Mr. Clay's approach to teaching in a very positive light. Rodney also offered praise for Mr. Clay's teaching methods. To him, Mr. Clay's demonstrations and instructions were most important. Mr. Clay's pedagogy was based partly on content and partly on what he knew about the students. This placed Mr. Clay's practices alongside Tomlinson's (200, 2003) theorizations on differentiation. Mr. Clay's wide range of approaches in both instruction and general interactions ensured that students were being given multiple avenues for exploration, communication, and success.

Rodney: I like that Mr. Clay...*teach* art. And Mr. Clay...he's not one of those teachers who make you work just to do it...he shows you how to do it and he explains it.

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Rodney placed emphasis on the word “teach” in this quote. To him, it was important that Mr. Clay actually instructed them and demonstrated how things should be done. Other teachers, he felt, seemed to want students to work without a clear understanding of why. Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007) offered that something that distinguishes art class methodology from other classes is that art teachers often demonstrate skills then allow students to practice those new skills immediately. During the gridding and map lessons, students were getting supplies and trying to apply their new knowledge within minutes of the beginning of class. Mr. Clay’s demonstrations and introductions were brief. The larger part of his instruction took place as students worked. The immediate use of new skills, according to Hetland, Winner, et al., reduce the need for rote and allows students to begin the process of mastering and eventually adapting their new skill to their preference or need. Mr. Clay’s demonstrations served to gain student interest and create a practical model for students to reference as they worked. He did not, however, expect student work to be of a particular quality. Cletus’ comment about Mr. Clay’s lack of judgment again demonstrated how the teacher’s approach affected students.

Cletus: Mr. Clay, he doesn't judge [student artwork] on how good or bad it is.

That's a good part about the class. He doesn't like really [say] "oh, your art is bad so you don't get a good grade". Like, at least if you try, maybe you'll get an A.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Mr. Clay said something similar in his interview. “Final product tells me whether or not they got it, whether not they’re engaged. I grade on effort. I want you working on it the whole time but I understand if you’re ‘off’ that day. But final product...that's how I

judge” (Mr. Clay Interview, May, 2014). Similar to the student participant selection criteria for this study, Mr. Clay was focused on student perseverance. As Cletus suggested, Mr. Clay wanted students to work as best they could. He even offered that he understood that students might have an “off” day. This type of student-centered and reflexive pedagogy reflects Grant & Dieker’s (2010) findings on what black males say they want from a teacher.

Student responses and observational data paint a picture of an art experience at Tanner that engaged black male students in ways that some other classes did not. This section discussed the subject of art, the art class environment, and the art teacher’s methods and allowances. These factors were the main reasons that students noted when arguing that they felt engaged, interested, focused, or attentive in the art classroom. The broader finding is that the ideal art classroom, and all it encompasses, establishes a social and educational space wherein students are the focus of instruction. Their preferences and interests guide aspects of much of the work. Skill acquisition is practical instead of theoretical. The students can clearly see aspects of themselves and their outside lives in their work. Mr. Clay’s class, like an ideal art classroom, became a place where the subject of visual arts, the colorful and familiar environment, and the teacher’s intentional and natural instructional choices converged to create a more complete aesthetic experience for students.

Emergent Themes

In the following pages, I will analyze and further expound on themes that arose from students responses in the context of some of the more central ideas shared in

Chapter 2. I will consider how students' perspectives relate to established concepts surrounding aesthetics, engagement and the argument for the arts in school. The goal of this analysis is to place student responses alongside existing theorization in a way that adds to the overall scholarship on these topics. I also plan to show how students' experiences help to explain why these topics are germane to education in general.

Aesthetics and The Value of the Arts

Ken Robinson (2009, 2011) and Tolstoy (in Knox, 1930) argued that aesthetics are highly personal and subjective. Each person has their own "aesthetic triggers" that create a sense of connection and excitement. The creation of art thereby becomes a personal expression of thought, experience, or feeling. Being almost contagious, the expression of art becomes an outlet for the communication of one's innermost preferences. Others, however, pushed theories of aesthetics further. Some placed aesthetics as not only a response to or creation of external beauty; but as a key aspect of human existence and motivation (Becker, 1980; Schusterman, 1999). Burns-Coleman, et al. (2013) examined disembodied aesthetics that exist in social interactions and the purposing of social spaces. These conceptions demonstrate the pervasive nature of aesthetics. Visual aesthetics guide student choices in attire, physical attraction, and what type of visual arts they preferred. The more experiential and social aspects of aesthetics guided their behavior and, ultimately, their engagement. Although this study did not focus on broader aspects of visual aesthetics like objective beauty or attire preferences, students were required to wear relatively uniform outfits; their perspectives on visual arts were still explored. Each of the participants in this study was given an opportunity to

define art using his own language and mental imagery. Even those who had to pause and think for a minute seemed to be gathering existing thoughts instead of reaching for something they hadn't considered.

DS: When you think about art, how would you define art?

Cletus: I define art as...like something that you create in your mind or something. You just think of something then just write it down and think about it.

DS: So something you create and your mind...

Cletus: Yeah, like drawing. You think, "this sounds easy but it's a little difficult but I can do it" sometimes.

DS: Do you think anything else aside from drawing and painting is art?

Cletus: Sports.

DS: You think sports are art?

Cletus: Yeah.

DS: Why do you think sports are art?

Cletus: [Be]cause...when you practice and it's good, you basically get better. So like when you get better and better at practice...you become part of it, like in a real game. You get perfect. So I was saying it's kind of an art...it takes practice to draw? So when you're playing sports it takes practice to get better.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Cletus struggled to explain exactly how he felt about art. As Cordileone (2011) suggested, Cletus' aesthetic thoughts had become embedded. It was difficult for him to rationalize something that Robinson (2009, 2011) and Gougen (2000) considered highly

intrinsic and relative. Cletus mentioned the mental aspect of the creative process followed by how one would “write it down” (draw it) and then think about it some more. Tolstoy’s definition of “esthetics” considered the communicative properties of art (Knox, 1930). These properties included the transmission of ideas and experiences via lines, colors, or movement. This latter form of communication became more relevant as Cletus’ thoughts turned to sports’ relationship to the arts. He looked at sports as an artistic endeavor as well. Cletus likened the effort and dedication shown for athletic success to how one had to work hard during the creative process. As was the case in his earlier academic discussion, art and athletics, to Cletus, were about effort and improvement. This was evident in the way that he worked in class. His head was down and he seemed almost disconnected from the rest of the class as he worked. If there were a loud outburst or commotion, above the classroom’s normal din, Cletus would look up quickly, almost as if he were waking from a nap. He looked around towards the noise for a moment and then he returned to his work without speaking. Like other aspects of his life, Cletus operationalized the effort and skill required for success in art. This did not, however, mean that he did not recognize the individualized and creative aspects of art. If anything, he had personalized it and made it fit his broader worldview.

Lee became outwardly philosophical when asked about his view of art. He spoke with his head raised and his chin jutting thoughtfully. Some of the energy and animation left his face and body as he attempted to adopt a more mature visage.

DS: What do you consider to be art?

Lee: To me, I think I consider art like drawing and painting and...to, like, paint what you thinking of or paint what the teacher tell you to paint. And it's basically that you have fun while you're doing it.

(Interview 2, May 2014)

Lee's definition of art was an amalgam of creativity, following instructions, and having fun. As suggested by Harter (2012), Lee was still struggling between seeking control of his expression and doing what his teachers suggested. Lee also noted that art was supposed to be a "fun". Robinson (2009) would describe that sense of "fun" as being aesthetically triggered. This is the equivalent to being "fully present" in a moment or an experience. Lee moved around the art classroom, speaking with anyone who would listen. When he was mocked by classmates for getting "crossed-over" during a basketball game, Lee laughed loudly and deflected the jibes of his classmates. His jovial demeanor never wavered. He moved, he interacted, he laughed, and he worked. This type of experience, San-Martin & Calabrese (2011) and Boykin, Tyler, et al. (2009) suggested, is exactly what adolescent black male students ask for in their education. Environments in which they can engage in "vervistic" communal behaviors and still learn and explore content and methods.

Randy's first chance to define art began in a relatively generic fashion. He had previously clarified that even though art was not necessarily an educational priority in his home, he still felt artistically inclined. He had discovered a new appreciation for painting and showed an affinity for the art classroom. He also felt like the art room

allowed him to show more of his personality than other classes. Randy began his definition much in the vein of Tolstoy's (Knox, 1930) conception.

DS: How would you define what art is?

Randy: I guess expressing yourself and being creative. Writing what you're thinking in your head. Like painting...you can paint...it don't matter [what you paint]. But...I think it's just expressing yourself. Like my little brother, he does art all the time. And he just write stuff that he likes. He likes Dragon Ball Z [a popular cartoon]. So he'll write all the characters. And when I used to draw...I used to write sports stuff like drawing players. But I don't draw no more...not like that [as much].

(Interview 1, May 2014)

Randy defined art in broad emotive terms. Art, to him, was about communication. He saw art as a way to communicate thoughts and personal feelings. He used his brother as an example of this communication. His younger brother liked and thought about a particular cartoon so his art reflected that; his art was intended take the emotion triggered by his experience and “to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling” (Knox, 1930). Randy did much the same. Seeing himself as an athlete, preferred to create images of other athletes. This was demonstrated in the way that he focused so intently on his NBA themed sculpture. The artwork was not just an object; Randy considered it to be a reflection of who he was. He used art to share his connection with and appreciation of sports. In discussing he and his brother's artistic expression, Randy used the words “draw” and “write” interchangeably before noting (with a subtle

downward shake of his head) that he does not draw much anymore. This displayed both how Randy discussed art as a communicative outlet as well as his visceral reaction to not creating art as much anymore. Randy referenced both the visual and the experiential aspects of art. For him, art was more than a subject at school. It was something that stayed with him wherever he went and was not limited in its effect, positively or negatively, to the objects he created.

When Rodney was asked to define art, he offered, “I think it’s the way you...let your feelings out.” (Interview 1, May 2014) Rodney’s response was succinct and reiterated the personal aspects of art. He also noted the fact that the art class was not his only expressive outlet. Music was the only other class where he felt that he could “express himself”. Although interviews and observations did not explore the structure of the school’s music classroom, Rodney’s opinion of the art class and music class seemed similar. Each was a place in which he felt that he could communicate aspects of his personality more freely than in academic classes. Interestingly, Rodney’s relatively laconic behavior during observations and interviews was similar to Mrs. Claudia’s description of his behavior in her classes. Herein lies the importance of mixing interviews and observations in studying engagement. To look at Rodney during class, one might surmise that he was not enjoying what he was doing. His interviews, however, suggest that he was enjoying his art class experiences. One might also think Rodney was not on-task. Closer inspection revealed that, though he sometimes needed the urging of his teachers, Rodney persevered once he started working. Though his behavior was

similar in each class, Rodney still argued that the art classroom was a place where he felt he could be more expressive and sincere.

Each of the participants used the phrases “express yourself”, “do what you want”, or “be you”. This implied that the students in this study were using this creative space to communicate their feelings and interests as well as to establish their general sense of self (Burns-Coleman, et al., 2013). Whether or not the original seed for these thoughts resided within the student, to each of them the art class was a place that loosened restrictions on who they felt they could be. During this period in their development, it seemed important for these boys to be able to communicate freely. It also appeared important that they be able to create expressions of their own aesthetics and explore their roles in the art class as well as school. Goguen (2000) noted the fact that art outpaces any attempts to define it. This is due in large part to the fact that art and aesthetics are inherently personal. In spite of attempts to operationalize aesthetics (Goguen, 2000; Knox, 1930; Nelson, 2011; Schusterman, 1997, 1999), students continued to define art in ways that reflect their own perspectives. This class was one of the spaces in which the student participants felt they could communicate and learn in their own way. The constant discussions and overall sense of comfort in the classes that were observed bore this out. Although observations were limited to two class periods twice per week over the course of two months, data from interviews reinforced what was seen in the art class. Art class was a place that student participants simply liked. It was a space where the subject, environment, and pedagogy provided students with a fuller aesthetic experience.

It was also a space that appeared to show some of the students a new way to look at their own lives.

Argument for the Arts: Art and the Future

The argument for the arts in schools ranges from discussions on the intrinsic value of art (Crowther, 2010; Robinson, 2009, 2011; Gougen, 2000; Dewey, 1980) to rationalizations about how the arts can be systematized to help specific groups of students (Deasy & Stevenson, 2005; Hetland, Winner, et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2003; Diket & Mucha, 2002; Colcord-Stuht & Yuguchi-Gates, 2007). The common strand in each of these arguments is the idea that the arts are an integral aspect of students' daily lives. This study considered the role of a particular art class in the lives of a particular set of students. It was important to not only ask these students about their experiences with art, but to ask them if they thought the arts would continue to play a role in their lives in the future. Of the students interviewed, only Randy and Cletus made clear connections between art and what they planned to do after they finished school.

Randy had previously mentioned that his goal was to play professional basketball or become an architect. When asked how he saw art playing a role in his future, Randy was pragmatic.

DS: How do you see what you're doing in art right now fitting into that? Or does it fit in?

Randy: I think in my future, basketball and architecture, you have to be creative to make some of the buildings and basketball. You're creative when you try to use

skills like crossovers like hook shots & stuff finding new ways. Got to be creative.

(Interview 3, May 2014)

Randy saw the creativity of art playing a role in either of his future goals. Ken Robinson's work on creativity (2009, 2011) made the concise argument that the arts were a catalyst for enhanced consciousness. Through the arts one could gain a unique perspective to address an issue or apply creative thought to a seemingly unrelated subject. Randy did each of these as he argued that creativity could help him come up with unique structures or hone his skills at basketball without becoming predictable.

Cletus also made a connection between art and sports. His language seemed more metaphorical than literal. Unlike Randy, he did not plan a career where the skills and practices from art class would be of direct value. He did, however, see how the two fields related to one another. Cletus had expressed his desire to become a professional boxer in a prior interview. He then surprised me with this insightful exchange that began when I asked about his future. It began with a clarification of how his father motivated him and shifted to an exploration of how two seemingly dissimilar subjects related to one another.

DS: How do you see your education fitting into your plans to be a boxer?

Cletus: Well my dad, he wants me to. I'm in the gym, but if I want to start a career, he said I have to pass this marking period.

DS: So you have to keep getting good grades in order to continue boxing?

Cletus: Yeah. To start a career. But I am [already] in the gym.

DS: Do you see the arts fitting into that plan? In any way?

Cletus: Yeah. I think boxing is an art...I think anything you do with your body, like we were talking about last time, things you can do with your body dancing, music, drawing, they're all art. But boxing and fighting, they're [a] different kind of art. Art is like built from creativity from your mind...from your brain.

DS: And there's definitely creativity in boxing?

Cletus: Yeah. Because your brain is what controls both your hands and creativity comes. You be creative with your hands and that's where it comes from.

(Interview 3, May 2014)

His father's "serious" view of education came up again as Cletus explained another motivational technique he used. Cletus' father understood that his son loved boxing and used that as leverage to motivate him in school. Based on Cletus' other responses as well as his demeanor here, it did not seem that he disliked this type of motivation. To the contrary, he seemed to crave it. His earlier description of how he resented that his father would not motivate him artistically, seemed to confirm this. Cletus had spoken of the importance of practice in all types of arts...one of which was sports. He began by talking about movement as art then offered the idea that creativity was a cognitive process. He then made the connection of hands being controlled by the same processes. As suggested by Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007), Cletus saw clearly how the methods and content of the art class could possibly influence his future. Tolstoy (Knox, 1930) also intimated that "esthetic" endeavors were not limited to static creations...they also included "movement". This idea that kinesthetic creativity or learning (Gardner, 1983) could have

a direct connection to the more ethereal creativity of the art classroom seemed profound. Indeed, Cletus spoke calmly and with confidence as if he knew that what he was saying was compelling. For Cletus and Randy, the arts were going to play a role. The level of that role differed. What did not differ was their understanding that they would need to continue to hone their creativity well after they left Mr. Clay's art class.

In this section I discussed student backgrounds, how students perceived their experience in the art classroom, which aspects of the art class helped the students feel more engaged, and broader themes related to aesthetics, art in student futures. The goal was to paint a picture of the human experience of these five black boys from Tanner middle school. Each student had a distinct set of factors that helped to form his views of the arts and school. Each student also had his own reason for his views on this particular art class. Common among all of the students was the fact that there was something about art, the art room itself, or the art teacher's methods that made them enjoy the art classroom. Not all of the students actually said that the art classroom was more engaging. They did, however, each point out particular aspects they liked the most. Evidence also indicated that student families played large roles in students' academic experiences, and thereby their views of school. Students cited family members as people who would check their homework and motivate them to be academically successful in other ways. Much of the students' overall affinity for the arts appeared, from their perspective, to be intrinsically motivated. These and other ideas will be discussed further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study examined the perspectives and experiences of urban black male middle school students in connection to their art class. The preceding chapters have discussed existing literature related to aesthetics, culture, adolescence, black male students, and arguments for the arts in school. I have also shared detailed results and analysis of student responses. In the following section, I will discuss the rationales and methodology of the study. I will also offer a brief summary of the study's findings. I will look at those findings broadly as well as looking at how they relate to the existing literature. I will then examine the implications of those findings in relation to classroom practice as well as further directions for research. Finally, I will reflect on the experience of conducting a study in a classroom, school, and community that mirrored the ones in which I have taught learned, and lived. I will also reflect on the experience of interviewing students who inhabit a space so similar yet distinctly different from the one I inhabited at their age.

The purpose of this study was to explore how urban black male middle school students experienced their art classes. The study also sought to examine how students' prior experiences with art and school affected their perceptions. The study additionally looked at how these students perceived their engagement in the art classroom. The existing literature from Chapter 2 spent a great deal of time discussing the arts and how they can benefit students. Researchers have considered how the arts affect behavior, academic success, and future outcomes. The arts, in most cases, have discussed in ways that position them as external outlets as opposed to integral aspects of human experience.

The findings of this study argue that, while there may be salient rationales for using the arts or art-like approaches in other classes, the true power of the art classroom and its ability to engage students lies in its embrace of broader definitions of aesthetics (Becker, 1980; Burns-Coleman, et al., 2013, Schusterman, 1997,1999). In this study, five 8th grade black male students were interviewed and observed over the course of two months. Three teachers were also interviewed, but only for contextual references. The focus of the study was student voices. In order to gain a fuller understanding of their perspectives, the students were asked about their educational and art related experiences both in school and at home. They were also given an opportunity to reflect on what or who may have influenced their perspectives. The boys were also allowed to discuss what aspects of the art room, if any, affected their engagement. The resulting data indicated that a convergence of multiple factors made the student participants feel more comfortable and engaged in the art room than in other academic classes.

The Boys

The students in this study entered the classroom with preconceptions about art and school in general. Their families played a role in the development of these views. Randy's teacher-mother, Cletus' policeman-father, and Patrick's idealistic-mother provided their own unique motivations for their children to do well in school. Each saw school as an important aspect of their child's future success. Cletus' parents were especially interesting. His father used multiple behaviorist approaches to get Cletus to seek help and improve his grades. His mother, conversely, appeared to motivate Cletus more indirectly by simply pursuing her own higher education. Both Cletus and Randy

noted that their parents sometimes created art. They did not, however, discuss art with them or create art together. Although only one of the parents (Lee's mother) was said to express a particular interest in how their child was doing in the art class, each interviewee discussed the bond that they and a sibling share in visual art. Cletus vividly described his younger brother's "obsession" with drawing zombies before he mentioned his own monster fascination...vampires. He also discussed how he and his brother would hang their finished artwork in each other's room. Randy and Patrick also mentioned how they and their younger sibling create art outside of their respective art classrooms. Patrick also mentioned his older sister's influence in both art and his academics. It was apparent that the students' views of art and school were impacted by several factors.

Students seemed to expect that the art class would engage them more than their other classes. The art class was the antithesis of other classes in many ways. It was discussed as a fun, relieving, comfortable, and open place. Factors for student perspectives of the art class varied. Those factors included the classroom environment, Mr. Clay's methods, proximity to friends, and ability to speak and move freely. Each student's prior school experiences, as well as their personal experiences with art, helped to shape their views as well.

The Boys' Lived Experiences

Adolescence is the period after the onset of puberty when a boy's body begins to mature and show the type of man he may become. It is the time when a boy is learning to examine himself through the eyes of others (Harter, 2012, 1986; Perry & Pauletti, 2011). It is also a time when black male educational achievement may be most affected. Black

male students face a very specific set of obstacles in school and in society (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Cunningham, Phillips-Swanson, & Hayes, 2013). The confluence of high dropout rates, violence, poverty, in-school disciplinary issues, and incarceration among black males is a road well traveled. This study sought to learn directly from the students how and if a particular learning environment could help them. “Help” is often seen as a value-laden term. It can mean many different things to many different people. In this case, I am using the word in its most altruistic and contextually fluid definition. Help is a differential term. It is also a culturally relevant term. Helping will require different things for each of these students. The best way to learn what students need is to speak to them. The value in such an approach is not its generalizability. In fact, phenomenological research is not intended to be applied to large swaths of a population. This type of research is grounded in a desire to better understand the inherent uniqueness of specific phenomenon through the eyes of the participants. In this case, those participants are five black boys with distinct backgrounds and distinct personalities who happen to be of the in the same grade at the same school. The fact that they spoke of their art class experiences in relatively similar terms is not intended to imply that all students in this demographic will feel the same way. It does, however, suggest that, in spite of their differences, the art classroom did affect them in similar ways. There was still the lingering question about whether or not this effect was predictable based on a socially accepted purpose of the art class as a “place for expression”. What was most important for this study was to examine these ideas from the students’ perspectives. To the students, their interest in art was not based on a disconnected idea of what the art

class should be. Their interest in art, and school in general, was based on their own, personal conceptions.

All of the students who were interviewed saw education as an important aspect of their futures. Each also noted that the art classroom was a place that lifted restrictions and allowed them to develop. These students all lauded the overall subject, methods, and environment associated with the visual art classroom. The art classroom, according to students, is a place of freedom, expression, less judgment, stimulation, fun, and communication. The ever-present weight of their adolescence seems to be buoyed when they enter the art room. The boredom and pressure that they lament in other classes seems to be lessened. This art classroom is not only a place that gives students freedom, it also allows them a chance to grow and interact in ways that may not be allowed in other classes. As these students are transitioning between childhood and adulthood, the freedom of the art class can act as a social laboratory. In this room students explore and practice not only visual arts, but also the limits of language and behavior. This exploration frames their transition from boys to young men. This is at least partially enabled by the pedagogical approach used by Mr. Clay and many other arts teachers.

Pedagogy in Mr. Clay's Art Class

Information on teaching and other external factors were secondary to what the students saw and felt. Based on observations as well as the words of the students, it became clear that student engagement is difficult to discuss without digging deeper into pedagogy. Codes that related to positive student engagement (observed and/or self-reported) were analyzed in conjunction with codes related to teaching methods, art, and

student expression. The goal of this analysis was to look more closely the intersection of pedagogy, the arts, and student engagement and expression. As the study continued, it became clear that the pedagogical choices of the teacher(s) played a large role in how students related to the classroom. Mr. Clay built his instruction and assessment based on student needs and learning preferences/styles. This type of instruction and assessment are often inherent in art classrooms (Hetland, Winner, et al., 2007).

Mr. Clay never made allusions to understanding students. He seemed to understand that, since his upbringing and education were distinctly different than those of his students, he would not truly grasp the realities in which they lived (Grant and Dieker, 2010; Kunjufu, 2002). He also seemed very comfortable with who he was. He made no attempts to dress or speak as students did but he was able to show regards for students' aesthetics and perspectives via projects that used figures and subject matter that related to student interests and culture. Mr. Clay had high expectations of the students. His expectations were not related to measures of skill or artistic acumen. As suggested by Tomlinson (2000, 2003) and Hetland, Winner, et al. (2007), Mr. Clay's expectations related to student effort, persistence, and respect. He also utilized his existing knowledge in an effort to draw connections between his class and student lives. He made attempts to show students how the arts existed in everything. He also expressed care for students as he did when he told the student that he "wanted" him to stay in class in spite of the student's behavior.

Mr. Clay set moral guidelines by which the students needed to abide. The guidelines were focused on ethics and respect instead of behavior. Information from

interviews also implied that students felt like this class let them be and show more of who they actually are (or hope to be). Mr. Clay embraced the ideas of Tomlinson (2000, 2003) by creating lessons that were developmentally appropriate for as many classes as possible. Although he lamented classes with “poor behavior”, he also used their age and class makeup to create variations of his lessons. He planned projects that lasted longer for some classes than others based on what he knew of their developmental abilities. He also allowed for variations within the classes for students who were more advanced or those who struggled. Mr. Clay also planned for a large degree of behavioral variation in his classroom. The fact that students felt they could be themselves and be closer to friends was based on conscious choices by Mr. Clay to create a non-adversarial classroom environment. He was not interested in constantly challenging the language, sound level, movement, or other seemingly inherent traits of the students. The behavioral baselines that he created for the class centered on respect and preventing anger or property damage. It appeared that the most impactful aspect of Mr. Clay’s pedagogy was how he allowed students to have a role in defining their aesthetic social space (Burns-Coleman, Hartney, Alderton, 2013).

The Art Classroom Environment

This study found that the art classroom was a space where urban black male middle school students could engage in developmentally appropriate explorations of their “sense of self” (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Feldman-Farb, 2012; Harter, 2012). During their adolescent years students are navigating the transition from dependent child to self-sufficient adult. They are constructing their future-self based on the rules of social

interaction, power, hegemony and role performance. They are also discovering their unique individual expressive voices (Manning, 1988). All of the students who were interviewed mentioned that this art class (and art in general) allowed them to “express themselves” or “show who they are.” Randy went so far as to say that the art class helped him to feel more comfortable with his peers. He saw art as something that could help him make friends and feel less shy. Interviews with teachers corroborated Randy’s point. Mrs. Claudia and Mr. Clay talked about how students “came out of their shell” in art class. Each of these points can be related to Chapter 2’s literature on aesthetics. Burns-Coleman, et al. (2013) addressed the idea of navigating and better understanding social structures as well as attempting to determine where oneself might fit into such a hierarchy. The aesthetic experience in this idea is embedded in both the harmony of a functional social system or space as well as the challenge of subverting a social structure. The art classroom, by design, is intended to be both a part of the larger educational structure as well as an outlier. While other classrooms may have similar layouts, pedagogies, or subject matter, the art classroom is a space where those things are intended to come together to form a specific type of social environment. Students appeared to be aware that this was a class where they would be allowed, if not encouraged, to explore the content as well as their own experiences. They would also be allowed to juxtapose the class’s concepts and materials in order to create new realities. This made the art classroom a distinctively appealing social space` for the students.

Seeing Engagement?

Measuring engagement was the most difficult aspect of the study. I was able to observe four of my interviewees during their art classes. During those observations I looked for the typical indicators of student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster, 2013). Of the three types of engagement, behavioral is the dimension that is most easily observed (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). It is for this reason that the bulk of the pertinent data was culled from in-depth interviews with students about their own experiences. Considering the complicated nature of observing engagement, observational data acted as supplements or contextual cues to interview data. This was done to examine how students' views related to the perspective of the researcher. It was important to do this in a way that did not devalue or override the students' perceptions. Questions similar to those on the HSSSE were embedded into student interviews in order to ascertain students' self-reported levels of cognitive and emotional engagement. For several students, engagement almost seemed instinctive as to defy observation. Lee and Cletus were at opposite ends of the observable engagement spectrum. Lee spoke non-stop, moved around the room, engaged peers in conversation and jokes, and still seemed consistently connected to the class and the work. Cletus, though he did talk to classmates occasionally, seemed to go into a shell as he worked, using his arm to shield his work from classmates. Attention to their given task was the only commonality between these students.

Traditionally, behavioral engagement is measured via observations by teachers and/or researchers (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Goldspink & Foster, 2013). Typically they will associate engagement levels with students' participation, attendance, asking questions, and/or a lack of "inappropriate" or "disruptive" tendencies (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This is problematic in that it may not consider the effect of the overlapping contexts in which students live. Studying behavioral engagement can be further complicated when students' cultural and/or familial value sets differ from those that are commonly associated with positive student engagement (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). It is also important to point out that measures of behavioral engagement may also be impacted by the student's psychological and psychosocial developmental stage (Harter, 2012; Mahatmya, Lohman, et al., 2012). Discussions about the students' home lives revealed divorce, different parenting styles, siblings who live separately, and other external factors that would likely weigh on the minds of any student. This is especially relevant during adolescence when students are determining their own autonomy in schools and other social spaces that have their own behavioral and authoritative hierarchies (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2009). That is why it is important to examine the issue of engagement from a student perspective. From the outside, engagement may take many forms.

An analysis of student behavioral engagement solely based on the perspective of the researcher and the three teachers who were interviewed would likely argue that the art class did not increase black male adolescent students' engagement. It may actually create an argument that these students were less engaged in the art classroom than they were in

traditional academic classrooms. According to Mrs. Claudia (Mrs. Claudia Interview, May 2014), Lee, Randy, and Rodney were much more “well-behaved” in her class than they were in art. Mrs. Claudia noted that she had a very rigid classroom structure to which all of her students adhered. Students raised their hands to speak and generally did not stand or move around the classroom without permission. They also were not allowed to speak loudly or use profanity. When her students became agitated or began to behave poorly (in her eyes), she was able to help them to regain their equilibrium via individual reading or quiet time. Engagement, to Mrs. Claudia, was quiet and static. Randy, Rodney, and Cletus embodied aspects of this definition of engagement. Each of these students, as well as the other student participants, also exhibited traits that would have been deemed unacceptable in Mrs. Claudia’s class.

Many students did complete their work in art class but their time on task was spotty. They moved about the room at will and did not show clear signs of interest in academic pursuits. Their conduct was often loud and otherwise energetic (their voices and movement could be heard from behind the closed art room doors during student interviews in the hallway). Student language was consistently “profane”. There were also constant references to violence and sexuality. Black male students spoke on random topics throughout the class and did not often show direct attention during instructions. One exchange that exemplifies the language and topics of discussion occurred at Lee’s table during the sculpture lesson.

While they worked, their table was very loud and somehow found themselves embroiled in an excited debate about who would win in a fight between Batman

and Superman. A smaller boy at the table was absolutely sure that Batman would win because he had more gadgets and had defeated Superman in the comics already. “I could beat them both because they are NOT REAL!” a very tall boy yelled. He then noted that Batman had no superpowers and could be killed by anyone on the street. They then asked Mr. Clay who he preferred. “I like Batman and Iron Man because they don’t have powers and they use their brains and training”, he offered. “And MONEY!” one student yelled. “Anybody could walk up to Batman during the day and just shoot him in the head!” the tall student argued. “No they can’t because nobody knows Bruce Wayne is Batman, idiot!” said another student. “Batman can beat anybody if he has enough time to study them!” Lee argued while still looking at his sculpture. Somebody can just shoot that ni*** in the head!” the tall boy reiterated. “No they can’t”, noted the smaller student...”Bruce Wayne is White...not a ni***! They’d have to shoot that cracka in the head!” The entire table laughs loudly. The tall boy, still smiling from the last joke... “Yo, why the f*** are we arguing about this!?”

(Field Notes, 4/25/2014)

Based on this observation alone, one might presume that the students did not find the art class particularly engaging. Their conversation was loud, they insulted each other, they argued, and they were talking about something that was unrelated to the work upon which they were supposed to be focused. In truth, however, each of the four black males at the table worked as they spoke. Their ability to communicate acted as a catalyst for their engagement. The students who were interviewed attributed much of their

engagement in the art class to being able to “express” or “be” themselves. Four of the five students interviewed noted that expressing and exploring this sense-of-self that is so important in adolescence (Harter, 2012, 1986) was less present in other classes.

I use this brief analysis to display the possible disconnection between observed behavioral engagement and the more constructivist ideas of cognitive and emotional engagement. Cognitive and emotional engagement are tied to an individual’s perception of self (Axelson & Flick, 2011). This perception of self is in a state of transition (or even blooming) during adolescence (Harter 1981, 1986; Elkind, 1996; Manning, 1988). Students at this age are beginning to gain autonomy and learning to shoulder more social responsibility (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Elkind, 1996). Being urban black males, these students also live at the intersection of a very specific social context that is often diametrically opposed to that of their teachers (Kunjufu, 2002; Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009). These points are the reason that Mahatmya, Lohman, et al. (2012) and Bingham & Okagaki (2012) propose that measures of engagement must be socially, contextually, and developmentally based. They recommend research that thoroughly examines the dimensions of engagement as well as micro and macro level factors by which it may be impacted. This study looked specifically at emotional and cognitive engagement from the perspective of the students in a unique education environment. The study also offered a surface level look at how student perceptions of engagement might be impacted by peers, family, and teaching methods. Phenomenological research seeks to study experiences within their own context (Endress, 2005; Peters, 2009). This type of research is also intended to examine the meaning making processes of those being studied. For

these reasons, first person student-reported engagement data has been used as the primary source and ultimate authority for this study.

Student Work

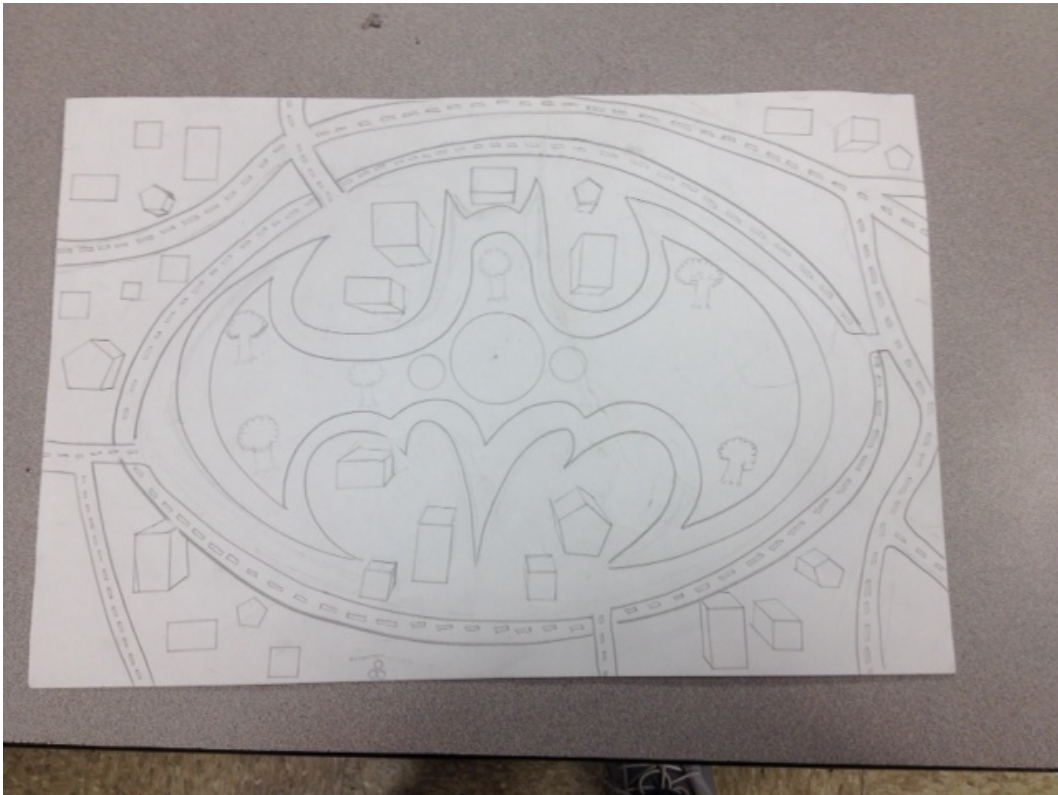


Image 7- Map design by Patrick (this is the piece that was damaged by another student and repaired by Mr. Clay).

Patrick was the only student who chose to share his work. While he did not create these pieces specifically for this study, he did take time during and after his interviews to discuss what he made. After Patrick's final interview, we entered the classroom to look at his work. He had mentioned each piece to me previously. The first piece he showed was a black and white bird's eye map of streets that were in the shape of Batman's logo. The second piece was a gridded enlargement of the rapper, Drake.

Patrick mentioned that he liked to stay home and draw but sometimes his little brother scribbled in his drawing book. This prompted me to ask if anyone in school had ever damaged his artwork.

Patrick: Yeah...one time...Mr. Clay fixed it. Actually, I can show you it... It's this Batman thing. You know that thing that we're doing with the streets [a map design lesson], I was doing that and one of my friends, they ripped it. But Mr. Clay glued it.

DS: He glued back together?

Patrick: Yeah.

DS: How did you feel when they messed up your work?

Patrick: I mean, I really didn't care cause I could draw it again so...

(Interview 1, June 2014)

Patrick was animated. He motioned as if he wanted to get up and show me the work then (although we were early in the first interview). It wasn't until his last sentence that his demeanor changed. As he discussed his brother, showing me his work, his friend's betrayal/mistake, and Mr. Clay's subsequent assistance, he gesticulated and smiled. He seemed to be happy to be discussing the topic. When I asked him how he felt about his work being damaged, he almost seemed surprised. He dismissed the idea of being angry with a shrug and a wave of his hand. As he showed me the piece, he explained his design as well as where the damage had been. Then he turned my attention to his Drake drawing that was hanging just to the right of the class entrance.



Image 8-Patrick's gridded Drake image.

I asked Patrick if he discussed or shared his work with anyone or if he took any of his artwork home with him.

Patrick: Yeah sometimes...I took a picture of my Drake and showed it to my sister and she thought it was nice.

DS: She liked it?

Patrick: Yeah. And I also talk to my friends about art sometimes.

DS: What do they have to say?

Patrick: They like they think it's nice too.

(Interview 3, June 2014)

This quote displayed the communicative aspects of the arts from Patrick's perspective. The sharing of art with his family, friends, and me seemed to make him happy. As he showed me the image, he noted that he likes Drake's music. As with the Batman image, Patrick seemed to be excited about being able to create work that felt relevant to him in addition to showing his developing artistic skill.

Implications for Practice

The prescriptive takeaway from this study should be that the holistic aesthetic experience of the ideal art classroom has the capacity increase student engagement across subjects. This art classroom was a place where, by its given purpose, décor, pedagogy, and subject matter, students enjoyed a more complete aesthetic experience. This is especially important for adolescent black male students. These are the students for whom traditional education has not seemed as natural or as fruitful. This broader aesthetic setting allows black male students to express themselves in ways that reinforce the arguments of Boykin, Tyler et al. (2009). These arguments center on the concepts of "verve" and "communalism". In other words, the ideal art classroom environment, of which Mr. Clay's class is a close analogue, is learning environment that allows and encourages students to explore in a very personal way. For many black students, according to Boykin, Tyler et al. (2009) and Taylor (2010), that exploration is based on West African traditions that are not necessarily embraced in other traditional academic classes. In addition to pedagogy, the décor and the actual purpose and tenor of the art

class added to students' engagement. In this environment, students were allowed, if not encouraged, to engage in aesthetic exploration of space (the room), the subject, and their own experiences and interests. Students also explored their own development and perceptions. The art classroom was a place where multiple parts of student lives converged in a meaningful way. These findings indicate that this type of learning environment, including the pedagogy within, could also affect student engagement in other classes.

Sousa and Tomlinson (2011), Tomlinson (2000, 2003), Sheridan (2011), and Winner, Hetland, et al. (2007) proposed frameworks and theories for integrating art related pedagogy (as opposed to general arts integration) into any classroom. This study indicates that broader adoption of these practices can help to bridge the gap between students' often stimulating non-school experience and their often "anaesthetized" experience in school. Prior to implementation, however, it is exceedingly important to continue asking the students what they think and want. What is the purpose of education? Is it to provide a basic common set of skills and knowledge in order to feign equity under the guise of equality? This is where the strength of art class frameworks is shown. Ideal art classrooms and pedagogies begin with an understanding of what students should know as well as their starting point. The curriculum then coalesces around their interests, skills, needs to create a more complete educational experience. It is for this reason that I believe art styled pedagogies are the best way to address the needs of diverse learners.

Future Research

In order to address the bifurcation of academics and arts as well as students' in and out of school experiences, further research must be conducted that expands on the work of Deasy (2002), Deasy & Stevenson (2005), and Smilan (2009). While Deasy & Stevenson noted the psychological changes that can be brought on through arts integration into curricula, Smilan discussed the arts' overall capacity to heal children who live in difficult areas. None of these authors, however, focused solely on the overall educational experiences of the middle school black male students in terms of engagement. They also overlooked the idea that the art classroom itself, in conjunction with art and art pedagogy, might provide a more complete aesthetic, and thereby humanistic, experience for these and other students. Future research must continue to solicit and value feedback from students about what engages them. This research must go beyond surveys that will be translated into quantitative and disembodied data. Future research that looks at shrinking academic gaps and engaging students cannot be allowed to devalue the perspectives of the students. Longitudinal research can center on the experiences of individual students while recognizing and discussing what is seen and thought by students who are on the periphery of the study. What is most clear is that middle school students are experiencing school as a place of immense familial and educational pressure. It is also clear that this stage in student development plays a large role in their academic and personal futures. Research must examine what students are experiencing at this time and attempt to understand what type of learning environment can best engage students and ameliorate the stress of this difficult transitional period. As

Freire (2000), Noguera (2009), and Tomlinson (2000, 2003) suggested, it is of the utmost importance that those who can do so, examine the lives of those we wish to help in order to better understand their perspectives so that change can be based on what is needed most.

Personal Reflection

My perspective on research, pedagogy, and curriculum revolve around the same idea...reflexivity. The reason I chose to study students in an art class was because of art's inherent capacity to react to student skills and modalities (Tomlinson, 2000, 2003; Hetland, Winner, et al., 2007; Dewey, 1980). Students bring their own unique skills and needs into the class and lessons and grading are arranged in a way that considers beginning and ending points for each product (Pistone, 2002). The art classroom is also often adorned with artwork that relates to the students population, student work, as well as work from the teacher. The result is a learning environment that is tailored to the school, lessons that can be tailored to students' needs and/or skills, and artwork that reflects the identity and/or aesthetics of the students.

Although I had intended teacher interactions and methods to be a secondary aspect of the study, student responses consistently reiterated the impact of the art teacher. As an art educator, I never thought of my methods as "strategic". They were just how art was supposed to be taught. This study has exposed me to how the practices associated with the arts are often grounded more firmly in the culture, aesthetics, and developmental appropriateness discussed in this study. These methods are also rooted in the idea that teaching and learning should be personal and dialogical. But what is most important is

that learning must occur in ways that value student interests, experiences, and perspectives. The smaller the cognitive and affective distance is between students' home-lives and school-lives, the more relevant and effective the learning.

Conclusion

This study was intended as a phenomenological examination of how urban middle school black males experienced their art classes. The five student participants expressed a consistent appreciation for the art class. Although they were sometimes unclear about differences between the art class and their other classes, students did express increased engagement in the art classroom. The students' overall appreciation for art and art making were also clear. In spite of differing prior experiences with art as well as familial influences, students used clear, concise language and examples to express their appreciation for the art class. It was also apparent that students saw the art teacher as an integral aspect of their appreciation of art. The students repeatedly used examples of how Mr. Clay taught as reasons they enjoyed the class. An art class that mirrors what happened in Mr. Clay's might indeed be the key to increasing overall student engagement. What seemed to make his methods more impactful for the student participants in this study was the fact that he did not enforce the Eurocentric cultural norms of behavior that tend to dictate traditional educational practices (Boykin, Tyler, et al., 2009; Noguera, 2003, 2009). Instead, he allowed the students to exhibit their "verve" through talking and movement. He also allowed the students to have input in each project. This appeared to lessen the distance between the black males' home life and their school life. Although further research will be necessary, it was clear that the art

class at Tanner had become a place that allowed students who were dealing with family trauma (like divorce), not “fitting in”, or just normal growing pains to be successful. The students’ responses and behaviors paint this art classroom as a space that was engaging based on its holistic approach to providing aesthetic experiences. I will be immensely interested to see if the same type of dynamic exists in other schools in other urban areas.

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APPENDICES

A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Student Interview Protocol

Participant _____ Grade _____

This study is about how students are feeling, thinking, and acting in this class. As a student in this class, your viewpoint is very valuable. This study will also look at how you seem to be reacting to and behaving in the class. The goal is not to assess behavioral issues but to note how you respond to the classroom, subject, teacher, and how the class is taught.

Each interview will take about half an hour. If there are any questions that you need to think about before answering, you can give me your response during any of my future visits. Just make note of the question to which you are responding. Your response can be in any form that you feel best displays your perspective (words, images, music, etc.). We can discuss these responses in depth during our next conversation.

Interview 1- Life History

I'd like to begin by learning about your history at home, in school, and with art.

- Let's start by getting some background on your home life.
 - How does your family feel/talk about education/school?
 - Who in your family is most involved in your education?
 - How?
 - What type(s) of art do you like?
 - Who in your home life talks to you about art?
 - Can you remember any art hanging in your house?
 - What was it (describe in your own words)?
 - How was it discussed/explained (if at all) by your family?
 - Can you describe any time your parents, relatives, family friends or others took you to concerts, museums, and/or galleries?
 - How would you describe that experience?
- Let's talk specifically about your previous school experiences.
 - What school(s) did you attend prior to this year?
 - How did you feel about school when you were younger?

- Why?
- How well did you do (grades, interested, behavior)?
- How did you feel in your classes (re: teachers, learning, the school environment)?
- Did you have art classes in that/those school(s)?
 - How did you feel about at that time?
 - Explain any differences you noticed between art and your other classes.

Notes

Standout Quotes/Responses

Items for Follow-up (or pending response):

Date of Interview _____

Interview 2- Current Situation

In this interview, I would like to discuss your experiences in *this* class/program.

- Let's begin by exploring about how you feel about school.
 - How are you doing in school now (grades, interested, behavior)?
 - Explain how (if at all) your view of school is different that it was in prior years.
- I'd now like to look at how you are experiencing the arts class/program.
 - How long have you been in this art class/program?
 - What are the most enjoyable parts of this class/program?
 - Please explain how (or if) this class/program is different from your other current classes?
 - What do you like/dislike most about this class/program?
 - How would you describe the way you feel when you are walking into this class/program?
 - What images/words/thoughts/etc. go through your mind when you enter this classroom?
 - How do you feel while you are in the class/program?
 - How would you describe the way you feel when you are working in this classroom?
 - Please explain what aspects of this class/program keep you the most attentive.

Notes

Standout Quotes/Responses

Items for Follow-up (or pending response):

Date of Interview _____

Interview 3- Meaning Making/Reflection

- In this interview, I would like to look back on your experiences and see how and why you arrived at this point (in this class/program). I would also like to give you a chance to explain how you think this experience has affected you.
 - How do you think your interest (or lack of interest) in this class/program was impacted by other people/factors?
 - What lead you to this conclusion?
 - In what ways do you think this class/program is impacting/changing your view of school/life?
 - Who do you speak to (family, friends, or others) regarding your feelings and/or experiences in this class/program?
 - What do you say?
 - How do they react/respond?
 - How have others reacted to your participation in this class/program?
 - How do you think their reactions will affect your future decisions/experiences in the arts and school?
 - What are your plans for the future?
 - How do you see your education fitting into that plan, if at all?
 - How do you see the arts fitting into that plan, if at all?

Notes

Standout Quotes/Responses

Items for Follow-up (or pending response):

Date of Interview _____

Interview Protocol (Staff)

Participant _____ Subject _____

This study is about how students are feeling, thinking, and acting in the art classes. The goal of this research is not to assess behavioral issues but to note how students respond to the classroom, subject, teacher, and instructional methods. As an employee in this school, your viewpoint is very valuable. You see these students in various contexts and your perspective can add very relevant background for student responses.

This interview will take about half an hour. If there are any questions that you need to think about before answering, you can give me your response during any of my future visits. Just make note of the question to which you are responding.

Interview

- What is your position here at “Tanner”?
 - How long have you worked here?
 - Would you say that the arts are an important aspect education at this school?
 - Are you familiar with 8th grade students who are currently enrolled in a visual arts class?
 - Are there students for whom the arts to have had a positive impact (behaviorally, academically, emotionally)?
 - Have they shared with you their view of school and/or the arts classes?

Notes

Standout Quotes/Responses

Items for Follow-up (or pending response):

Date of Interview _____

Interview Protocol (Parent/Guardian)

Participant _____ Subject _____

This study is about how students are feeling, thinking, and acting in the art classes. The goal of this research is not to assess behavioral issues but to note how students respond to the classroom, subject, teacher, and instructional methods. As an employee in this school, your viewpoint is very valuable. You see these students in various contexts and your perspective can add very relevant background for student responses.

This interview will take about half an hour. If there are any questions that you need to think about before answering, you can give me your response during any of my future visits. Just make note of the question to which you are responding.

Interview

I'd like to begin by learning about your child's history at home, in school, and with art.

- Let's start by getting some background information.
 - How do you and others in your family feel/talk about education/school?
- Let's talk specifically about your child's previous school experiences.
 - How did your child feel about school when they were younger?
 - How did your child perform in school in the past (grades, interest, behavior)?
 - Did your child have art classes in their other school(s)?
 - How do you think the arts fit into your child's overall education?
 - What type(s) of art do you like?
 - What type(s) of art does your child like?
 - What types of art are in your house?
 - Please describe in your own words.
 - Have you talked about this art with your child?
 - Can you describe a time you took your child to concerts, museums, and/or galleries?
 - How did they behave and react to this experience?

Now I would like to discuss your child's experiences in *this* class/program.

- How is your child doing in school now (grades, interest, behavior)?
 - Explain how (if at all) their view of school is different that it was in prior years.
- What are your child's plans for the future (if any)?
- How do you see education fitting into that plan, if at all?

- How do you see the arts fitting into that plan, if at all?

Notes

Standout Quotes/Responses

Items for Follow-up (or pending response):

Date of Interview _____

B. CONSENT FORMS

Participant Informed Assent Form

FINDING THEIR VOICE THROUGH THE ARTS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL BLACK MALE STUDENTS IN ARTS CLASSROOMS

Dr. Will Jordan Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Donald S. Siler M.Ed., Student Investigator

1301 C.B. Moore Ave., Ritter Hall, Philadelphia PA 19122

215 204-6677 wjjordan@temple.edu

This is a study about black male students in art class at “Henry O. Tanner” Middle School. I want to see how you feel about this class and others. I want to know whether or not you feel like this class keeps you interested in your work. I also want to see if you feel more comfortable in the art class. You will also have a chance to talk about your life outside of school.

In the interviews, I will ask you questions about your experiences and opinions. The questions will be about your life at home, in school, and with the arts (outside of school and in this art class).

I will be interviewing parents, students, and teachers. All interviews will be about half an hour long and will be audio recorded. I will not use your real names in future papers, articles, books, or presentations on this research. The identity of each person will be kept strictly confidential. I hope that these interviews will give you a chance to talk openly about your life.

Although the researcher has said that my identity will not be shared with anyone else, there is always chance that information may be requested by authorities. All documents and information about this research study will be kept confidential, unless federal, state, and local laws and regulations require that they be shared. I understand the records and data generated by the study may be reviewed by Temple University and its staff and/or

governmental agencies to be sure that the study is done according to the law. I understand that the results of this study may be published. If anything is published, I will not be identified by name.

While I have chosen you to be a participant in this study, it is your choice. You are free to say that you don't want to be involved in this study at any time. You can refuse to answer any question. Any questions about this study may be addressed to Donald S. Siler, 274 Ritter Hall, 1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave. Temple University, Department of Teaching and Learning, Philadelphia PA 19122, (215) 204-8184.

Questions

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Institutional Review Board Coordinator at 215-707-3390. The coordinator may also be reached by email at IRB@temple.edu or regular mail:

Temple University
Temple Research Administration
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Student Faculty Conference Center
3340 North Broad Street, Suite 304
Philadelphia, PA 19140

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Assent Form and that you agree to take part in this study

Participant Name (Please Print)

Date: _____

Student Signature

Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date : _____

Researcher Signature

Parent/Guardian as Participant Informed Consent Form

**FINDING THEIR VOICE THROUGH THE ARTS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF
URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL BLACK MALE STUDENTS IN ARTS
CLASSROOMS**

Dr. Will Jordan Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Donald S. Siler M.Ed., Student Investigator
1301 C.B. Moore Ave., Ritter Hall, Philadelphia PA 19122
215 204-6677 wjjordan@temple.edu

This study focuses black male students in art class at “Henry O. Tanner” Middle School. I want to see how you think your child feels about school and the arts. I want to see how your family thinks of education. I also want to see how your family views the arts. You will have a chance to share your honest opinion about what you know of your child’s experiences at “Tanner”.

In this interview, you will be asked questions about your and your child’s experiences with school and the arts. I will be interviewing parents, students, and teachers. This interview will be about half an hour long and will be audio recorded. I will not use your real names in future papers, articles, books, or presentations on this research. The identity of each person will be kept strictly confidential. I hope that these interviews will give you a chance to talk openly about your life as well as your child’s.

Although the researcher has said that my identity will not be shared with anyone else, there is always chance that information may be requested by authorities. All documents and information about this research study will be kept confidential, unless federal, state, and local laws and regulations require that they be shared. I understand the records and data generated by the study may be reviewed by Temple University and its staff and/or governmental agencies to be sure that the study is done according to the law. I understand that the results of this study may be published. If anything is published, I will not be identified by name.

While I have chosen you to be a participant in this study, it is your choice. You are free to say that you don’t want to be involved in this study at any time. You can refuse to answer any question. Any questions regarding the study may be addressed to Donald S. Siler, 274 Ritter Hall, 1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave. Temple University, Department of Teaching and Learning, Philadelphia PA 19122, (215) 204-8184.

Questions

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Philadelphia, PA 19140

Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study

Participant Name (Please Print)

Date: _____

Student Signature

Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date : _____

Researcher Signature

Staff as Participant Informed Consent Form**FINDING THEIR VOICE THROUGH THE ARTS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF
URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL BLACK MALE STUDENTS IN ARTS
CLASSROOMS****Dr. Will Jordan Ph.D., Principal Investigator**

Donald S. Siler M.Ed., Student Investigator
1301 C.B. Moore Ave., Ritter Hall, Philadelphia PA 19122
215 204-6677 wjjordan@temple.edu

This study focuses on black male students in the art class at “Henry O. Tanner” Middle School. My goal is to understand how these students are making meaning of their experiences. I am also interested in how this program affects student engagement. I am especially interested in how the selected students’ perceptions relate to the perceptions of their teachers and parents.

In this interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences with black male students at “Henry O. Tanner” Middle School for whom you think the arts have been impactful. The questions will focus on your perceptions of student engagement in arts and traditional classrooms. You will also be asked about changes in behavior and/or academic performance for students who are involved in the study.

I will be interviewing parents, students, and teachers. This interview will be about half an hour long and will be audio recorded. No real names will be used in future publications or talks on the research. The identity of each participant will be kept strictly confidential. I hope that these interviews will benefit the participants by giving them a chance to talk about their experiences and perspectives on this important issue.

Although the researcher has placed safeguards to maintain the confidentiality of my personal information, there is always a potential risk of an unpermitted disclosure. To that degree, all documents and information pertaining to this research study will be kept confidential, unless required by federal, state, and local laws and regulations to be disclosed. I understand the records and data generated by the study may be reviewed by Temple University and its agents, the study sponsor or the sponsor’s agents (if applicable), and/or governmental agencies to assure proper conduct of the study and compliance with regulations. I understand that the results of this study may be published. If any data are published, I will not be identified by name.

While your participation is highly valued, it is, of course, voluntary. You are free to participate or not. You can refuse to answer any question that is asked of you. Questions

regarding the study may be addressed to Donald S. Siler, 274 Ritter Hall, 1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave. Temple University, Department of Teaching and Learning, Philadelphia PA 19122, (215) 204-8184.

Questions

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Institutional Review Board Coordinator at 215-707-3390. The coordinator may also be reached by email at IRB@temple.edu or regular mail:

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Signing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study

Participant Name (Please Print)

Date: _____

Participant Signature

Date : _____

Researcher Signature