

The Outcomes of the Implementation
of a Choice-Based Art Practice for Students with Special Learning Needs

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Overview of Research

Empowering students to play an active role in decision-making regarding their education has shown to improve student engagement, academic performance, student motivation, and behavioral gains. Several studies, with differing degrees of opportunities for students to voice their choice, have been completed to demonstrate the outcomes of providing options in educational settings. These outcomes benefit students with special learning needs and neurotypical developing students.

Skerbetz and Kostewicz (2013) explored the effects of providing assignment choice on the engagement of students with or at high risk for emotional disturbance. While there was a significant amount of adult control over the design of the assignments (the experimenter created the assignments, students chose one of four created assignments that focused on the same vocabulary words/content) the results indicated a functional relation between providing the opportunity to choose assignments and increased academic and behavioral performance. Ramsey, Jolivet, Patterson, and Kennedy (2010) questioned the effects of choice of task sequence on time-on-task, task completion, and accuracy for students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a residential facility. When students were presented with two tasks, both that were required to be completed, but were able to choose which assignment to complete first task completion, time on task, and accuracy increased.

In the latter spectrum of choice, Hesser (2009), an art educator, questioned what would be the effects of giving students complete creative control and choice over their artwork. He

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employed a constructivist approach to his pedagogy practice, students were responsible for being involved in all stages of the learning process, and reflected on his findings in a qualitative study.

Hesser found, while this approach was foreign and at times difficult for students to direct their own learning, the social/emotional outcomes for students to be transformative, citing the student's employed self-reflection, collaboration, and higher level thinking throughout the process. Dravenstadt (2018), a middle school art educator, documented the effects of choice on student motivation. She described her classroom community as lacking resources, and she struggled to engage students in meaningful learning, which resulted in off task and disruptive behaviors. Rather than combatting these behaviors with more control and reducing student freedom, she "released control" to students and employed a choice based approach to her pedagogy. She initiated instruction by providing students with a prompt, "through material exploration of found objects, make an assemblage that transforms your everyday environment" and students were tasked with choosing the materials, content, and assemblage process.

Dravenstadt collected data in the form of interviews, observations, and student artwork and found motivation greatly increased because 1. Choice led to more exploration of materials and processes with raised student confidence, 2. Choice supported students in engaged meaning making, and 3. Choice heightened the student dialogue and collaboration, which led students to feel, validated. Choice also facilitated stronger teacher-student relationships and student-to-student relationships, which improved the classroom culture. In a similar approach, Rago's (2018) study results support Dravenstadt's outcomes, establishing that a choice environment encouraged and promoted authentic collaboration, exploration, and play.

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Chad- Freidman, Lee, Liu, and Watson (2019) questioned the effects of teacher-directed and choice- based teaching methods on general artistic skill, realistic drawing skill, creativity, and intrinsic motivation in elementary art classrooms. Two 15 minute drawing assignments were administered, one free draw and one observational drawing to two different third grade art classes; one with an educator who employed a teacher-directed approach and one who utilized a choice based approach. Undergraduate fine arts majors on creativity and artistic skill rated the drawings. A questionnaire was developed and administered to measure students' intrinsic motivation. Students in the teacher- directed program scored significantly higher on skill and creativity than the students in the choice based program. The study also found that the higher levels of artistic skill correlated to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Contrastingly, Cox and Rowland (2000) investigated the effects of three different teaching approaches, Steiner, Montessori, and traditional, on students' drawing ability. The Steiner approach, which focuses on "developing the creative artistic ability which every person has within (Cox, 2000)" views play, imagination, and creative thinking as a significant part of their curriculum (What is Steiner Education, 2020). The drawings produced by the children of the Steiner school were rated more highly in both color use and drawing ability, than those produced by students who attended the Montessori and traditional school.

Janelle Turk (2012) integrated collaboration and inclusion, appointing students, some from "mainstream" classes and some with special needs, to work cooperatively to create a student led, choice based school mural. Turk's study was interested in student's perception of self-esteem, sense of personal values, and perceptions of responsibility. She found that through

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the opportunity of playing an active role in decision making, specifically in an inclusive environment, students reported a sense of self-worth, pride, and belonging.

Specifically examining a teacher- directed, discipline- based approach versus a student-centered, choice- based art education approach, Cristen Hess (2018), sought to measure student intrinsic motivation. Succeeding a teacher-directed approach, Hess implemented a choice-based methodology over a twelve-week period. Through examination of artifacts, student interviews, and observations, Hess established choice supported all students' needs and increased intrinsic motivation dramatically. She particularly noted higher engagement, and observed an increase in student goal setting and self- reflection, greater self-confidence, and higher peer-to-peer collaboration. Samantha Varian (2016) studied the effectiveness of a choice- based art education at supporting an inclusive community. The qualitative study took place over a seven-week period and included participants of an inclusive classroom comprised of 26 sixth grade students, 12 of those students having an Individualized Education Plan. Varian collected data in the form of interviews, pre and post assessments, rubrics, observations, and surveys to assess problem-solving skills, student attitudes on mistakes, creativity, and confidence, communication skills, and student growth. She found choice- based art education supports the learning needs of all students while also improving their self-confidence and critical thinking skills. Specifically, the study found that the pedagogy challenges students individually, which meets the diverse needs of all learners.

Limitations

The studies conducted by Hesser, Dravenstadt, Rago, and Turk are qualitative. While they provide a rich picture of the outcomes of their practice and capture changing attitudes within a

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target group, the data is self-reported and is limited because results are not able to be verified objectively. Chad-Freidman, Lee, Liu, and Watson (2019) and Cox and Rowland (2000)'s research addresses the implications of choice on artistic skill but does not address the outcomes or implications of students' social-emotional learning. Skerbetz and Kostewicz (2013) and Ramsey, Jolivet, Patterson, and Kennedy (2010) quantitative studies provided us with numerical data that supports choice, but the choices offered were experimenter created and a significant amount of adult control over the design of the assignments.

Rationale and Research Question

The outcomes of providing choice and learner-directed educational opportunities support the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) is a choice based, learner directed grassroots movement created by art teachers, recognized by the National Art Educators Association. TAB rejects the school curriculum that prioritizes "information-processing activities, data collection, and mandatory high-stakes testing which have little to do with students' internal world (Gaw, 2020)". The pedagogy does not presume that adults know what every child must learn to succeed, but rather regards students as artists and offers real choices for responding to their own ideas and interests through art making (Hathaway and Jaquith, 2014). In a TAB classroom lessons are not differentiated but rather personalized, the teacher is not designing differing activities based on different levels of student needs in order for students to meet the same goals, the teachers are facilitators and mentors and students are empowered to study art based on their own interests and experiences (Gaw, 2020).

This model of instruction, which focuses on process rather than product, maintains to meet the diverse needs of learners, especially at-risk learners who excel in self-directed settings

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(Hathaway and Jaquith, 2014). According to the organization's website TAB (2019), “meets the needs of all learners through choice, agency, flexibility, and emergent curriculum”. This pedagogy encompasses many constructivist philosophies that would seem to support, engage, and challenge exceptional learners. However, there is a significant lack of research available on the outcomes of choice based art for students with special needs. From this review of literature an investigation was necessary to further explore the benefits and limitations of providing a choice based art education. The research question we look to answer is: From teachers’ perspectives, what are the outcomes for exceptional learners who participate in a choice-based, student center approach to art making?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study included 32 preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school art educators across the United States who align their pedagogy with the principles of Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) (See appendix Figure 1) and utilize a student-centered approach to teaching art. Of those 32, five teachers work with pre-kindergarteners, 22 teach grades kindergarten through 2nd grade, 23 teach grades 3rd-5th, 10 teach grades 6th-8th, and two teach grades 9th-12th. 24% of the participants work in an urban setting, 58% in a suburban setting, and 18% in a rural setting. The range of teaching experience is varied; five participants are novice educators, 14 have been teaching for 6- 15 years, and 13 have been in the field for 16+ years. The majority of participants have been practicing a student-centered, choice-based approach to teaching art for less than 10 years, with 47% of participants implementing the approach for 0-5 years, and 44% for 6-10 years. Two participants have been applying the

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pedagogy for 20+ years. Of the participants, 66% identify as implementing full choice practices in the classroom, 31% implement moderate choice, and 3% implement limited choice (see appendix Figure 1). The total percentage of students the participants serve who receive support services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan varies. Fourteen participants report their total population consists of 0-20% of students with an IEP or 504 plan, 15 participants serve 20-40% of students with an IEP or 504 plan, two participants serve 40-60 % of students with an IEP or 504 plan, and one participant's total population of students with an IEP or 504 plan is 60-80 %.

Setting and Materials

The participants completed this survey in any location they chose to. The material used was a researcher developed anonymous survey and questionnaire created in Qualtrics. The survey was delivered in a secure online professional learning network. The participants completed the survey and their results were sent to the investigator. The survey results were anonymous.

Measures

The participants completed a Likert scale survey related to the outcomes of implementing a choice- based, student- directed art program for students with special learning needs. The Likert scale used the following responses: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Data Collection

The data collected concerns the outcomes of implementing a choice- based, student- directed art program for students with special learning needs. Surveys were sent out

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electronically to participants through a secure online professional learning platform. Data was collected and stored electronically in Qualtrics, a secure web-based survey tool.

Design and Data Analysis

The data was analyzed based on the data collected using the Likert Scale. The scores were sorted by the researcher based on which responses are given more often and less often by participants. The researcher coded and categorized the open-ended responses signifying key points and ideas being made.

Procedures

The study was conducted using a researcher created survey (see Figure 2) in Qualtrics. The survey contained questions concerning teachers' perspectives of the outcomes of implementing a choice-based, student-directed art program for students with special learning needs. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher requested participants to complete the survey. Once the participants were willing, the survey was delivered electronically. The responses were analyzed for commonalities.

Results

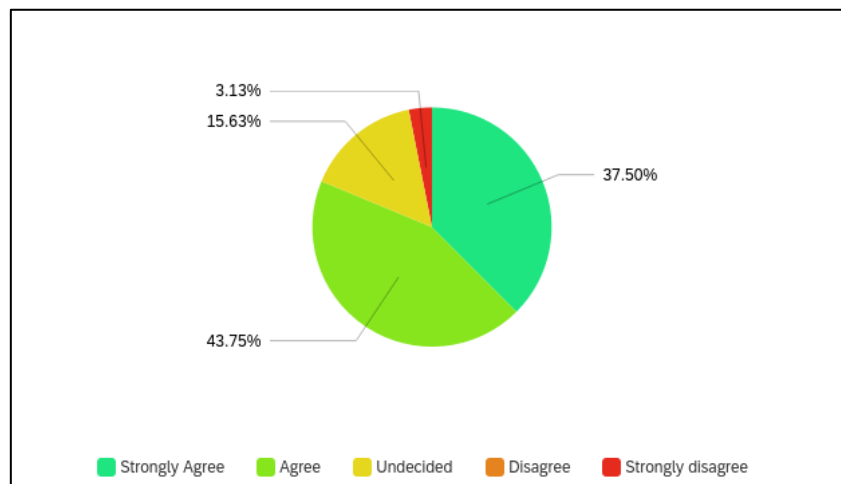
During the research, there were 32 electronic responses. Of those 32, the range of teaching experience is varied; five participants are novice educators, 14 have been teaching for 6-15 years, and 13 have been in the field for 16+ years. The total percentage of students the participants serve who receive support services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan varies. Fourteen participants report their total population consists of 0-20% of students with an IEP or 504 plan, fifteen participants serve 20-40% of students with an IEP or

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504 plan, two participants serve 40-60 % of students with an IEP or 504 plan, and one participant's total population of students with an IEP or 504 plan is 60-80 %.

The survey comprised of eight optional Likert scale questions and two optional open-ended questions. 99% percent of participants completed all the Likert scale questions and 75% answered the open-ended questions. The researcher coded and categorized the open-ended responses signifying key points being made. The tables below show teachers' responses to the Likert survey questions asked.

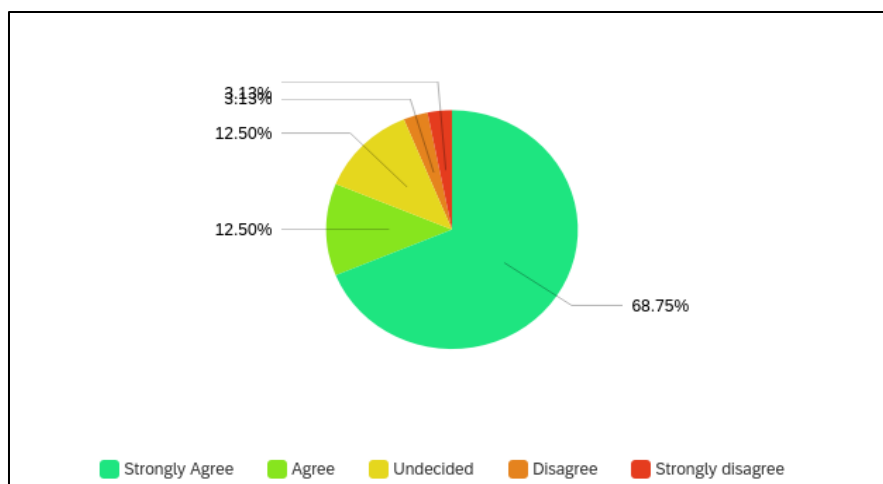
For students with special needs, the frequency of participation in class discussion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.



Twelve (37.5%) teachers strongly agree, 14 (43.75%) teachers agree, five (15.63%) teachers are undecided, 0 teachers disagree, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that for students with special needs the frequency of participation in class discussion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

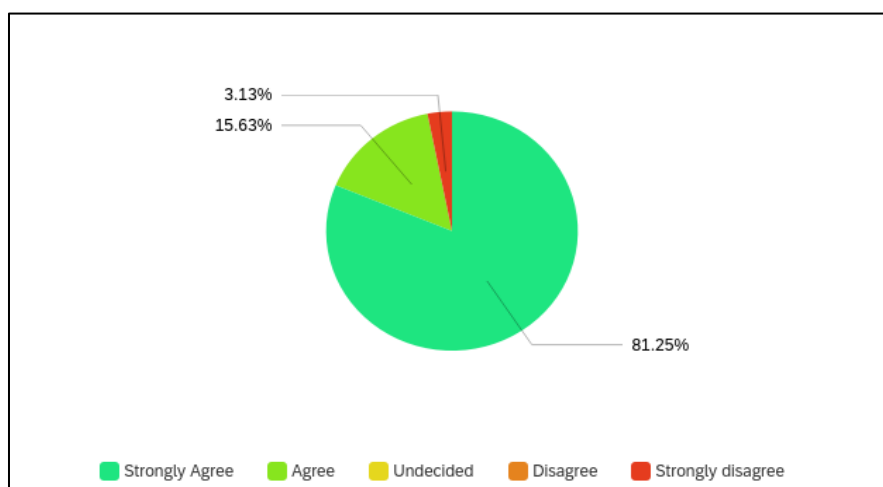
For students with special needs, the amount of participation in art-making increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

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Twenty-two (68.75%) teachers strongly agree, four (12.5%) teachers agree, four (12.5%) teachers are undecided, one (3.13%) teacher disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that for students with special needs the amount of participation in art making increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

For students with special needs, peer-to-peer collaboration on artwork increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

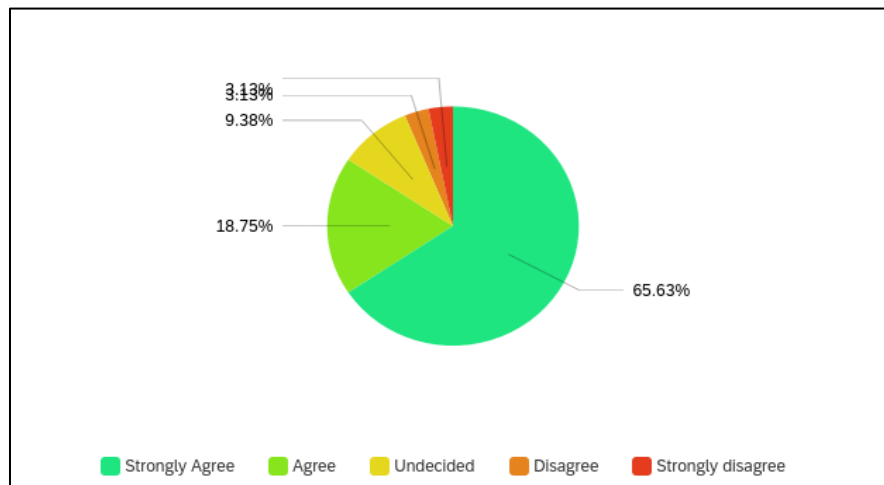


Twenty-six (81.25%) teachers strongly agree, five (15.63%) teachers agree, no teachers are undecided, no teacher disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that for students

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with special needs peer-to-peer collaboration on artwork increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

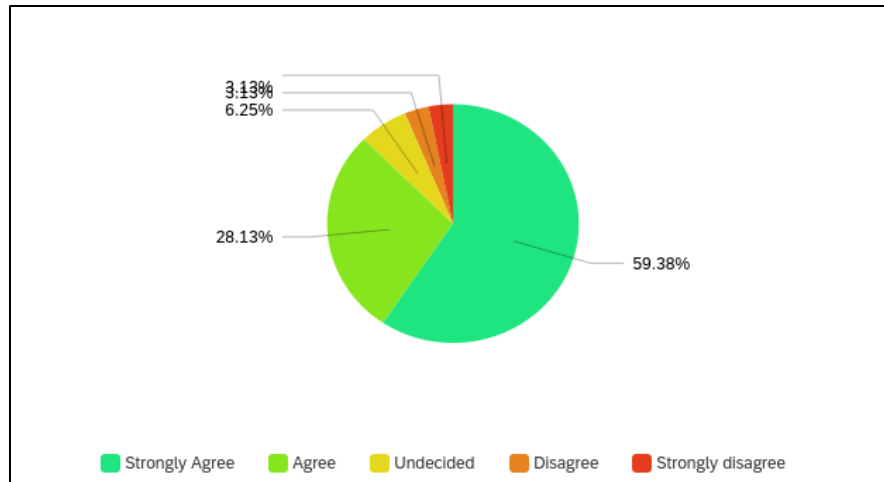
For students with special needs, the duration of on-task focus in a single class session is longer in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.



Twenty-one (65.63%) teachers strongly agree, six (18.75%) teachers agree, three (9.38%) teachers are undecided, one (3.13%) teacher disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that for students with special needs the duration of on-task focus in a single class session is longer in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

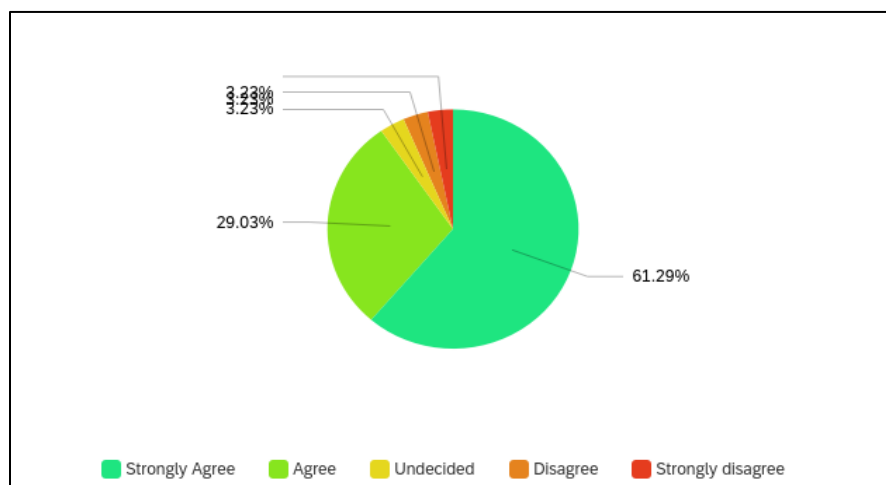
Students with special needs are more eager to participate in the learning process in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

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Nineteen (59.28%) teachers strongly agree, nine (28.13%) teachers agree, two (6.25%) teachers are undecided, one (3.13%) teacher disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that students with special needs are more eager to participate in the learning process in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

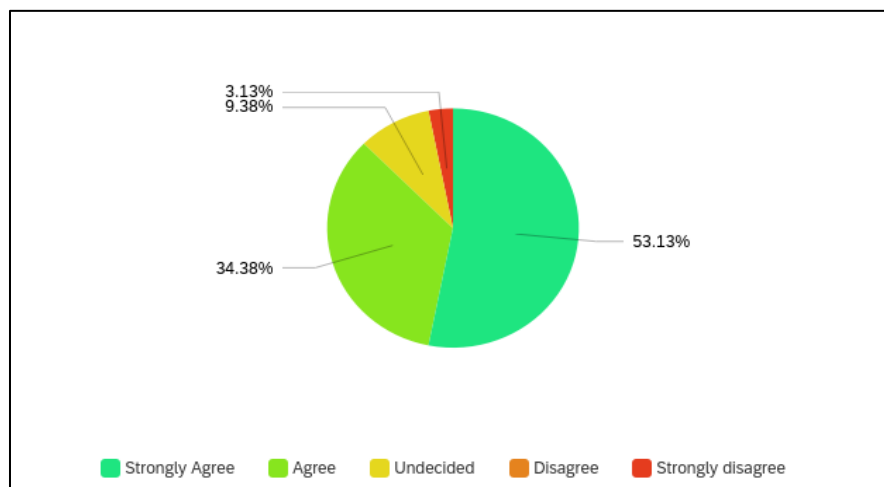
Behavior challenges and disruptions decrease when a student-centered, choice-based approach is employed versus a teacher-directed approach in the art classroom.



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Nineteen (59.28%) teachers strongly agree, nine (28.13%) teachers agree, one (3.23%) teacher is undecided, one (3.13%) teacher disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that behavior challenges and disruptions decrease when a student-centered, choice-based approach is employed versus a teacher-directed approach in the art classroom.

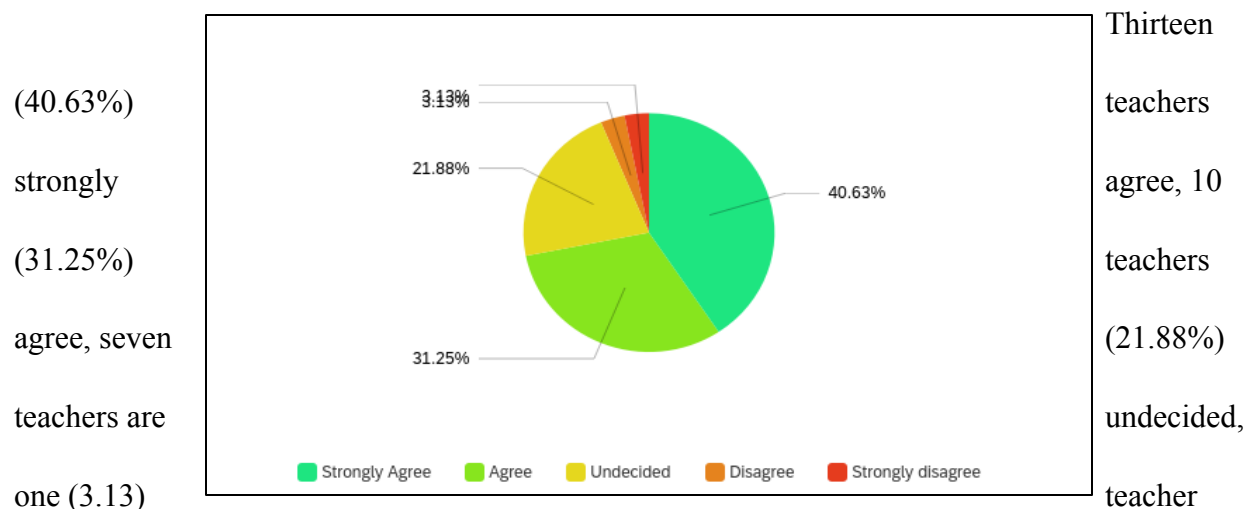
Students with special needs want to physically stay longer in a choice-based classroom versus a teacher-directed classroom.



Seventeen (53.13%) teachers strongly agree, 11 (34.38%) teachers agree, three (9.38%) teachers are undecided, no teachers disagree, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that students with special needs want to physically stay longer in a choice-based classroom versus a teacher-directed classroom.

For students with special needs, task completion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

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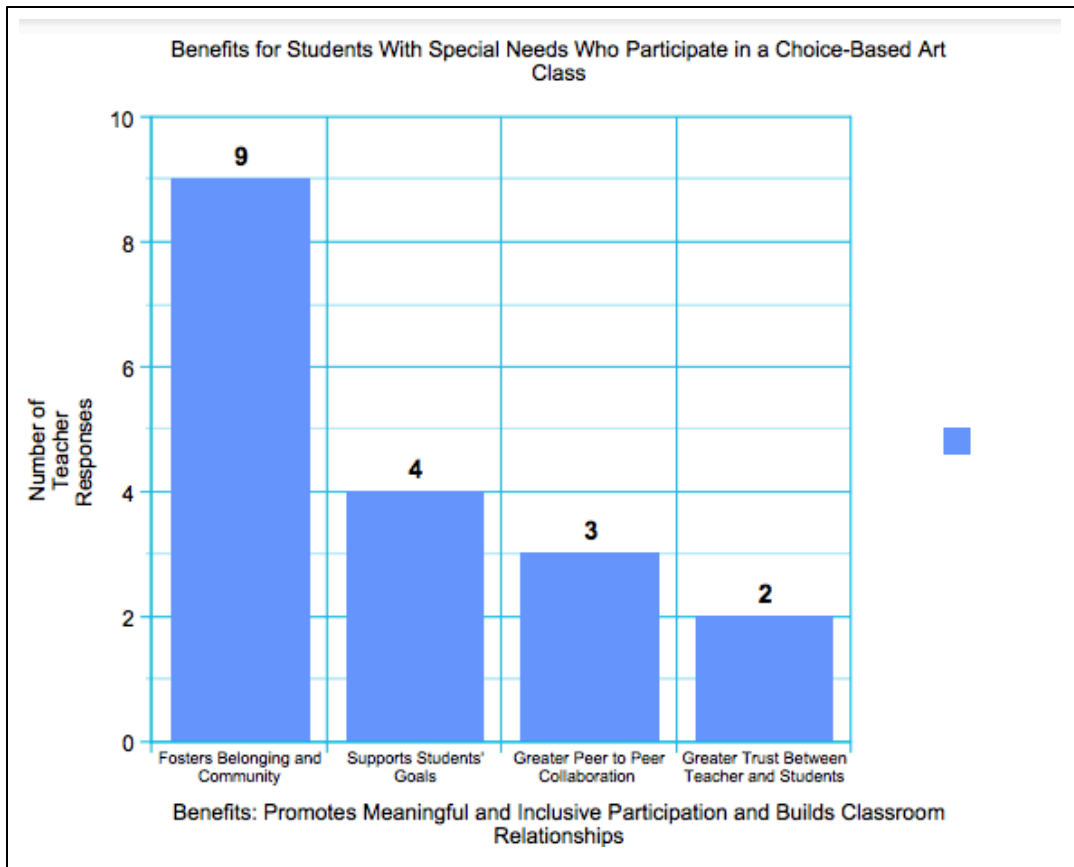
disagrees, and one (3.13%) teacher strongly disagrees that for students with special needs task completion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

It should be noted that one participant uniformly chose “strongly disagree” for all eight Likert scale questions, and this participant also implements a limited choice approach in the classroom (see Figure 1).

The participants’ open- ended responses considering the benefits of a choice-based, student-centered approach for students with special needs were categorized into four main themes. Choice (1) Promotes Meaningful and Inclusive Participation and Encourages the Development of Relationships, (2) Supports Students’ Social and Emotional Growth, (3) Cultivates Active Learning, and (4) Other. The tables below show teachers’ responses to the open-ended survey question asked.

What have been the most impactful gains for students with special needs who have the opportunity to participate in a choice-based, student-centered approach to art class?

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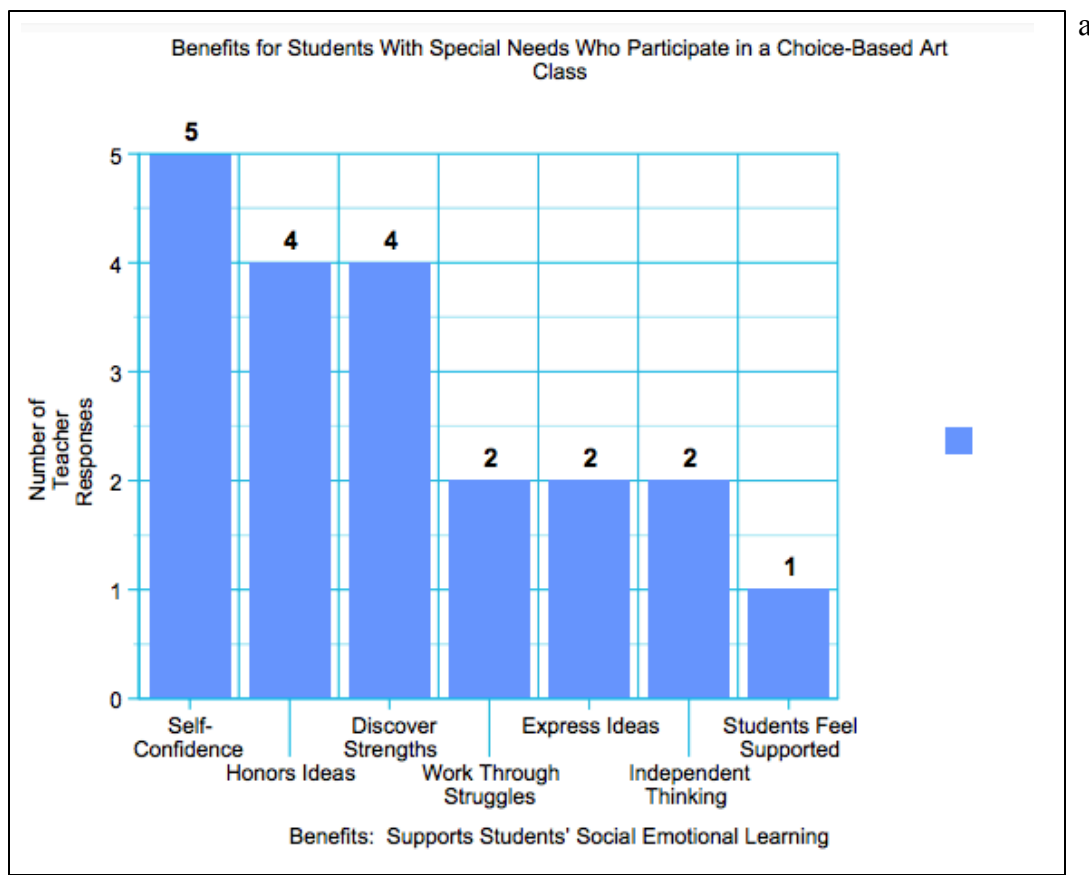


Promotes Meaningful and Inclusive Participation and Build Classroom Relationships

Nine participants believe a choice-based practice supports an inclusive environment and

fosters

sense of



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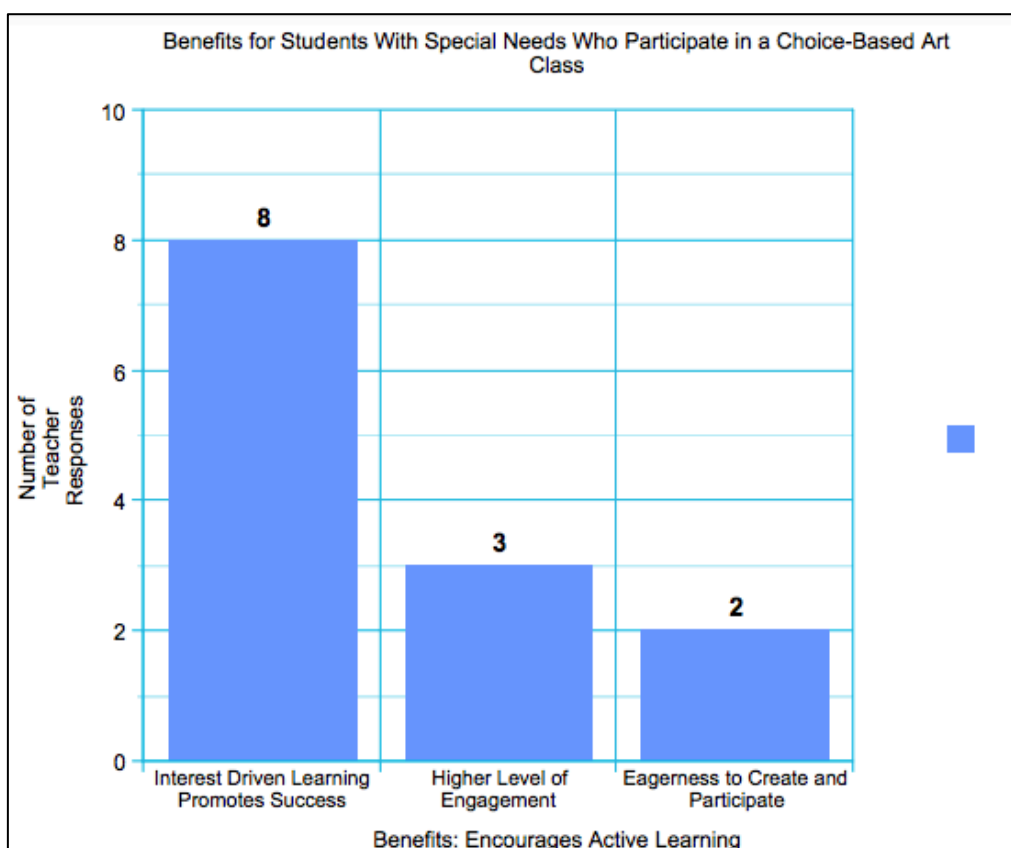
community and belonging, four participants described choice as an individualized approach which inherently supports students' goals, three teachers noted greater peer to peer collaboration, and two participants documented greater trust and collaboration between teacher and students.

Supports Student' Social Emotional Growth

Five participants believe a choice-based practice promotes an increased sense of self-confidence, four teachers described choice as honoring students' ideas, four participants believe choice provides the opportunity for students to discover their strengths, two

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respondents note the approach allows for the time and space for students to work through struggles, two teachers documented the methodology advances the development of independent thinking, two participants noted choice-practices provides an avenue for to students to express individual ideas, and one teacher recognized the pedagogy creates a space for students to feel safe, welcome, and supported.

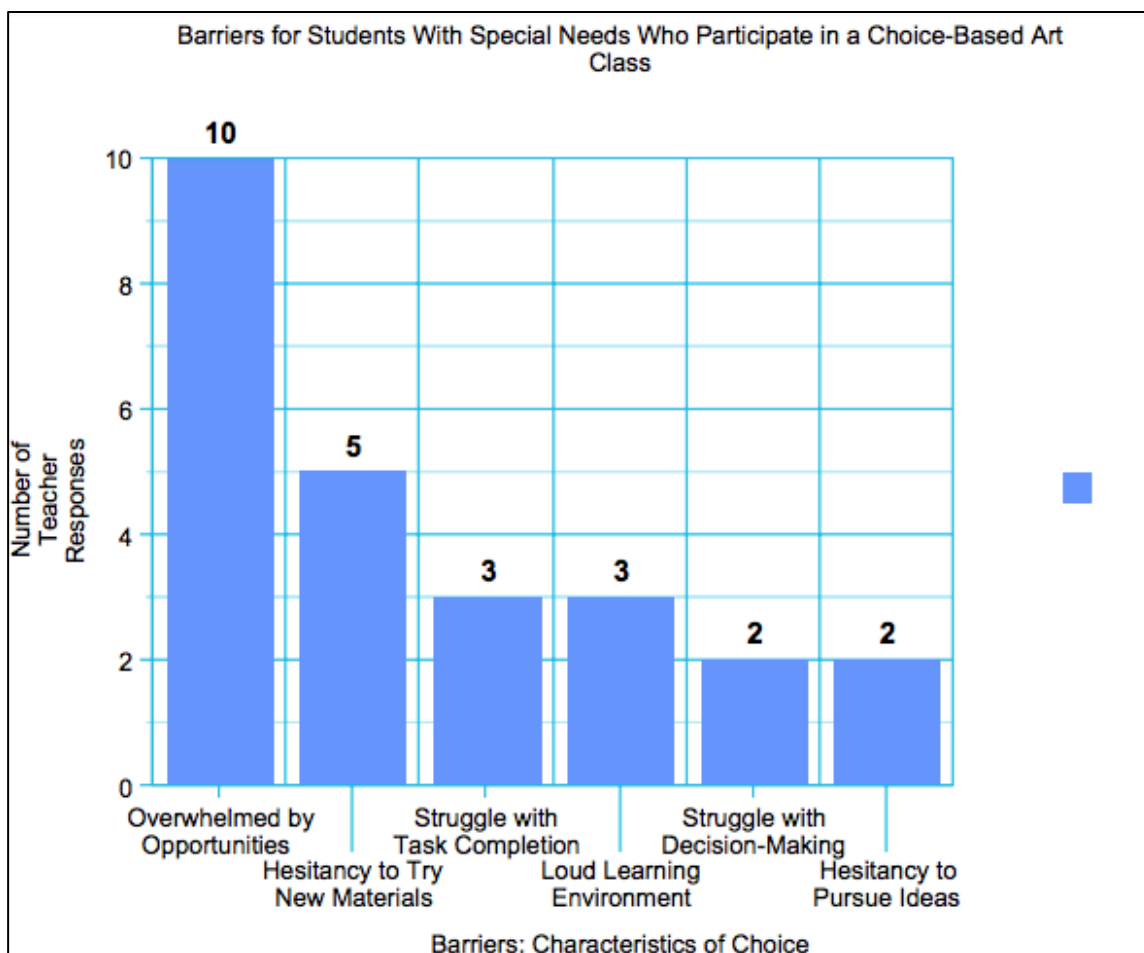


Encourages Active Learning

Eight teachers documented choice supports interest-driven learning, which has advanced the success of students, three participants noted the method contributes to a higher level of engagement, and two teachers described an increase in eagerness to create and participate.

Other

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Characteristics of Choice

Ten participants remarked the open-ended opportunity that is inherent of choice can be overwhelming for students, five observed a hesitancy from students to try new materials, two noted students were reluctant to pursue their artistic ideas, three participants remarked some learners struggle with task completion, three teachers noted a TAB art room can produce a louder learning environment, and two educators state students can struggle with decision-making and are more successful with limitations.

Other

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One participant noted (1) a lack of familiarity with beneficial and effective adaptive tools and material offerings to support student needs and (2) a lack of knowledge of best practices for students with special needs as barriers. One teacher recognized negative parental perception of student work as a hindrance.

Conclusions

The data suggests a choice- based, student-centered approach to teaching art substantially benefits students with disabilities in the areas of inclusion, specifically with peer-to-peer collaborations and fostering a sense of belonging and community, and social emotional growth, when compared to a teacher directed approach. The most significant barriers addressed, concerning the defining properties of choice, could be regarded as difficulties with many possible solutions in the form of adaptations and modifications. The inherent characteristics of choice bestow significant responsibility onto students which includes playing an active role in decision-making regarding their education, seeking problems they are interested in solving, determining the purpose of their work, and working collaboratively with a leader rather than being instructed what to do and how to do it. This piece may be uncommon and initially uncomfortable for many students in the educational setting. As the data describes, participating in a TAB studio can ensue overwhelming and hesitant feelings in students. Numerous participants communicated solutions after describing their perspective of the impediments of a choice- based art approach,

“The open-ended aspects can be overwhelming. Luckily choice can incorporate individual training-wheels to support students”

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“Sometimes a choice studio is louder than teacher led. I have occasionally found this to be an issue for kids who are over-stimulated but accommodations such a noise cancellation headphones help”

“Sometimes students struggle to find an idea they want to follow but since other students are more independent I have more opportunity to talk through this creative block with individual students”

“Some of our friends who have autism require more routine and may need some prompting upon entering the choice-based studio, narrowing choices or knowing what the options are for the day is helpful to these friends”

The ability to seamlessly change the art studio environment, curriculum, and/ or instruction, in order for students with disabilities to be successful and actively participate in the community, is also an inherent advantage of choice. While the barriers limit, they also offer opportunities for problem solving and, through choice, present the opportunity to find solutions to better meet students’ needs. Comprehensively, the data collected mirrors and supports the findings of the preceding research described in the literature review; while the approach can be foreign and at times difficult for students, the social, emotional, and behavioral growth is transformative.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research:

Limitations to the data include the amount of participants who completed in the survey. The questionnaire was sent out to thousands of art educators through a live, online social network platform and completed by 32 members. For further research, it would be recommended to seek out an electronic mailing list to directly contact teachers who practice the Teaching for Artistic Behavior philosophy. The administrator of the platform was contacted for permission

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prior to posting and was responsible for outputting the survey, which did increase participation and strengthened the data collection. Additionally, the term “special needs” was applied in the survey without a definition of what constitutes a student having special needs. It would be recommended that the term be clearly and explicitly defined for future reference as that term may vary across the nation.

The results of teachers’ perspectives on the outcomes of the implementation of a choice-based art practice for students with special learning needs support the research that studies the opportunities for students to voice their choice. A student- centered, choice-based approach to teaching art empowers students to play an active role in decision-making regarding their education and has shown to improve student participation, academic performance, motivation, and social/emotional growth. Mary Warnock cautions an “ideology of inclusion”. She argues, “If educated in mainstream schools, many such children [children with identified special educational needs] are not included at all. They suffer all the pains of the permanent outsider” (Warnock, 2005, as cited in Allan, 2014). Art education has the unique and rare opportunity to provide an authentic inclusive learning community for students with disabilities to belong and thrive.

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[behavior.org/what-is-tab.html](https://teachingforartisticbehavior.org/what-is-tab.html)

Appendix

Figure 1. Range of Choice taken from Purtee, M. (2021). The Difference Between TAB and Choice and Why It Matters - The Art of Education University.

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	Media Process	Process	Interpretation
Limited Choice	Students make choices within a single media, like choosing which colors of paint to use.	Students make choices that apply to one process.	The teacher develops the main concept, and students add personal touches.
Moderate Choice	Students choose from a limited range of options, like choosing between three different drawing materials.	Students choose between a limited amount of processes, like deciding between printmaking or painting.	The teacher gives some parameters, like a theme or essential question, which students must work within.
Full Choice	Students choose from a wide range of options, like media-based centers or an array of supplies.	Students choose between many processes.	Students are expected to generate and develop their own ideas.

Figure 2. Research Created Survey

What grade level(s) do you teach?

Pre-kindergarten Kindergarten - 2nd Grade 3rd Grade - 5th Grade 6th Grade- 8th Grade 9th Grade- 12th Grade

What type of community do you teach in?

Urban Suburban Rural

How many years have you been teaching art?

0-5 years 6-10 years 11-15 years 16- 19 years 20 + years

How many years have you been practicing a student-centered, choice-based approach to teaching art?

0-5 years 6-10 years 11-15 years 16- 19 years 20 + years

How do you typically implement choice in the classroom?

Limited Choice Moderate Choice Full Choice

What percentage of the students you serve receive support services through an Individualized Education Plan or a 504 Plan?

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For students with special needs, the frequency of participation in class discussion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

For students with special needs, the amount of participation in art-making increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

For students with special needs, peer-to-peer collaboration on artwork increases in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

Students with special needs are more eager to participate in the learning process in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

Students with special needs want to physically stay longer in a choice-based classroom versus a teacher-directed classroom.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

For students with special needs, the duration of on-task focus in a single class session is longer in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

Behavior challenges and disruptions decrease when a student-centered, choice-based approach is employed versus a teacher-directed approach in the art classroom.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

For students with special needs, task completion is greater in a choice-based art classroom versus a teacher-directed learning environment.

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

What have been the most impactful gains for students with special needs who have the opportunity to participate in a choice-based, student-centered approach to art class?

OUTCOMES OF A CHOICE-BASED ART PRACTICE

What are, if any, the limitations for students with special needs who participate in a choice-based, student-centered approach to art class?