

**Designing an Inclusive Art Classroom: A Framework to Support Emergent Bilingual and
Neurodiverse Learners**

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Educational History

As I reflect on my K-12 educational journey, it's impossible to ignore the intricate dance of identities that shaped my experience. Being the daughter of a Mexican mom and a Chilean dad, a small thread woven into the tapestry of the American dream, I grew up speaking Spanish. Because of this, when I started kindergarten, I was placed in the English language development program. But my narrative only just starts there. Behind the scenes I was wrestling with ADHD and dyslexia, two companions on my educational journey that I would not be formally diagnosed with until fifth grade and my freshman year of college.

In third grade, I managed to break free from the cocoon of English language development when I passed the ELPAC test. This was exciting for me because I would finally be in the “normal” class. I could do what everyone else was doing. This feeling of success lingered briefly as I entered fourth grade, where a new challenge awaited me – the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. The shift from one extreme to another was dizzying, but I embraced the opportunity, eager to prove that I belonged.

Unfortunately, middle school was a dark, dark place, with no visible exit. I dealt with extreme bullying, by the kids that were supposedly my best friends in elementary school. The pain I was experiencing on a daily basis was so strong that thoughts of suicide started to creep into my mind. Each day felt like a never-ending battle that simply started up again the next day. Toward the end of the middle school nightmare ride, my sixth grade English teacher and my art teacher noticed my struggle. They contacted my parents which lit the spark for improvement. They went to the school and demanded to speak to my guidance counselor, who gave me the safe

and welcoming space to tell her and my parents what was going on the last three years. While this did help, it was already toward the end of the school year and we were soon headed to high school, to which I saw as a fresh start.

High school did bring some respite from the bullying, but scars from the past lingered, manifesting as emotional hurdles. As the curriculum of high school became more advanced, a new challenge emerged. The words we had to read seemed to dance right off the pages, forcing me to have to read everything a good five to eight times. My ability to learn wavered, leaving me grasping for understanding in a sea of confusion. I must have seemingly covered it up very well, however, because most of the time my teachers would simply write it off to English not having been my first language and that must explain it.

It wasn't until my freshman year of college when the veil over my learning struggles was lifted. I still continued having problems reading as the material was only harder than it ever had been before. I will be eternally grateful, however, to my English 103 professor Nicki Lovett, who saw me struggling to read out loud, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau. After one morning class, she pulled me aside and asked me if I had dyslexia. I said I didn't think so because no one had ever brought that up as a possibility before. Another spark that led to some change. I sought a diagnosis and was found to have dyslexia. This diagnosis helped explain the years of silent battles, the misunderstandings, and the tears shed in solitude. It was both a relief and an answer to the questions that had haunted my educational journey.

Looking back, my experiences taught me a valuable lesson – we never truly know the battles others are fighting. Assumptions based on appearances or limited information can perpetuate injustice and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Because of my experiences, I never want to judge others hastily, especially my future students. I understood the importance of creating an

inclusive and empathetic learning environment, where every individual is seen, heard, and valued. My journey has had many hardships, but it has also become a guiding light in my career in education. I aspire to create classrooms where every student feels acknowledged and supported. I carry this resilience with me as I step into a future dedicated to fostering understanding and inclusivity in education.

As I step into the role of an educator, my backpack, filled with the knowledge of my own educational journey, I am keenly aware of the transformative power that teaching holds. My experience navigating my K-12 education has been marked by systemic biases and personal struggles that have shaped my vision for a classroom that nurtures well-being and equity, and encourages meaningful student connections. To that end, the purpose of my action research project is to identify and implement instructional strategies that support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students, particularly those who, like I did, may feel marginalized, so they can build confidence, remain engaged in their learning, and experience a genuine sense of belonging and success in the classroom.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

Systemic oppression has woven itself deeply into the fabric of educational institutions, creating disparities based on race, gender, socio-economic status, and learning differences (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023, p. 645). My experiences as a student have shown me firsthand the obstacles that can arise when systems fail to account for diverse identities and needs. This awareness informs my commitment to pedagogical practices that recognize and celebrate different learning styles. My journey with ADHD and dyslexia has underscored how traditional methods often overlook neurodivergent experiences. By embracing varied instructional approaches, I aim to foster an environment where every student can thrive. Through open

dialogue, I want students to learn how to critically examine the very systems that perpetuate inequality, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to drive meaningful change.

Two pedagogical theories that guide my teaching are Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), and Universal Design for Learning, first published by Dr. David Rose and Dr. Anne Meyer (2000).

Starting with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (2014), who has been working on this theory for over 25 years, described it as an approach to teaching that centers student culture and aims to empower students intellectually, culturally, and socio-politically. In fact, those are the three major domains of her work: *academic success*, *cultural competence*, & *sociopolitical consciousness* (pp. 74-75). In other words, Ladson-Billings advocated for an educational approach that not only values but actively integrates students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process. By doing so, she encouraged educators to go beyond traditional academic goals and address the holistic development of students. This means fostering academic success while ensuring that students maintain a strong sense of their cultural identity and develop an awareness of the social and political dynamics that shape their lives. Through culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings emphasized the importance of viewing students as whole individuals whose unique cultural experiences are assets to the classroom. This approach helps to build a more inclusive and empowering learning environment where students feel seen, respected, and motivated to engage critically with the world around them.

My own educational history connects with the principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) in several ways. Growing up learning English as a second language, I felt that my culture was in a sense, slowly being stripped away. As the years went on, I became fluent in English, but my fluency in Spanish did not reach the same level. It wasn't until college that I

started learning to read and write in it again. Had my cultural knowledge been embraced and encouraged at a young age, I might have flourished in both languages. My learning disabilities are also connected to CRP, because they were minimized and related to the fact that I was an ELD student, and CRP calls for educational environments that not only recognize but celebrate different learning styles and backgrounds. It was when my teachers recognized my struggles and found a way to get me help, that I felt the most successful academically. Finally, I have slowly learned to advocate and fight for the needs of myself and others, which is an important aim of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: to cultivate socially conscious students who recognize and resist oppressive systems.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is appropriate to guide my study because it directly addresses the foundational elements of my own educational experiences and the goals I envision for my classroom. Given my history of feeling culturally marginalized and unsupported in terms of learning differences, CRP's emphasis on validating and incorporating students' cultural and personal identities resonates strongly with my commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment.

The second pedagogical framework I use to guide my teaching is Universal Design for Learning. Dr. David Rose and Dr. Anne Meyer adapted "the general approach called Universal Design, first applied in architecture, [to the concept of education]" (2000, para. 2). Dr. Rose and Dr. Meyer took principles aimed at enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities, such as crosswalks, and redirected it to educational settings (2000, para. 3). In short, it is a framework for planning instruction to benefit *all* students while keeping in mind the needs of all the different learners in our spaces.

The main tenet of UDL is providing multiple means of access, engagement, and expression to support all learners' needs. "The essence of UDL is flexibility and the inclusion of alternatives to adapt to the myriad variations in learner needs, styles, and preferences" (Rose & Meyer, 2000, para. 16). In other words, UDL does not rely on planning for the "lowest common denominator" and forcing all students to only intake that, rather it provides multiple options that make learning accessible and meaningful for a broad range of students.

The framework of Universal Design for Learning aligns with my educational history because it focuses on providing flexible, inclusive, and supportive learning environments, which directly connects with the hurdles I faced in accessing education due to language differences, neurodivergent conditions, and the emotional impact of bullying. The UDL framework is ideal to guide my teaching because it emphasizes removing barriers to learning and supports diverse, individualized approaches, which aligns with my commitment to creating an empathetic, accessible classroom.

Goals and Connection to Theory & InTASC

One of my goals is to create a space where students feel seen, heard, and valued, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends the boundaries of the classroom. However, I have to ask myself how this goal can be meaningfully achieved in practice, particularly for students whose linguistic and cultural identities have not always been affirmed in academic spaces. This reflection leads me to my revised question: In what ways does integrating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in art instruction impact emergent bilingual students' confidence in engaging in discussions, particularly as they develop and use academic language to express their ideas and perspectives?

Incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices is one of my top priorities. Students will not only be allowed but encouraged to bring their lived experiences into our classroom, shaping our collective exploration of knowledge and understanding, through intentional opportunities for discussion, art making, and reflection. By acknowledging and respecting the diverse backgrounds within the classroom, we will create a learning environment that embraces the beauty of our differences.

My goal of creating an inclusive, culturally responsive classroom directly aligns with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and is well-supported by InTASC Standard 2, which emphasizes the importance of understanding and embracing individual differences to foster an inclusive learning environment. By prioritizing culturally responsive teaching practices, I am committing to a teaching approach that values students' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and personal identities.

InTASC Standard 2 aligns seamlessly with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by asking teachers to understand and leverage students' diverse cultural backgrounds as assets in the learning process. This approach not only promotes academic achievement but also empowers students to meet high standards, recognizing that every student has unique strengths that can contribute to the classroom's collective understanding. CRP and InTASC Standard 2 jointly guide me in creating an equitable and inclusive learning environment that celebrates diversity while setting high expectations for all students.

Another goal of mine is to create a collaborative learning environment where decisions are made collectively, ensuring that the diverse perspectives within our community are considered. Student input will be integral in shaping the classroom experience. I want my students to be empowered and feel a sense of ownership in their education. As with my previous

goal, I have to ask myself how this can be meaningfully and authentically achieved. This leads me to explore the question: In what ways does implementing UDL strategies in art instruction affect the academic engagement and project outcomes for neurodiverse students? When it comes to curriculum, my goal is to offer my students choices, incorporate their interests, and adapt content based on their feedback. I hope to make learning a more personalized and relevant experience that reduces barriers to engagement. This approach not only caters to diverse learning styles but also reinforces the idea that education is a shared journey.

This goal closely aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning and InTASC Standard 1. UDL emphasizes creating flexible, inclusive learning experiences that respond to individual needs, promoting an environment where all students feel valued and engaged. By incorporating student input in curriculum decisions, I can provide choices and adapt content based on student feedback, which mirrors UDL's core tenet of offering multiple means of engagement and empowering students to shape their own learning journeys. This approach encourages students to develop autonomy and a sense of ownership over their education, particularly relevant in an art classroom where creativity and self-expression are central.

InTASC Standard 1 emphasizes the teacher's role in recognizing the unique cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development of each learner. By creating developmentally appropriate, student-centered learning experiences, I remain attentive to the different ways my students learn and grow. Being guided by both UDL and InTASC Standard 1, ultimately helps me foster an inclusive, collaborative, and growth-oriented classroom environment where students are encouraged to reach their full potential.

While these two frameworks support each other in practice, there is not one name for them combined. For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to the combined use of Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, as the Lathrop Framework.

Summary

In summary, this introduction serves to illustrate that I recognize how my K-12 educational journey was shaped by my cultural background and experiences with learning disabilities, as well as my approach to teaching. Beginning in the ELD program, but soon transitioning to mainstream and GATE classes, left me feeling a mix of pride but alienation. While my proficiency in English grew, my fluency in Spanish waned, which deepened a sense of cultural disconnect as I moved through school. This disconnect, paired with unaddressed learning disabilities, made academic success a continual challenge.

However, I am thankful for my experiences, as they have taught me the value of empathy, patience, and inclusivity. They have inspired me to create a classroom where all students feel seen, valued, and supported. Guided by the Lathrop Framework, I aim to use elements from both Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, to celebrate the cultural backgrounds and unique perspectives that each student brings, as well as Universal Design for Learning to support my students with diverse learning needs. My journey through these hardships has deeply influenced my commitment to fostering spaces where students feel connected and empowered, equipped to navigate their academic and personal paths with confidence and resilience.

Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Research and Scholarship

Before proceeding to the annotated bibliography section, I would like to preface that I used two AI models to help me process the information provided in these articles. The first is Speechify, which was used to have the AI read the articles to me. The second model is Google's Notebook LM; this model has the ability to create a podcast out of the files provided. While it is not perfect, it does an adequate job at summarizing the information in an engaging way. As a follow up, I would like to state that I did not use AI to do any written work for me, but solely for the purpose of listening to the information.

Introduction

This annotated bibliography examines literature that explores the intersections of art education, emergent bilingualism, ADHD, dyslexia, and culturally responsive teaching practices. These sources reflect both theoretical and practical perspectives on how arts-based instruction can serve as a powerful, inclusive tool for supporting diverse learners. I will use this body of work to inform the design of my action research project focused on supporting emergent bilingual students and students with ADHD and dyslexia in the art classroom.

Bacon, A. M., & Bennett, S. (2013). Dyslexia in Higher Education: the decision to study art.

European Journal of Special Needs Education, 28(1), 19–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2012.742748>

This article investigated how the lived experience of dyslexia influences the decision to study art in higher education. It examined whether individuals with dyslexia are drawn to art due to inherent strengths, such as visual thinking and creativity, or because of perceived academic limitations. Bacon and Bennett conducted interviews with 13 participants who were either current or recent graduates of art programs. The study was

grounded in social and psychological theories of identity and self-concept, focusing on how dyslexia shapes personal and vocational identities. The data was analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify recurring themes related to educational experiences and motivations. Bacon and Bennett's findings revealed three main themes: the influence of school and family, dyslexia as a strength, and a passion for art. While some participants actively chose art due to their interest and talent, others felt limited in academic options because of negative school experiences. Regardless of their motivations, all participants reported a strong sense of fulfillment and identity as artists, highlighting the role of higher education art programs in fostering positive self-concepts among students with dyslexia.

While this article focuses on higher education, it looks at how those individuals arrived at the decision to study art, influenced by their earlier education. It provides valuable insights into how art education can empower students with dyslexia by leveraging their visual and creative strengths.

Berriz, B., Wager, A., & Poey, V. (2019). *Art as a way of talking for emergent bilingual youth*. Routledge.

This book examined the integration of arts-based practices to enhance literacy and language skills among emergent bilingual students in PreK-12 settings. It challenges traditional methods of English language instruction, advocating for culturally responsive and arts-integrated approaches that empower students and build on their sociocultural knowledge. Berriz, Wager, & Poey compiled a collection of studies and practical examples that highlight the use of multimodal art forms, such as photography, graphic novels, and digital art, within bilingual education settings, in the context of fostering

critical literacy and language development. The authors' research was analyzed through the lenses of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and theories of multiliteracies. The authors conclude that integrating the arts into bilingual education not only enhances language acquisition but also fosters a sense of belonging and cultural identity among students. They argue that arts-based methods provide a critical pathway to meaningful engagement and academic success for marginalized communities.

This book provides me both practical and theoretical insights into how I can use art as a tool to support emergent bilingual students in my classroom. The strengths of the book are its diverse case studies and its emphasis on culturally responsive teaching through the arts. However, it is important to note that simply because a student is an emergent bilingual, it does not guarantee that the student will automatically gravitate toward the arts.

Biggs, I., & Kiziewicz, M. (Eds.) (2007). *Cascade: Creativity across Science, Art, Dyslexia, Education*. University of Bath.

This article examines the relationship between dyslexia, art, and creativity, emphasizing the importance of imagination as a broader and more fundamental concept than creativity. Biggs critically explores assumptions about dyslexia and its association with artistic talent and advocates for a more inclusive and imaginative approach to education. The author presents a reflective, narrative based on personal experiences, academic research, and observations from working with dyslexic art students. The study uses a critical and philosophical lens, challenging traditional views of creativity and dyslexia. It emphasizes the role of imagination in dissolving rigid categories and highlights the risks of oversimplifying or stereotyping people with dyslexia as inherently creative or artistic.

Biggs concludes that dyslexia should not be narrowly associated with artistic talent, as this risks limiting the broader potential of individuals with dyslexia. Instead, education should foster imaginative thinking across all disciplines, emphasizing diversity and fluidity in how individuals make sense of the world. The author argues for an educational model that values imagination as central to human development.

This article plays a somewhat opposing perspective of what the other studies in this bibliography have found, not fully discounting the other research, but simply expressing that just because a student has dyslexia, it does not mean that art will be the subject they excel in. It forces me to think critically about how I frame creativity and dyslexia in my teaching.

Chappell, S. V., & Faltis, C. J. (2013). *The arts and emergent bilingual youth: Building culturally responsive, critical and creative education in school and community contexts*. Routledge.

This book examines how the arts and language learning intersect to emergent bilingual students' academic and linguistic growth. It highlights how the arts can be utilized in bilingual education to challenge social injustices and enhance language learning and identity development. Chappell and Faltis used a combination of theoretical discussions, vignettes, and model arts projects. The book incorporates perspectives from researchers, artists, and educators who engage in culturally responsive teaching with bilingual youth. The projects cover visual arts, media, and storytelling practices to illustrate effective strategies. The authors analyze their findings through the lens of critical pedagogy, or education for liberation. Chappell and Faltis conclude that arts integration in bilingual education supports both language acquisition and cultural identity. It provides students

with opportunities to critically engage with their sociocultural contexts, resist deficit narratives, and contribute to transformative educational practices.

This book offers valuable insights into how I can use the arts to support emergent bilinguals in my classroom. Its emphasis on culturally responsive practices resonates with my goal to create an inclusive learning environment.

Docrat, Y. (2021). *Using the Arts to Foster Emotional Regulation for Grades Four to Ten Students with ADHD and Attention and/or Hyperactivity Challenges: A Multiple Case Study* (Doctoral dissertation, Queen's University (Canada)).

This thesis explores how the arts can foster emotional regulation among students grades 4–10, diagnosed with ADHD, by examining the perspectives of multiple teachers and students. Docrat used a qualitative, multiple case study design, including interviews with three teachers and three students. The study draws on Shanker's (2013) five-domain conception of self-regulation and integrates insights from cognitive and educational psychology to explore the relationship between emotional regulation, executive functioning, and arts education. The research was analyzed using Thomas' general inductive qualitative approach, focusing on how the arts support emotional regulation and identifying potential challenges and benefits. Docrat's findings indicate that arts-based practices can serve as effective tools for ER, particularly for students with ADHD. Teachers' pedagogical orientations and strategies were crucial in leveraging the arts for this purpose. However, the research also highlighted that certain art activities might lead to dysregulation if not properly guided.

This thesis is relevant to my teaching as it emphasizes the importance of intentional arts-based strategies for supporting students with ADHD. The strengths of this study

include its comprehensive, qualitative approach and its focus on actionable teacher strategies.

Farrington, C., & Shewfelt, S. (2020). How Arts Education Supports Social-Emotional Development: A Theory of Action. *State Education Standard*, 20(1), 31-35.

This article examines the relationship between arts education and social-emotional learning, presenting a theory of action that explains how daily arts practices can help develop students' SEL competencies. The study emphasizes the role of intentional arts instruction in fostering emotional growth, self-regulation, collaboration, and resilience. Farrington and Shewfelt conducted a literature review and interviews with educators, administrators, students, and parents in Chicago Public Schools from 2017 to 2019. They combined findings from arts-specific research and broader multidisciplinary studies on child and adolescent development to form their theory. This study is analyzed through a social-emotional learning lens. The authors conclude that arts education can significantly contribute to SEL when delivered intentionally. They emphasize that arts practices should not be seen as automatically fostering SEL but as opportunities to guide students in developing social-emotional skills.

This article, while not directly related to learning disabilities, provides valuable insights into how arts education can support social-emotional learning in my classroom. I believe it is important to take a holistic approach and support the emotional well-being of students, especially those dealing with disabilities.

Hickman, R., & Brens, M. (2014). Art, Pedagogy and Dyslexia. *The International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 33(3), 335–344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12067>

This article explores the relationship between dyslexia and art pedagogy, specifically examining how art teachers with dyslexia use their personal experiences and strategies to inform their teaching practices. It aims to identify pedagogical approaches unique to art teachers and their potential value for broader teaching contexts. Hickman & Brens conducted interviews, observations, and collected autobiographical details from six art teachers with dyslexia. The research focused on identifying strategies these teachers developed as learners and how they translated these into classroom practices. This study views the research through the lens of adult art teachers with dyslexia. The authors' findings reveal that art teachers with dyslexia often exhibit heightened empathy, augmented spatial awareness, and a preference for visual and somatic teaching methods. It considers their neurodiverse strengths as attributes that enhance their classroom management and instructional practices to benefit diverse learners. This article highlights the potential strengths associated with having dyslexia and teaching art.

Lehman, M., Phillips, S., & Saenz Williams, A. (2018). Empowering Identity Through Art:

Bilingual Co-Teaching at the Blanton Museum of Art. *Journal of Museum Education*, 43(4), 375–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2018.1522222>

This article describes the Bilingual Co-Teaching program at the Blanton Museum of Art, which integrates dual-language instruction into gallery experiences for K–12 students. The program aims to affirm linguistic and cultural identities while enhancing social-emotional learning and bilingual literacy. The program implements a co-teaching model pairing bilingual education students with graduate teaching fellows in art history. Through planning and leading gallery tours, co-teachers facilitate student engagement

using Visual Thinking Strategies and bilingual dialogue. The study draws on culturally responsive teaching principles and Paulo Freire's concept of dialogic action, affirming bilingualism and dismantling hierarchical language structures in educational spaces. The authors conclude that bilingual co-teaching fosters a sense of belonging and validates students' cultural and linguistic identities. The program demonstrates how museums can extend classroom learning and create inclusive educational environments.

This article offers insights for collaboration opportunities, using art to empower bilingual students and affirm their cultural identities. This, in the context of my school, can come in the form of working with coworkers, or when having guest speakers visit. While the article's strengths lie in its detailed description of the bilingual co-teaching model and examples of implementation, it could have included more quantitative data on student outcomes.

Sanita, J. K. (2019). *The Phenomenon of Artistic Talent in the Dyslexic Brain Visual Arts as an Intervention Strategy for Students with Dyslexia*. California State University, Long Beach.

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of artistic talent in individuals with dyslexia, proposing visual arts education as a beneficial intervention strategy. It explores whether a neurobiological link exists between dyslexia and artistic talent and examines the role of visual arts in fostering self-esteem and academic success for students with dyslexia. The study utilizes a mixed-method approach, including a literature review on the neurobiology of dyslexia, current intervention strategies, and six qualitative interviews with adult artists who have dyslexia. These interviews capture personal narratives about their educational experiences and the impact of visual arts on their self-esteem. The

research is grounded in neurological studies, focusing on the structural differences in the dyslexic brain. It advocates for strength-based approaches that highlight artistic talents as opposed to focusing solely on deficits in language processing. Sanita concludes that visual arts education significantly contributes to the academic self-esteem of students with dyslexia by providing a space where they can succeed and feel valued. It recommends integrating visual arts into intervention plans for students with dyslexia, shifting from a deficit-based approach to one that builds on their strengths.

This thesis strengthens my understanding of how art can empower students with learning disabilities, including my own, by leveraging their inherent strengths. The strengths of the study lie in its combination of theoretical insights and personal narratives, which provide a thorough view on the issue. To get a more accurate pool of data, the study could have interviewed more students.

Thirukkumaran, M. R. (2013). *Teaching art to students diagnosed with ADHD: An analysis of teacher strategies* (Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University).

This thesis explores effective strategies for teaching art to students diagnosed with ADHD. It identifies unique challenges and opportunities in art classrooms, aiming to provide implementable recommendations to support these students' success and engagement in artistic learning environments. Thirukkumaran conducted electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews with middle and high school art teachers who had experience teaching students with ADHD. Data was collected from a diverse sample of teachers to identify common strategies and themes. Thirukkumaran's research is grounded in constructivist theory, emphasizing the role of individualized and student-centered teaching strategies in creating inclusive art education environments for

students with ADHD. The findings indicate that student-centered teaching, flexibility in expectations, and a focus on community engagement are effective in supporting students with ADHD. Teachers emphasized the importance of understanding individual needs and using personalized strategies rather than relying solely on IEPs. Art education was shown to provide unique opportunities for success and self-expression, which could be adapted to other subjects.

This thesis offers valuable insights into tailoring my teaching strategies to better support students with ADHD in my art classroom. Its strengths include the practical recommendations and its focus on art-specific challenges and solutions.

Conclusion

Collectively, the sources included in this annotated bibliography highlight the empowering possibilities associated with art education, especially when such approaches are designed, developed, and executed through a student-centered approach. While the literature indicates a consistent benefit associated with arts-based instruction for emergent bilingual learners and students with learning differences, there is also a sense of caution associated with such approaches, such as the assumption of inherent artistic talent among neurodiverse learners, which must be considered for the development of the action research project. These sources inform both the instructional approach and data collection methods for the action research project, which as a reminder of its purpose, is to identify and implement instructional strategies that support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students, particularly those who, like I did, may feel marginalized, so they can build confidence, remain engaged in their learning, and experience a genuine sense of belonging and success in the classroom.

Chapter 3. Methods

According to Sagor (2000), action research “is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” improving and/or refining, his or her actions” (p. 3). In other words, action research is a method of studying ones’ work to determine what is working, what is not, and how to improve it.

In his book, *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*, Sagor outlined the seven steps for properly conducting action research (2000, pp. 3-4). A teacher must begin by selecting a focus, which means narrowing down the specific aspect of their teaching practices they wish to examine (Sagor, 2000, p. 4). The second and third steps are to study existing research in this area and clarify the approaches they feel will work best in their classrooms, to then generate some guiding research questions (Sagor, 2000, p. 4). The fourth and fifth steps are to collect valid and reliable data, and to then analyze that data (Sagor, 2000, pp. 4-6). The sixth and seventh steps are to report on the findings of the research and to then take informed action based off those findings (Sagor, 2000, p. 6).

For myself, action research is the proper method of study because it honors both my role as a teacher and my lived experiences reflected in my own educational history. As a full-time teacher, teaching 5 different classes to plan for and serving students ranging from freshmen learning foundational art and design skills to seniors in advanced mixed media classes, I work with a wide variety of learners with diverse academic and linguistic needs. By implementing and studying UDL strategies within my own classroom, I can reflect on the data I collect to intentionally refine my practice and create more accessible and affirming learning experiences for all of my students. The two questions that guide my research are: 1) In what ways does

integrating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in art instruction impact emergent bilingual students' confidence in engaging in discussions, particularly as they develop and use academic language to express their ideas and perspectives? 2) In what ways does implementing UDL strategies in art instruction affect the academic engagement and project outcomes for neurodiverse students?

Participants and Setting

Sprague High School serves the South Salem community, an area that blends suburban neighborhoods with stretches of rural land. The school is surrounded by hills and forested areas, giving it a distinct natural backdrop. The school serves approximately 1600 students.

In my Mixed Media I classes, which I will be using for my research, I have 47 students: 27 female, 18 male, and 2 non-binary students. 20 students are 9th graders, 17 students are 10th graders, 9 students are 11th graders, and 1 student is a 12th grader. 17 students are White, 2 students are Black, 9 students are Hispanic/Latino, 2 student is Asian, 6 students are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 11 students are multiracial. 8 students are receiving special education services, 6 students are emergent bilinguals receiving sheltered language instruction, and 1 student is a TAG student.

20 of the 25 students took Art 1 and passed with a C or higher, 2 students took Art 1 and passed with a D, and 3 students did not take Art 1. This tells me that 80% of my students are at the level needed to do well in this class. However, this does not mean that the other 20% cannot still do well; they may simply need additional support. My students have a rich bank of cultural funds of knowledge. One of my students is an exchange student from Spain. Another has traveled all over the world with her mom. While academically, most are proficient, culturally, they all have so much to offer.

I have had this particular class for approximately three weeks at the time of writing this chapter. However, I have previously taught 18 of the 25 students either last semester or within the past couple years. This prior experience has allowed me to build meaningful relationships with many of them, understand their working styles, and develop insight into their strengths, challenges, and creative tendencies. Because I am familiar with how many of these students approach problem-solving and manage their time, I am often able to anticipate when additional scaffolding may be needed or when I can push them toward deeper critical thinking. One of my strengths with this group is the rapport and trust that has already been established, which fosters a classroom environment where students feel comfortable taking creative risks and engaging in critique. At the same time, an area for growth is ensuring that I do not make assumptions based on prior experiences with them but instead remain responsive to their current needs. As students mature and their circumstances shift, it is important that my instructional decisions are informed by ongoing observation and data rather than familiarity alone.

Data Collection & Analysis

When it came to collecting data, I needed to make sure I was collecting valid and reliable data, as explained by Sagor (2000). To do this, I used the process of triangulation, which “refers to the use of multiple independent data sources to corroborate findings” (Sagor, 2000, p. 19). In other words, I needed to collect information from several different sources or methods and compare them to see if they point to the same conclusion, instead of relying on just one piece of data. Some of the data I collected comes from my PLC. During our PLC meetings, part of the form we fill out is collecting data on shared students and discussing their progress in our respective courses. This is a valid set of data, according to Sagor (2000, p.19). Originally, I was going to collect data from observation and assessment of students across 2 units. One unit would

be taught without UDL and CRP strategies and the second would include additional supports and strategies, including one lesson that is shared across both units: a critique. The sets of data including visual observations, student assessments such as their art projects, presentations, and critiques, would also be valid and reliable, according to Sagor, as it will compare work to previous assignments (2000, p.21). However, as I began the data collection process, I realized I already had an abundance of data from the first semester. This became even more important as I examined the two classes I am comparing. In the first semester class, Art 1, I teach somewhat of a canned curriculum. While I do have some freedom to change things, it is mostly taught as designed by our district PLC. Mixed Media is a class I designed entirely on my own, giving me the freedom to try strategies across the entire semester and not just one unit. This allowed me to collect a wider pool of data to analyze.

In this action research study, I followed both a qualitative and quantitative analysis procedure to examine patterns across multiple data sources, including student work, grades, observational and anecdotal notes on students, and a student survey (n=6/14). I began by organizing the data by type and then reviewed the data in detail, as recommended by Creswell (2009), to build familiarity with student experiences. This process allowed me to move beyond initial impressions and begin identifying patterns related to engagement, confidence, and sense of belonging. By reviewing the data multiple times, I ensured that my analysis was grounded in consistent and recurring student experiences rather than isolated incidents of progress. To make sense of the data, I used open coding as an initial step. Because there is so much data as previously mentioned, I had to code each set individually. Student work was analyzed for evidence of personal expression, creative risk-taking, and application of concepts, while grades were reviewed to identify patterns in completion, growth, and demonstrated understanding.

Observational and anecdotal notes on students were coded for behaviors such as participation, peer interaction, question-asking, and confidence in sharing ideas. These notes were particularly valuable in capturing moments where students engaged more actively or demonstrated increased comfort in the classroom environment. This process allowed codes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined, ensuring that student voice and lived classroom experiences remained central to the analysis. In addition to this data, I applied similar coding practices to survey data I collected. I analyzed student survey responses line by line and labeled key words and phrases that reflected student experiences. For example, student statements such as “interesting topics” and “creative things like our culture” were coded as engagement and cultural relevance, while responses such as “knowing what to do” and “she helps me and doesn’t make me feel bad” were coded as instructional clarity and non-judgmental support.

I then used these initial codes to group them into broader categories, which helped identify overarching themes. For example, codes such as creative freedom, personal connection, and enjoyment, I grouped into the theme “Creative Freedom Increases Engagement.” Similarly, codes related to peer support, kind environment, and shared interests were grouped into the theme “Sense of Belonging Through Community.” Codes connected to teacher support and clear instruction formed the theme “A Supportive Environment Builds Confidence.” This process from codes to themes was somewhat difficult as I was originally calling recurring patterns, themes. After multiple rounds of research on this matter, I am hopeful that these themes can properly convey what I am trying to accomplish as the purpose of my research action project, which as a reminder is to identify and implement instructional strategies that support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students, particularly those who, like I did, may feel marginalized, so they can build

confidence, remain engaged in their learning, and experience a genuine sense of belonging and success in the classroom.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, I triangulated data across multiple sources and aligned my analysis with the Lathrop Framework outlined in Chapter 1, using a combination of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. I intentionally looked for consistency across data to ensure that observed changes, such as increased engagement or participation, were not isolated or coincidental, but instead connected to specific instructional strategies grounded in these frameworks. For example, an increase in completed and more thorough critique assignments aligned with the implementation of supports such as sentence frames, reflecting UDL's emphasis on multiple means of expression and reducing barriers to participation. Similarly, students' increased engagement through creative freedom and their ability to incorporate personal identity and culture into their work supported culturally responsive teaching practices. Observational notes, student work, and grade trends reinforced these patterns, particularly in moments where students demonstrated greater confidence in sharing ideas and participating in discussions. By comparing survey responses with these additional data sources, I was able to confirm that these patterns were consistent across different forms of evidence.

To make sure my data was valid, I asked my second reader, who previously served as our school's ELD teacher and facilitator, to review my data analysis. During our discussion, she recommended that I also seek feedback from the current ELD teacher, Christy Berry, as she could provide an additional perspective on the findings. I followed this recommendation and shared my data with Christy for review. One of my primary concerns was whether I had collected sufficient data to support the study. Christy felt that I had. While she understood the

challenge of working with a relatively small number of students, she reminded me that these students were the specific focus of the study and therefore the most relevant population for analysis. After reviewing the survey results and participation data, she noted that the data appeared meaningful and demonstrated clear patterns related to student engagement and confidence.

Christy also raised an interesting question that could inform future research. She wondered about the relationship between students' sense of belonging, their confidence in engaging with academic content, and their level of participation in class. Because part of the survey data was collected using a Likert scale, she questioned whether there might be a measurable threshold at which students begin participating more actively. For example, it might be assumed that students would need to report "strongly agree" when describing their sense of belonging or confidence before participation increases; however, it is possible that a rating of "neutral" or "somewhat agree" may be sufficient to produce meaningful changes in engagement. Exploring this relationship over multiple school years and across different content areas could provide a deeper understanding of how educators can better support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students.

Researcher Positionality

My layered identity as a bilingual, a Latina, and a neurodiverse learner directly informs both the theoretical framework of this study and the way I approach data collection and analysis. In Chapter 1, I grounded my research in the Lathrop Framework, a combined use of UDL and CRP strategies, that seeks to reduce barriers and increase access for diverse learners. My personal experiences navigating academic spaces that were not always designed with linguistic

or neurodiverse learners in mind, shape my commitment to studying instructional practices that proactively remove barriers to accessing art education.

Because I have lived experience with language and learning differences, I am particularly aware of moments when students demonstrate hesitation, lack of confidence, and disengagement. This awareness influences how I collect data, as I will intentionally look for evidence of voice, vocabulary risk-taking, sustained engagement, and access to multiple means of expression. At the same time, my layered identity requires me to remain reflective and cautious during analysis. I must ensure that my interpretations are grounded in observable evidence rather than assumptions shaped by my own past experiences. By acknowledging both the strengths and biases that come from my positionality, I aim to conduct research that is useful for me to become a better teacher, through the equity-centered principles of the Lathrop Framework.

Chapter 4. Findings

Before reviewing the findings of this research, I would like to provide a reminder of the purpose of this action research project. It is to identify and implement instructional strategies that support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students, particularly those who, like I did, may feel marginalized, so they can build confidence, remain engaged in their learning, and experience a genuine sense of belonging and success in the classroom.

While analyzing the data I have collected over the course of this school year, three themes emerged. The first theme is how creative freedom caused an increase in student engagement. The second is a sense of belonging through community. The third theme is how supportive environments build confidence. I used supportive data from my research to discuss each theme.

Creative Freedom Increases Engagement

One major theme that emerged from this study was that creative freedom played a critical role in increasing student engagement, particularly for students who had previously demonstrated low participation, avoidance behaviors, or inconsistent performance in Art 1, where the curriculum is more strict on creative choice in comparison to Mixed Media. Across multiple data sources, including survey responses, observational notes, student work, and grade patterns, students consistently demonstrated higher levels of engagement when they were given opportunities to make meaningful choices about their artwork. This engagement was not only reflected in student perceptions, but also in observable behavioral changes, increased completion of work, and a higher level of personal investment in their projects.

In earlier coursework, particularly in Art 1, instruction followed a more structured, skills-based approach, where students were often working toward a common outcome with

limited variation in subject matter or conceptual direction. While this structure supported the development of foundational skills, it also created barriers for some students, especially those who struggled to connect personally to the assigned content. In contrast, the Mixed Media courses were intentionally designed to incorporate student choice across all projects, allowing students to determine subject matter, materials, and, in some cases, conceptual direction. This shift in instructional design created opportunities for students to engage with content that was personally meaningful, culturally relevant, and aligned with their individual interests.

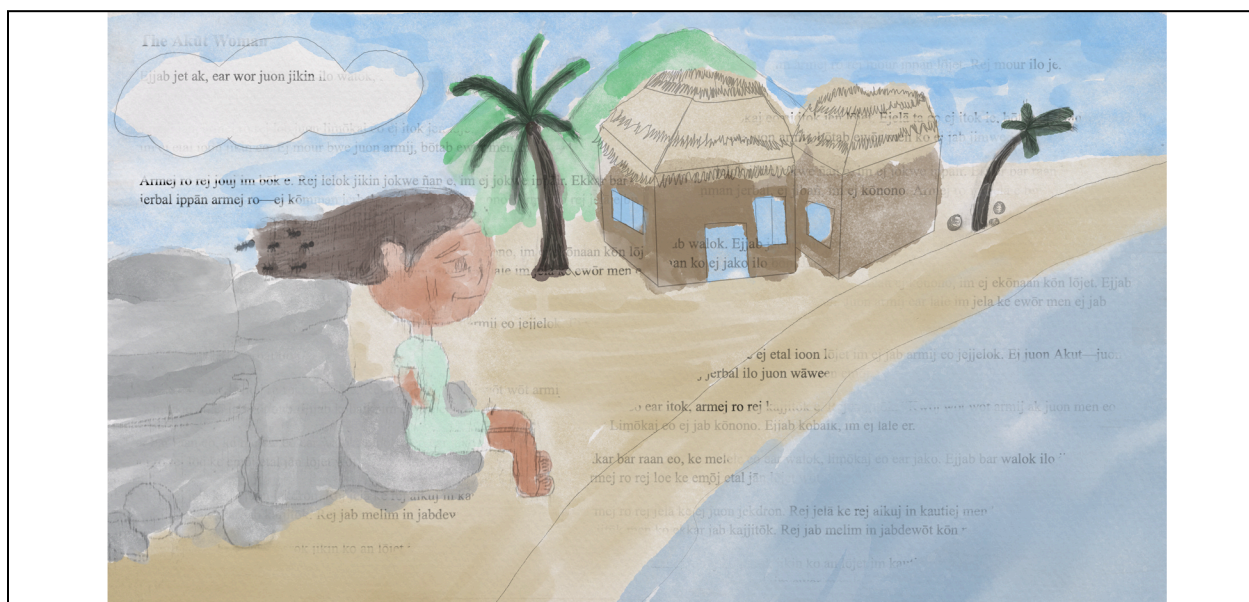
This contrast is particularly evident in the case of student AL298, an emergent bilingual student whose level of engagement shifted dramatically between Art 1 and Mixed Media 1. During Art 1, this student frequently disengaged from the learning environment. My observational notes indicated that she often avoided participation by putting her head down, browsing the internet on her Chromebook, or leaving the classroom under the pretense of using the restroom. When prompted to engage, she would respond with *“I just don’t want to do this.”* These behaviors ultimately resulted in the student failing the course. From a behavioral and academic standpoint, this student demonstrated minimal engagement with both the content and the classroom community.

However, in Mixed Media 1, this same student has exhibited a notable shift in both behavior and academic performance. Survey responses revealed that she attributed this change directly to the increased level of autonomy within the course. When asked to describe the difference between Art 1 and Mixed Media, the student stated, *“well I have more freedom in this class and the art doesn’t have to be an exact thing.”* This statement reflects a key barrier present in the previous course, where the expectation that work conformed to a specific outcome limited the student’s willingness to engage. In contrast, the flexibility of the Mixed Media 1 curriculum

allowed the student to approach projects in a way that felt accessible and personally relevant.

The student further explained, “*I get to choose what my project looks like and how I can do it.*”

This sense of ownership translated directly into action. Unlike in Art 1, where the student did not complete any projects, she fully engaged in the Reimagined Folktale project. For this assignment, she selected a story, *The Akūt Woman*, from her own cultural background and worked in her home language to develop the concept.



(Figure 4.1)

The resulting piece (Figure 4.1) demonstrated not only completion, but also a depth of engagement that had not been present in her previous work. The project reflected personal investment, cultural identity, and a willingness to participate in the creative process. This shift aligns with research on emergent bilingual students, which emphasizes the importance of connecting academic work to students’ lived experiences. As noted in *Art as a Way of Talking for Emergent Bilingual Youth*, “multiple literacies projects build stories based on and arising from young people’s lives and experiences and cultural forms of representation to engage with and gain access to student agency, cultural memory, and home and school learning within local

contexts” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 255, as cited in Berriz et al., 2019, p. 13). In this case, the integration of culturally relevant content and student choice enabled the student to re-engage with the classroom in a meaningful way.

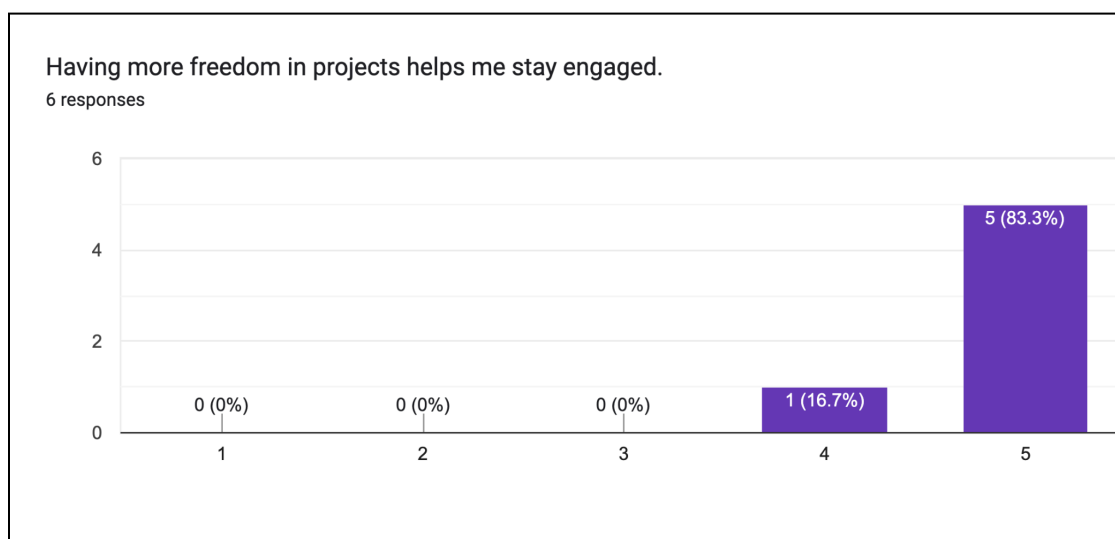
A similar pattern of increased engagement through creative freedom was observed with student MR816, who has ADHD. During Art 1, this student demonstrated inconsistent engagement, particularly when projects did not align with his interests. When assigned to paint trees as part of a unit on color and texture, the student expressed his frustration by stating, *“I don’t wanna do trees. Why can’t I do the ninja turtles?”* Although he was eventually able to complete the assignment with support and redirection, his engagement remained limited. Again, my observational notes during the first semester indicated that he frequently left his seat, wandered the studio, or exited the classroom altogether. While some of these behaviors were aligned with accommodations outlined in his IEP, such as taking a 10 minute break when stressed or distracted, they occurred most frequently during tasks that did not capture his interest.

In the Mixed Media 1 course, where students were given greater flexibility in their subject matter, this student demonstrated a noticeable increase in engagement. When provided with opportunities to incorporate his own interests into his work, he became more focused, sustained his attention for longer periods, and produced work that reflected a higher level of effort. This shift is consistent with findings related to students with ADHD in art classroom environments. As Thirukkumaran explains, “the nature of the art studio offers [students with ADHD] freedom to move around more than in a traditional classroom environment and I’ve found that there is always a project or medium that is enticing to them. Usually they have had a high degree of success in the art studio” (2012, p. 104).



(Figure 4.2)

This student's work provides clear visual evidence of this shift. While he did complete the tree painting in Art 1, the level of time dedicated and the craftsmanship were limited. In contrast, his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles painting during the 2D animation unit (Figure 4.2) demonstrated significantly greater care and persistence. The difference between these two works suggests that engagement was not solely a matter of ability, but rather of interest and personal connection. When given the opportunity to create work that aligned with his passions, the student demonstrated a higher level of commitment to the artistic process.



(Figure 4.3)

Beyond these individual examples, broader patterns across the class further support the relationship between creative freedom and engagement. Survey data (n=6/14) asking students if having more creative freedom helped with their engagement, indicated that students consistently associated increased interest with having the ability to make choices in their work (Figure 4.3). Many students described feeling more motivated when they could explore topics that were meaningful to them or experiment with different materials and approaches. Observational notes reinforced these findings, documenting increased on-task behavior, more frequent peer interaction, and a greater willingness to participate in discussions during projects. Students persisted through challenges, sought feedback more often, and revised their work more willingly when they felt a sense of ownership over the outcome.

Analysis of student work also revealed differences in depth and complexity between more structured and more open-ended assignments. In projects that allowed for creative freedom, students were more likely to incorporate personal narratives, cultural references, and unique visual approaches. This resulted in work that was not only more diverse in appearance, but also more reflective of individual student identities. In contrast, more structured assignments often produced more uniform results, with less variation in both concept and execution. These patterns suggest that creative freedom not only increases engagement, but also enhances the quality and authenticity of student work.

These findings are further supported by culturally responsive teaching practices, which emphasize the importance of connecting learning to students' identities and experiences. As described in *How Arts Education Supports Social-Emotional Development: A Theory of Action*, “young people need access (geographic, financial, and culturally inclusive) to a wide range of

high-quality activities—arts and nonarts, in school and outside of school—so that they can find the ones that best suit them and ignite their passions” (Farrington & Shewfelt, 2020, p. 34). By incorporating opportunities for students to explore their cultural backgrounds, personal interests, and creative identities, the Mixed Media 1 curriculum created conditions that supported deeper engagement. Students were not simply completing assignments; they were creating work that held personal meaning, which in turn increased their investment in the learning process.

At the same time, it is important to note that creative freedom alone does not automatically result in increased engagement. The effectiveness of this approach was supported by the presence of clear expectations, structured guidance, and ongoing teacher support. Students were provided with demonstrations, frequent checks for understanding, and opportunities for feedback, which helped them navigate the creative process without feeling overwhelmed. By reducing barriers and offering flexible pathways for participation, students were able to engage in ways that aligned with their strengths and preferences.

Overall, the data suggests that creative freedom, when intentionally implemented within a supportive instructional framework, can significantly increase student engagement. This is particularly impactful for students who may not thrive in more rigid, standardized learning environments. By allowing students to make meaningful choices, connect their work to their identities, and explore their interests, educators can create learning experiences that are not only more engaging, but also more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students.

Supportive Environments Build Confidence

The second major theme that emerged from this research was that supportive learning environments build student confidence. Using survey responses and observational notes in the form of a checklist showed students consistently connected their confidence to the presence of

support systems within the classroom. These supports included instructional scaffolds, opportunities for peer collaboration, emotional safety, and equitable access to the content.

Confidence in actively participating in class discussions and voicing opinions is something students with diverse learning needs, including emergent bilingual students, students with anxiety, and neurodiverse students tend to struggle with, speaking as someone with experience. While this might be common with all students at the beginning of the year, particularly freshmen students, as high school is a new environment for them, this was particularly evident and consistent for my selected group of students. Students who have repeatedly struggled academically often develop hesitancy around participation, particularly in environments where mistakes may feel public or embarrassing. As Sanita explains regarding students with dyslexia, “A dyslexic student may present as being unmotivated, lazy, resistant, or defiant. It is important for educators to understand these behaviors may be a direct result of a dyslexic child’s low self-esteem. They (students with dyslexia) have anxiety, depression and other social, emotional and mental health conditions on the order of two to five times greater than their peers” (2019, p. 8). Although this quote specifically references dyslexia, the broader concept of low academic confidence connected strongly to patterns observed throughout this study. Students who initially appeared disengaged or resistant to participate often demonstrated significantly higher participation once barriers were reduced and support systems were introduced.

Survey responses (n=6/14) revealed that students frequently associated confidence with clarity, accessibility, and support. When asked what made them feel more confident in the class, student AW566 explained, *“I feel confident because miss L makes things simple to understand and everything is in our sketchbooks or on canvas so I can just look there and know what to do*

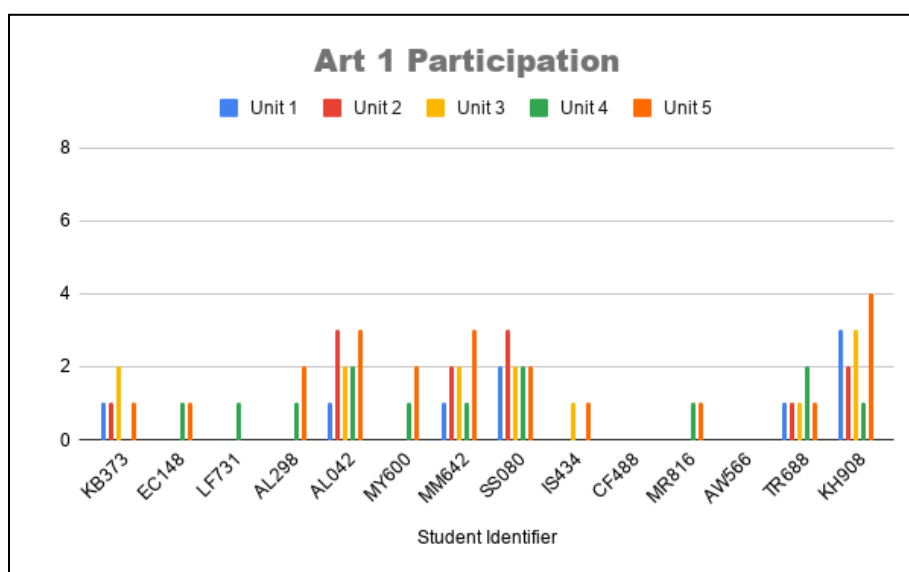
or I can ask my friends or my teacher for help so I can do things good and get a good grade on things.” This response highlighted several important instructional supports simultaneously. First, the student explained that by having instructional materials consistently accessible through his sketchbook and on Canvas, he felt capable of independently revisiting instructions rather than relying solely on memory or immediate teacher assistance. Second, the student emphasized the importance of multiple sources of support, including both peers and myself. Rather than feeling isolated when confused, the student understood that help was available through several pathways.

This aligns closely with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), particularly the idea of reducing barriers by providing multiple means of representation and support. In my classroom, instructional information was intentionally presented in several formats, including verbal instruction, visual demonstrations, and written instructions. This reduced the likelihood that students would miss information simply because one instructional format did not align with their learning needs. By increasing accessibility and predictability within the classroom, students appeared more willing to attempt tasks independently and participate more confidently.

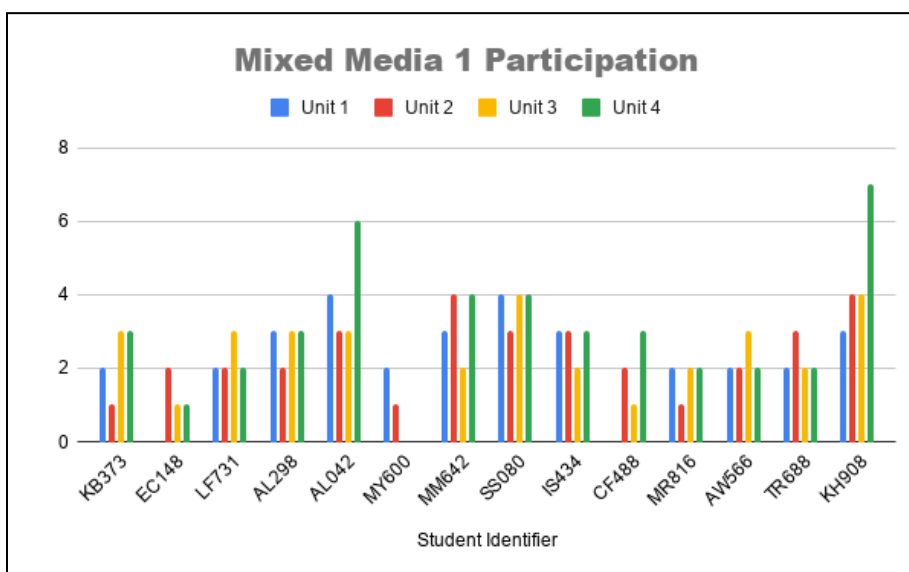
Student TR688 similarly connected confidence to the emotional safety of peer interactions, explaining that *“that we get to talk to our friends about our work and not be like embaressed because our friends are going to be nice about it so i feel comfident about sharing my art.”* This response demonstrates that confidence was not solely tied to academic ability, but also to the social environment surrounding learning. Students were more willing to share their ideas and artwork when they believed their peers would respond respectfully. This reinforces the relationship between confidence and emotional safety. Art classrooms often require students to

share highly personal ideas and creative work, making vulnerability a necessary part of participation. Without a supportive environment, many students may avoid contributing altogether out of fear of embarrassment or judgment.

Observational notes throughout the school year supported this pattern. Over time, many students who had initially been hesitant to participate became increasingly comfortable contributing during discussions and critiques. This shift was particularly noticeable among emergent bilingual students and students with anxiety or neurodiverse learning needs.



(Figure 4.4)



(Figure 4.5)

Participation data also reflected these changes. In Art 1, participation patterns showed relatively inconsistent engagement among several students across units (Figure 4.4). Some students participated once or twice, or only during projects they found personally interesting. In contrast, participation patterns in Mixed Media demonstrated a much more consistent level of engagement across the class (Figure 4.5). Students who had previously avoided participation became more willing to contribute ideas, ask questions, and engage in collaborative discussions. However, while this trend generally shows an increase, on an individual level, some students did not increase participation, with or without additional supports. While participation alone does not necessarily indicate confidence, the increase in voluntary discussion and critique participation suggested that students were becoming more comfortable taking academic and creative risks within the classroom environment.

One particularly important pattern observed throughout the semester was that students became more confident when mistakes were normalized as part of the learning process. I often pushed the concept of process over product. Over time, mistakes frequently became opportunities for experimentation, revision, and growth. Students regularly observed peers revising artwork, asking questions, and seeking feedback without ridicule or embarrassment. Even if something turned out “poorly,” either perceptually to students or actually did not meet the criteria on the rubric for said specific assignment, students began to understand that they can simply paint over it and continue anew. This normalization of imperfection appeared to reduce students’ fear of failure and increase their willingness to attempt challenging tasks.

The use of scaffolds also played a significant role in increasing student confidence. Supports such as sentence frames, step-by-step instructional sheets, visual demonstrations, and

scaffolded lesson sequencing provided students with structured entry points into complex tasks. This gradual progression helped students feel prepared rather than overwhelmed.

Sentence frames were especially impactful during critique activities. Critiques can often be intimidating because students are expected to articulate ideas about each other's artwork using academic language. Several students initially struggled with this process, particularly emergent bilingual students and students with language-based learning difficulties. However, providing sentence frames reduced any linguistic barriers associated with participation. Student AW566 described this support by explaining, *“Miss L listens to me if I have questions and if I cant do something she helps me like for the critikes she gives me snetence frames to be able to do it because its hard to think of what to write sometimes miss L has a lot of pashense.”*

This response illustrates several important aspects of supportive instruction. Rather than treating confusion or struggle as failure, the student noted my role was positioned as supportive and collaborative. The student's reference to sentence frames also demonstrates how linguistic scaffolds increased accessibility during critiques. In this case, the challenge was not necessarily understanding the artwork itself, but organizing thoughts into academic language. By providing structured supports and patient guidance, the classroom provided conditions where students felt more comfortable participating and expressing their ideas.

Observational notes further reinforced the impact of these supports. Earlier in the year, several students would only respond privately to me during conversations and critiques or avoid participating in them entirely. Over time, students began contributing more openly during discussions, often using sentence frames initially before gradually becoming more independent in their responses. This progression suggested that scaffolds functioned not as permanent supports, but as temporary tools that helped students build confidence and competence over time.

The classroom environment itself also contributed significantly to students' willingness to participate. Interactions between students and myself consistently reinforced the idea that asking questions was a normal and necessary part of learning rather than something to be embarrassed about. Even small shifts in language, such as rephrasing "Do you have any questions?" to "What questions do you have?" helped communicate the expectation that confusion and clarification are a natural part of the learning process. This is particularly important because many students who struggle academically develop avoidance behaviors to protect themselves from feelings of failure or inadequacy. By normalizing questions and uncertainty within the classroom, students appeared more willing to engage even when they were unsure or struggling.

These findings align strongly with the Lathrop Framework, which as a reminder uses principles from Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, particularly in relation to reducing barriers and increasing access to participation. It emphasizes designing learning environments that anticipate learner variability rather than expecting all students to navigate the same rigid pathway. In this classroom, confidence increased not because students suddenly became less anxious or more academically skilled overnight, but because instructional supports made participation feel more manageable and accessible. Students were given multiple opportunities to access information, express understanding, and seek support in ways that aligned with their individual needs.

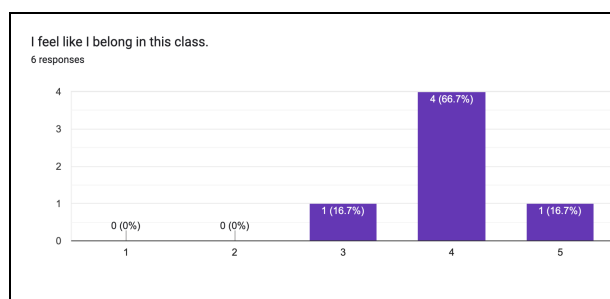
Overall, the data suggests that supportive learning environments play a critical role in building student confidence. Through intentional scaffolding and opportunities for collaboration, students became more willing to participate and express themselves within the classroom. These

findings reinforce the importance of designing learning environments that prioritize accessibility and support rather than assuming confidence will naturally develop on its own.

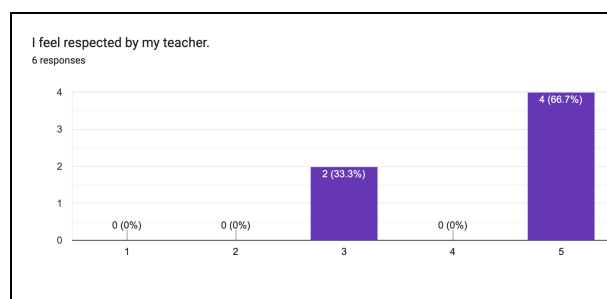
Sense of Belonging Through Community

The final major theme that emerged from this research was the development of a strong sense of belonging through community within the art classroom. Again, across survey responses, observational notes, and classroom interactions, students consistently described the classroom environment as welcoming, respectful, and emotionally safe. This sense of belonging appeared to play a significant role in students' willingness to participate and engage with both peers and coursework. While creative freedom increased engagement in the projects, and intentional scaffolds increased confidence in participating in discussions, the classroom community itself created the conditions that allowed students to feel comfortable enough to take creative and social risks.

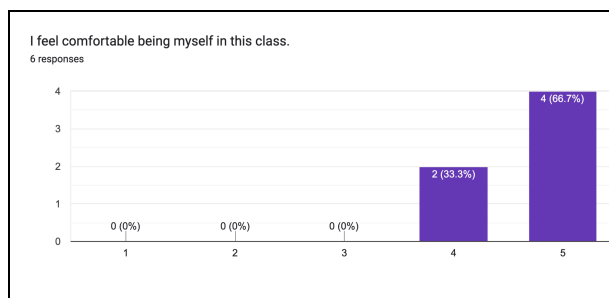
A sense of belonging is especially important in a classroom made up of students from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and neurodiverse backgrounds. All students entered the classroom carrying their own lived experiences and rich funds of prior knowledge, but many include experiences where they may not have felt fully accepted or valued. This aligned with the work of Ladson-Billings, who argued that, "Although teachers understand that people have different cultural backgrounds, they have tended to apply Eurocentric frameworks that uphold the knowledge of White people to students of color who do not always share the same values and experiences" (1999, 2003, as cited by Koo et al., 2024, p. 64-65). What Koo et al., were referring to in this section is cultural sensitivity and inclusive education. In other words, respecting and embracing students' varied backgrounds to make sure every student feels they belong.



(Figure 4.6)



(Figure 4.7)



(Figure 4.8)

Survey data (n=6/14) strongly supported the idea that students felt a sense of belonging in the classroom. When students were asked to rank the statement, “I feel like I belong in this class,” the majority of students selected either a four or five on a five-point scale, with no students selecting one or two (Figure 4.6). Similarly, students overwhelmingly agreed with the statements “I feel respected by my teacher” and “I feel comfortable being myself in this class,” with most students selecting the highest rating possible (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). Although the sample size was small, these responses aligned closely with classroom observational and anecdotal notes collected throughout the semester. Together, the data suggested that students not only felt academically supported, but also emotionally safe within the classroom environment.

Students’ written responses further strengthened these findings. When asked what made them feel like they belonged in the class, student AW566 expressed, “*I feel like I belong because we are all nice to each other and miss L is really nice to everyone and she makes it so there isnt any bullying or hate stuff and so no one makes me feel bad.*” This response highlights

that students value a safe environment characterized by positive peer interactions and a supportive classroom climate. The absence of “bullying or hate stuff” was identified as crucial for this student to feel comfortable. This underscores the importance of intentionally establishing classroom norms that prioritize emotional safety, respect, and inclusion, rather than assuming these conditions will naturally occur.

For some students, belonging was also tied to finding peers with shared interests or identities. Student MY600 explained that belonging came from being around *“kids like me that are interested in art and expressing themselves.”* This response is particularly significant because this is a transgender student who happens to have ADHD. For students whose identities may not always feel accepted in other educational or social spaces, finding a classroom community where they feel understood and welcomed can have a profound impact on engagement and participation. Rather than focusing solely on academic success, this response highlights the emotional and social dimensions of belonging.

These responses suggest that belonging in the classroom extended beyond teacher-student relationships and included the broader peer culture of the room. Observational notes throughout the semester reinforced this pattern. During work time, students frequently moved between tables to ask peers for advice, share ideas, or compliment one another’s work. Students often engaged in casual conversation while working, creating an atmosphere that felt collaborative rather than isolating. Importantly, these interactions were not limited to existing friend groups. Students regularly interacted across their own social circles in ways that contributed to an overall sense of acceptance within the classroom.

Part of this sense of belonging was intentionally cultivated through classroom structures and routines. Rather than imposing my classroom expectations on students, at the beginning of

the semester, I had students collectively create a classroom contract that outlined how they wanted the classroom community to function. While each student contributed their own ideas, many of the statements students generated focused specifically on respect, safety, and behavior. Examples from the classroom contract included: “Be respectful”, “Don’t laugh at people’s ideas even if you don’t like their idea”, “Treat people how you would want to be treated”, and “Be respectful of people’s work and ideas; do not discriminate.” The collaborative creation of these expectations communicated to students that their voices mattered in shaping the learning environment. The emphasis students placed on respect and non-judgment suggests that emotional safety was something they viewed as essential for learning and participation.

These classroom norms became especially important during our class critiques. Because students are required to present their work, critiques can create vulnerable moments for many of them during this part of the creative process. Without a supportive community, students may avoid taking creative risks or sharing meaningful ideas. However, observational notes throughout the semester documented students encouraging one another during critiques, offering constructive feedback, and listening respectfully when classmates discussed personal experiences connected to their artwork. This environment appeared to increase students’ willingness to engage authentically with their projects.

The sense of belonging cultivated within the classroom aligns closely with the principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Students repeatedly connected belonging to feeling accepted for who they were, including their interests, identities, and backgrounds. The classroom community validated students’ individuality rather than expecting conformity to a single standard of behavior or expression. By intentionally creating a classroom culture centered on

respect, inclusion, and student voice, the classroom became a space where students could participate without fear of embarrassment, exclusion, or judgment.

Importantly, the findings suggest that belonging was not created through one single strategy or activity, but through the consistent cultivation of community over time. Small daily interactions like greeting students, listening to their ideas, reinforcing respectful behavior, and encouraging collaboration, collectively contributed to the classroom culture students described in their survey responses.

Overall, the data suggests that a strong sense of belonging through community significantly influenced students' experiences within the art classroom. Students who felt accepted and respected were more willing to participate, share ideas, and engage authentically with their work. Through intentional community-building practices, collaborative classroom norms, and culturally responsive approaches, the classroom became a space where students felt comfortable being themselves. These findings suggest that belonging is not simply an additional benefit of effective teaching, but a foundational condition that supports engagement, confidence, and meaningful participation in learning.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

As a final reminder of the purpose of this action research project, the goal was to use the Lathrop Framework which is a combination of Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, to identify and implement instructional strategies that support emergent bilingual and neurodiverse students, particularly those who, like I did, may feel marginalized, so they can build confidence, remain engaged in their learning, and experience a genuine sense of belonging and success in the classroom.

When reviewing the literature examined throughout this study after the implementation of the strategies, the themes that arose from the research started to become more evident in the literature as well. The first major theme that emerged from my findings was that creative freedom increased student engagement. Several researchers emphasized the importance of multimodal learning experiences that allow students to communicate ideas through multiple forms while connecting learning to students' identities, languages, and lived experiences. Berriz et al. explained that, "A multimodal approach to literacy, as described via the arts and articulated within this volume and others, advances the call to deconstruct these restrictive forms of literacy assuring that educational settings connect to, and bring in our students' funds of knowledge—their homes, communities, and languages—to enrich schools and communities" (2019, p. 15). Similarly, Chappell and Faltis described the importance of "using multiple arts modalities and local varieties of English and other languages to tell stories about being and becoming bilingual in all its complexity" (2013, p. 82). These ideas aligned with the strategies I incorporated in my Mixed Media I class during the second semester. Students were frequently encouraged to make artistic choices connected to their personal experiences and interests. Specifically, during the reimagined folktale unit, students were encouraged to choose a story that

held personal or cultural significance to them, even if the story only existed in their home language, and reinterpret it through their own artistic lens. Rather than guiding students toward a single “correct” outcome, the unit emphasized individual interpretation, creative decision-making, and personal connection to the artwork. This creative flexibility appeared to increase engagement because students felt more connected to both the artistic process and the final outcome of their work.

Another major theme that emerged from the findings was a sense of belonging through community. The literature emphasized the importance of creating learning environments that support students socially, emotionally, and culturally. Thirukkumaran stated that, “The three main extrapolations that resulted from the literature review were that music could be effective in helping students with ADHD sustain attention, working with tactile media (such as clay) could also assist in focus, and that expressive, large-scale projects could decrease hyperactivity.” (2013, p. 51). While Thirukkumaran primarily discussed music as a strategy for attention and regulation, I implemented music in a way that also supported classroom community and belonging. At the beginning of the semester, students completed a “Get to Know You” survey where they shared two of their favorite songs. I used these responses to create a collaborative classroom playlist that students listened to during studio work time. Because students contributed music connected to their own backgrounds and identities, the playlist included songs in English, Spanish, Korean, Hindi, and Russian. This helped students feel represented within the classroom environment while also exposing classmates to cultures and languages beyond their own. In many ways, the playlist functioned as a shared classroom experience that fostered connection and inclusivity. However, later survey data (n=6/14) also revealed that one student described some of the music as “scary,” illustrating that culturally-centered practices still require reflection

on behalf of myself and students to ensure all students feel comfortable and included within the learning environment.

The final theme that emerged from the findings was that supportive environments built confidence. Several authors throughout the literature review emphasized the importance of accessibility, flexibility, and multiple forms of instructional support. Hickman and Brens noted that, “Potential accommodations for students with dyslexia might include lecture or studio instruction handouts to be given prior to the class in order to develop familiarity with the material ahead of time or to prepare for class discussions (Alden & Pollack, 2011); as is often the case, such practice is good practice for all students” (2014, p. 337). This approach strongly aligned with the UDL-informed instructional practices implemented throughout my classroom. Students received instructions verbally during demonstrations, visually through projected slides, digitally through Canvas, through sketchbook review pages where important notes were recorded, and through printed handouts available at each table. While these supports were intentionally designed to increase accessibility for neurodiverse and emergent bilingual students, they ultimately benefited all learners by providing multiple ways to access information and revisit instructions when needed. Additionally, supportive classroom language and normalized help-seeking behaviors appeared to increase students’ willingness to participate academically. Rather than framing confusion as failure, students were consistently encouraged to ask questions, seek clarification, and collaborate with peers. By creating an environment where support was normalized and accessible to everyone, students appeared more confident participating in discussions, critiques, and creative risk-taking throughout the course.

Limitations

A theoretical limitation of this study was the challenge of fully integrating both Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) into a single instructional framework. Because this study combined both theories into what I referred to as the Lathrop Framework, some tenets were implemented more consistently than others throughout the semester. The strongest alignment was with UDL, particularly the principle of providing multiple means of access, engagement, and expression. Students received instruction through verbal explanations, visual demonstrations, printed handouts, Canvas posts, sketchbook review pages, and peer discussion opportunities. Additionally, students were often allowed flexibility in how they approached projects and communicated understanding through artwork, critiques, reflections, and discussions.

The study also aligned with CRP's tenet of academic success by focusing on increasing student engagement, participation, and confidence within the classroom. Throughout the semester, students appeared more willing to ask questions, participate in critiques, and engage in creative risk-taking within a supportive classroom environment. Elements of cultural competence were also incorporated by intentionally exposing students to diverse artists, artistic traditions, and culturally connected projects. For example, students explored units where they reimagined folktales tied to their own cultural backgrounds and where they made culturally inspired masks. However, the findings did not fully align with all aspects of CRP, particularly sociopolitical consciousness. While students engaged with culturally diverse content and personal identity exploration, the curriculum did not consistently ask students to critically examine systems of power, inequality, or social justice issues through their artwork. As a result, the study more strongly reflected the accessibility and engagement components of UDL and portions of CRP

related to cultural representation and student success, rather than the full transformative and sociopolitical goals outlined within culturally relevant pedagogy.

This study also contained several methodological limitations. One of the largest limitations was the relatively small sample size. During the first semester, one of my Art 1 classes consisted primarily of students receiving special education services and emergent bilingual students, while the remaining Art 1 classes included only a small number of students from those populations. During the second semester, student enrollment was more evenly distributed across classes, requiring me to conduct the study across two separate class periods in order to gather enough participants. Even with combining both classes, the total number of students included in the study remained small ($n=14$), limiting the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation was the context of the study itself. Student engagement, confidence, and sense of belonging can fluctuate due to outside factors such as attendance, personal circumstances, peer relationships, or other academic experiences that could not be fully controlled within the study. Additionally, because the study was conducted within my own classroom, students may have responded differently on surveys or during observations due to familiarity with me as both their teacher and researcher. The types of data collected also created limitations. Much of the data relied on student self-reporting through surveys and classroom observations kept track of on a class roster. While these sources provided valuable insight into students' perceptions and experiences, they were inherently subjective. Furthermore, only 6 of the 14 students completed the final survey and not all students completed every survey question in depth, which limited the amount of detailed qualitative data available for analysis. There is also the proficiency level of the emergent bilingual students to consider. Based on what I have seen over the course of the school year, however, I do not believe this would have played a

significant role in the completion of the survey. It was more likely the fact that students tend to be burnt out on surveys by the end of the year.

This study also contained several practical limitations. One limitation was that the instructional flexibility available within my Mixed Media 1 classes may not be accessible to all teachers or classroom settings. Because I had significant freedom in designing curriculum and classroom structures, I was able to intentionally incorporate strategies aligned with the Lathrop Framework, particularly those connected to student choice and cultural relevance. However, teachers working within a district mandated curriculum, and scope and sequence may have fewer opportunities to implement culturally responsive projects or open-ended creative experiences in the same way. Future research could examine how the principles of this framework might be adapted within more rigid and structured classroom environments.

Another limitation was that the success of many strategies relied heavily on classroom relationships and the overall classroom environment that had been built over time. These practices may not immediately produce similar outcomes in classrooms where students do not yet feel psychologically safe or connected to their peers and teacher.

Conclusion

This action research project examined how integrating strategies from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), combined into the Lathrop Framework, impacted neurodiverse and emergent bilingual students within the secondary art classroom. Through classroom observations, student surveys, and student work samples collected over the course of the school year, three major themes emerged: Creative Freedom Increases Engagement, Sense of Belonging Through Community, and A Supportive Environment Builds Confidence. Findings suggested that providing students with multiple ways to access

information, engage with content, and express understanding helped create a more inclusive and accessible learning environment. Additionally, opportunities for student choice, culturally connected projects, and supportive classroom relationships appeared to positively impact students' willingness to participate and take creative risks.

Through conducting this study, I learned that accessibility and inclusivity are not separate instructional practices, but rather interconnected approaches that benefit all students. I also learned that small instructional decisions, such as normalizing questions, providing many supports, and validating students' identities and experiences, can significantly influence students' confidence, engagement, and sense of belonging within the classroom.

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