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If You Could See What I See

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Runs Petite Palette Studio in Mendham, NJ

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Mary Ann St. Jacques

If You Could See What I See

“In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to chisel through the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.” (Michelangelo)

Others may look into a classroom and see a room full of children, but that’s not what I see. I see a vast mountainside, filled with many rocks of different shapes, sizes, and textures—each symbolic of the angel trapped within the marble, each child potentially my greatest masterpiece. I see them as my challenge and my cause. Beneath each stone facade, exists a masterpiece in its own right that deserves to be appreciated solely for what it is. My job is not to recreate them, but to chisel through the rough walls and reveal them for all to see, for them to see themselves. As I chisel away at these stonewalls, my students will be released from the challenges of past criticism or negative reactions to their artwork and written words. I will instill in them the concept that art and creative writing are completely individual, and therefore, powerful enough to evoke many reactions from viewers, both positive and negative. Conversations and critiques of works are essential for personal growth and progress in a student’s body of work. Creating and critiquing fosters higher levels of analysis, and deeper levels of thinking and reflection in students. Art exploration, on the whole, enhances students’ cognitive development, and at the same time, it expands their language bridging skills between the visual and verbal necessary to advance students’ levels on Bloom’s Taxonomy.

As a teacher of art, I believe my job is quite a bit different than teachers in other concentrations. In my world, nothing is black and white; conversely, my world is filled with many shades of gray and all the colors of the rainbow. Let me describe this multicolored world—the cocoon of my beautiful classroom. The walls are adorned with children’s work, as well as art prints

and inspirational words from the greatest art and literary masters of our time. I often find inspiration in the words of others and believe students can as well. They sometimes offer a jumping-off point, if you will, allowing ideas to flow and ripple. Samples of my personal works and poems are displayed for students as well so that I will be as vulnerable to their opinions as they are to mine. The creative process is intensely personal, stripping you down, and leaving you naked to the judgment of viewers. But in the environment of my art room, there are no mistakes—only personal interpretations and often opportunities to uncover truths you didn’t realize you were seeking. This world is a safe place where creativity is fostered and individual expression praised. No effort goes unnoticed.

Art, much like language arts, allows students the opportunity to explore their imaginations and express limitless creativity. Art has no boundaries, but requires learning specialized techniques and endless stylized designs, similar to the syntax of language. I view art and language as the inner and outer worlds of a child. For this reason, I focus on the relationships existing between voice and vision bringing poetry, quotations, and writing journals into the art room. My goal is to converge the two and form an equator of understanding, yielding a heightening of students’ skills of conceptualization and observation. I am sure you’ve heard the expression “*A picture is worth a thousand words.*” By making connections between the way we integrate teaching art and language, we expand upon this bank of words. In some ways, art transcends language, but in others, it serves as a catalyst, evoking a more detailed and advanced language for students reflecting upon their own personal dialect. I believe that creating an environment where ideas leave the art room and enter the language arts room, and visa versa, allow for deeper growth and understanding in both areas. Teachers must leave their doors open, “literally” allowing for overlapping ideas and deeper meaning to emerge.

Teaching art is quite a different experience with each child. Because of that, children need to be encouraged and guided

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through the standards with care and consideration in the way they learn best. Unfortunately, what I've experienced is that by middle school, many children have lost this freedom and gaze fearfully at their crisp white canvas, afraid to mar it. For this reason, I am drawn to teach art to students in this age range. I prompt students to explore their individuality, for that is what will make their art intrinsically special. I also encourage them to accept being unique and to celebrate who they are and where they came from.

This brings to mind one particular student, Karena—a twelve year-old girl who has gone through this process with me, growing as an individual by integrating art and language as a means of finding her personal voice. Through her art, she has developed a personally unique and highly advanced language. She now views the world through an artist's eye, magnifying her vision, allowing her to see deeper, noticing the subtleties others have missed. She then utilizes this "vision" in her poetry and storytelling, adding graphic details that bring her words to life and allow others to create images in their minds from the vivid details painted in her words. This is a poem written by Karena that illustrates this "painting with words" approach I am attempting to explain. Together her imagery and poetry compose her complete vision.

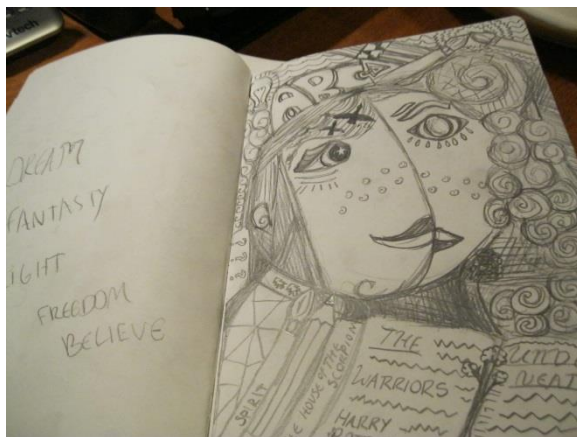


from A Green Sea, Is Part of Me

Swirls of green that echo and wave through stem
seams,
Roots gamble with hard owned air,
Green is more than a pallet's essence.
It is the very core that our soul grows from.

It is the leaves in the trees,
And the nature strung through our hearts.
Green is the fresh mint dazzles,
that shine through dew drops and petals,
the crisp morning air that trickles light through its
glare.

Karena's growth is revealed both in her visual creations and in her written words. She, along with her classmates, keeps a reflective journal chronicling thoughts and sketches in a safe personal place. By documenting inspirations and feelings both in words and sketches, she is presented with an opportunity to reflect and grow. As her vision becomes more mature, her voice becomes stronger and more apt to be heard.



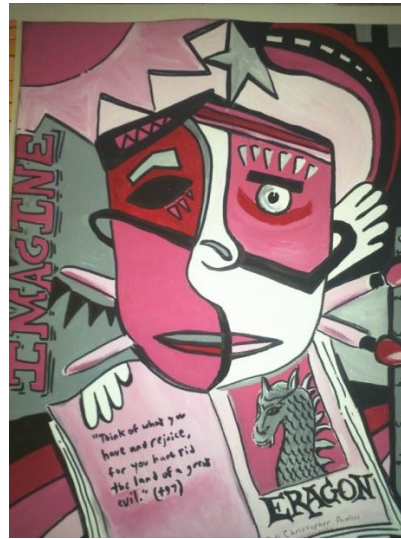
We can see her metamorphosis mapped out on these pages in black and white; more importantly, so

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can she. Art and language are extraordinary vehicles through which students can express and release emotions, insecurities, and accomplishments alike. Works created in these content areas can serve as the source that eradicates self-doubt and worries about what peers will think of you at a vulnerable stage in development.

By merging trends of the visual culture in the world around us, and weaving the works of the great historic masters and contemporary artists into my lesson plans, I believe I can achieve a balanced art curriculum. This curriculum can be brought to the highest level by incorporating language into art and allowing students' own words to bridge these two creative worlds: that of vision and of voice. By integrating language into art making, students gain a much deeper understanding of themselves, of others, and of the world that surrounds them. Speaking, looking, listening, and creating all become equally important elements in telling one's story. Through Karena's self-portrait and poetry, she has found her identity and shared her voice with the world through imaginative imagery and language.

To further expand on this connection, a small group of my art students, spanning many grade levels, are now in the midst of creating a very special and reflective banner for the New Jersey Council of Teachers and English.



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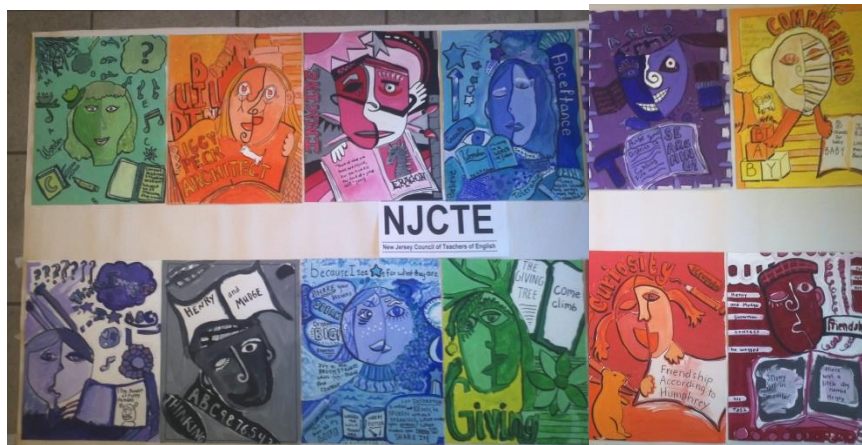


While brainstorming for ideas, I looked to my monochromatic self-portrait lesson as a means to accomplish and to illustrate the connections between literature and art as an optimum vehicle of self-expression. Students were asked to choose their favorite book and somehow incorporate it into a self-portrait, along with important words of their choice, based on the content of their selected book. Each student's painted panel will serve as one piece of a patchwork quilt design plan. Together, their portraits and book selections will create the whole image weaving together the importance of literature in the creation of art reflective of the self.

During this process, I hope to nurture important values in students such as respecting the choices of others, including viewpoints and technical choices, while working both individually and as a team, incorporating individual pieces to create a whole. Additional lessons this project will yield are that the limits of language based on age do not define the limits of thinking. Art has the ability to empower children to say that which they cannot yet say with words, while words, at times, allow children to say what their hands are not yet skillful enough to create. Through this combination, I hope to allow my students' voices to be heard loudly and clearly. All lessons learned here in my colorful world are presented to captivate my students' interests and engage them in this infinite world of art inspired by language—this world of no mistakes.



Mary Ann St. Jacques



Mary Ann St. Jacques currently runs Petite Palette Studio, an art studio in Mendham where she strives to provide a foundation for young artists integrating the worlds of art and language. She is completing a graduate studies program at the College of St. Elizabeth this May and hopes to continue teaching art and making the world a little more beautiful by encouraging her students to proudly share their beautiful, unique visions and voices.