

VISUAL NARRATIVE:  
A VEHICLE FOR EXPLORING ART IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by

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## ABSTRACT

Visual narrative is a vehicle that provides students and teachers opportunities to broaden their knowledge base, develop critical thinking skills, explore identity, and bring a social justice perspective into the classroom. These explorations are all critical components of transformative education, and even if when teachers don't have the answers to tough questions, their willingness to explore, reflect, and grow will serve everyone in the classroom to create art and learn.

*Keywords: visual narrative, critical thinking, identity exploration, middle school, art education, social justice, racism*

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## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Problem Statement**

In secondary visual arts classrooms across Washington State, standards are forming the basis for a substantial, rigorous arts curriculum. The state standards relating to communication in secondary visual arts in Washington include learning how to discuss aesthetics, how to communicate with art, and how to present and discuss artwork (Washington State K–12 the Arts Learning Standards, 2014). Similarly, the National Core Arts Standards provide multiple avenues for communicating with and about the arts, including methods of perceiving and analyzing art, methods for explaining how art might influence our view of the world, and methods for relating art to students' own lived experiences and funds of knowledge (National Core Arts Standards, 2014). All of these skills are relevant and necessary for deepening student learning and attending to students' roles as citizens and lifelong learners (Noddings, 2013). Visual narrative, which is a vehicle for communication in the arts, can engage students in identity exploration and in developing critical thinking skills in the arts classroom. For the purposes of this action research paper, I will employ the broad definition of visual narrative in which "a visual is something that can be seen using the human eye," and "narrative is the representation of an event or series of events" (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010, p. 28). Although this definition could be applied across all artistic mediums including theater, dance, and music, for this research I am applying it specifically to visual arts.

There are major gaps in the research literature regarding the effects of secondary art education on students, including the use of tools such as visual narrative projects to

develop critical thinking and student identity via the art-making process (Moorefield-Lang, 2010).

I decided to research visual narrative in a middle school classroom because of this lack of research and because of my interest in the potential skills resulting from students engaging with visual narratives, especially critical thinking and identity exploration. I conducted this action research project during student teaching in a two-year master in teaching program with a social justice emphasis; my studies during the master's program were a pivotal part of my investigation.

As a transformative educator, I believe that it is vitally important for students to learn critical thinking skills, including those involved in identity exploration and self-reflection; visual narrative was the vehicle I chose to foster these skills. Additionally, incorporating visual narrative in a middle school visual arts classroom through student projects, as well as via art criticism discussions and self reflections, had the potential to heighten critical thinking and positive identity formation (London, 1988; Moorefield-Lang, 2010; Wexler, 2002). These characteristics are important in cultivating not only a healthy classroom, but a healthy society.

### **Introduction to Review of the Literature: Existing Research**

Due to the lack of research regarding narrative, specifically in visual arts classrooms, for this review of the literature I investigated the way narrative integrates with other content areas. Several studies have examined the positive impacts of integrating visual art with English language arts (Caldwell & Moore, 1991; Goldberg, 1997; Moorman, 2006; Zander, 2007). Other research has explored the effects of examining specific pedagogical and cultural storytelling narrative styles (Eder, 2007;

Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEachen, 2002), while quantitative studies have indicated the effects of specific modes of dialogue in the classroom (Kakas, 1991). Regardless of the content area, or whether the research addresses primarily teachers or students, narrative has a demonstrated impact in the classroom (Rex et al., 2002). Through narrative, “we explain, interpret, and assess situations, experiences, and ideologies, leading in turn to the creation of new meanings. As an intrinsic form of human communication, [narrative] is prevalent in all aspects of human interaction” (Chung, 2007, p. 17). Further, “Personal and professional stories can be powerful tools to building connections with students and bringing the curriculum to life. Story can be a compelling scaffolding tool in the classroom” (Milner, 2012, p. 68).

For this review of the literature, I will address two major points regarding visual narrative in the secondary visual arts classroom: 1) The impact of visual narrative projects and discussions about visual narratives on critical thinking in the classroom; and 2) The role of visual narrative in the exploration of student and teacher identities.

### **Visual Narrative Impacts Critical Thinking in the Classroom**

Critical thinking does not fit into one neat, small definition. There are many interdependent facets that contribute to developing the skills of critical thinking, and they manifest in a variety of ways. Stout (1995) adapted a framework for critical thinking skills illustrated in Table 1.

In order to elicit critical thinking skills such as those outlined in Table 1, teachers can use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). The VTS approach has a demonstrated effect on critical thinking skills, and while there are many approaches to VTS, a common

**Table 1.**

*Strategies that foster critical thinking skills about art.*

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1. Employ the skills of meticulous observation, looking beyond the surface to the discovery of the richness of details
2. Draw inferences and form logical interpretations based on observation, reading, and other forms of communication; look at bigger picture
3. Use the vocabulary of the discipline appropriately and precisely
4. Transfer the learning from one situation to another; consider another perspective
5. Compare and contrast
6. See and discover relationships
7. Make informed decisions and reasonable choices
8. Support opinions and wage arguments with credible facts, information, examples, explanation, descriptive details, illustrations, quotations, incidents
9. Distinguish between substantiated and unsubstantiated opinion, and separate relevant from irrelevant information; cultural consciousness
10. Weigh meanings and evaluate the credibility of sources
11. Analyze information and ideas and understand their relationships
12. Synthesize or put ideas together to form a new idea or concept
13. Recognize the plausibility of more than one correct answer or solution to a problem
14. Identify fundamental problems and recognize major issues
15. Perceive the complexity of an issue or concept
16. Generate solutions to problems
17. Withhold judgment or evaluation until valid and adequate evidence has been established
18. Make evaluations based on fairly established standards
19. Predict
20. Revise and rethink

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Adapted from “Critical Conversations about Art: A Description of Higher-order Thinking Generated Through the Study of Art Criticism,” by C.J. Stout, 1995, *Studies in Art Education*, 36(3), 170–188.

practice is to focus on three questions. The first is What’s going on in this picture? This question “initiates the inquiry into the meanings contained in the image: not just what’s depicted but also what it conveys” (Yenewine, 2013, p. 25). The second question adds on to the first: what do you see that makes you say that? This presents a “nonthreatening way to introduce reasoning: students are asked to provide evidence of interpretations, staying anchored in the images” (p. 26). Finally, the third question—what more can we find?—“deepens the meaning-making process,” and using this question repeatedly “reinforces the notion that no matter how quickly we think we grasp something, further observing and reflecting often enlarges or changes first thoughts” (Yenewine, 2013, p. 26).

Yenawine and his colleague Abigail Housen conducted a five-year research investigation in rural Minnesota to find out whether VTS might advance visual literacy and aesthetic thought in elementary students. What they found was that

through VTS, students do indeed learn a strategy they can and will employ...to make sense of what is unfamiliar both in art and objects of another nature—like fossils or scientific implements—probing what they see for more than first impressions. Housen was able to document a range of cognitive behaviors—within the spectrum known as critical thinking—that were reliably transferred after a certain amount of VTS (Yeanwine, 2013, p. 77).

The researchers noticed that students excelled especially at providing evidence, pointing to the effects of the second question in the VTS process (What do you see that makes you say that?). This skill, when applied both in the visual arts

classroom and across content areas is a potentially powerful tool for deepening student learning.

According to multiple researchers (Cohen-Evron, 2005; Darts, 2004; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Emme, 2001; Zander, 2007), contemporary art and media can be used to foster critical thinking, as well as honest dialogue and, ultimately, social change. Zander (2007) found that narratives are more than just stories; they are emotional explorations and vehicles for fostering critical thinking, leading to social transformation. Visual narrative projects and discussions in the art classroom could be a vehicle by which, “in theory, personal concerns...become social concerns when they are shared collectively by a group or community” (Milbrandt, 2002). These social concerns often comprise the fabric of critical thinking, enabling students to process difficult information and think critically about society. Without such sharing in practice, “students' education [could be] narrowed to an accumulation of knowledge, and not as a means to craft [art] in light of their tacit knowledge derived from their life experiences and the mass media” (Cohen-Evron, 2005, p. 316).

Desai and Chalmers (2007) argue that students, as young artists, need to continually think about their roles in society as producers of knowledge, and that examining socially engaged works of art, such as visual narratives, require us to ask critical questions about current political, social, economic and cultural situations. Additionally,

The ease with which people have access to means of representation – camera phones, video cameras, computers, etc., means that we have a responsibility in art education to teach our students the tools to read

images...critically, and also to produce alternative images that force us to ask different kinds of questions (p. 9).

Darts (2004) agrees, arguing that as purveyors of such a ubiquitous and pervasive medium, art educators are especially responsible for teaching students to think critically about visual culture. “If art education is to prepare students to responsibly live within the contemporary sociocultural sphere, educators must be willing to help them resist the ideology of the ordinary, question the unperceived and become awakened to the invisibility of the everyday” (p. 316).

Part of waking up to the “invisibility of the everyday” (Darts, 2004, p. 316) is engaging students in projects and discussions that allow critical thinking to emerge. These projects and discussions allow students to learn how to ask critical questions about their lived experiences. In developing their Storytelling Project Model, Bell and Roberts (2010) discovered that “the aesthetic experience of stories told through visual arts...can help students think more creatively, intimately, and deeply about racism” (p. 2302). This model entails establishing norms, including normalizing talking about difficult issues such as race, which enables students to feel empowered to listen and respond to each other’s narratives, both visually and verbally (Bell & Roberts, 2010).

Another approach to supporting critical thinking skills involves art criticism. In her transformative investigation into higher-order thinking via art criticism, Stout’s (1995) 50 undergraduate art education majors kept dialogue journals. Students used a two-column system on each page: the left column was reserved for regular class notes from discussions and lessons, and the right column was to be used for interpretations, wonderings, and connections made by students in regard to the content in the left column.

This written component of art criticism and reflection served as a vehicle for students to solidify their burgeoning critical thinking skills, something which could also be applicable in middle school classrooms.

Upon conclusion of Stout's (1995) study, students were asked to read through their dialogue journals and highlight what they considered their most important and clear examples of critical thinking. Including student input in the data collection process lent credibility to this self-described "nontraditional" (Stout, 1995, p. 171) qualitative research study by incorporating participant perspectives. Student input also provided evidence for their understanding of what critical thinking means. Additional data came from classroom discussions, and these data were used to support evidence from the dialogue journals. This methodology—of collecting a diverse range of data including student writing and discussions—provided key foundational ideas for the way I collected data in this research project.

To analyze her data, Stout used a framework for critical thinking as outlined by Paul (as cited in Stout, 1995), deciding whether students' highlighted remarks matched any or many of the criteria on Paul's list of possible traits for higher order thinking. In describing her results, Stout included the ethnicity of each student that she cited directly, stating that she wished to convey a range of perspectives about art criticism and higher order thinking. While it may be that her intentions were transformative, her lack of clarity about why mentioning students' ethnicities were important detracts from the dependability of the study. This would be remedied by specifically acknowledging that not only is a diversity of perspectives important, but that there is a lack of perspectives from people of diverse cultural backgrounds in the art research literature.

While Stout's study took place at a large university, critical thinking can be investigated at any educational level, and therefore her presentation of the research is useful for my particular research inquiry into a middle school art classroom.

Critical thinking is just one possible outcome of utilizing narrative in the art classroom. Visual communication is a necessary opportunity for students to explore diverse forms of cognition and expression (Darts, 2004; Emme, 2001) while practicing critical thinking.

### **Visual Narrative and Identity Exploration**

Educators are responsible for creating a classroom environment that allows students to express their cultural identities (Eder, 2007; Goldberg, 1997). Narratives—by both students and teachers—are a vehicle for creating such an environment. “Affirmative identity,” writes Tatum (2007) “is about recognizing students’ lives—and helping them make connections to them” (p. 31). In his summer institute work with Cree students from the Saddle Lake Reserve in Alberta, British Columbia, Sarris (1990) found that the sharing of personal narratives led students to recognize the oppression under which they live. Further, students realized that in sharing stories, they were operating from positions of strength and power, as they found their voices (Sarris, 1990). Freedman and Wood (1999) recognized the importance of discussing visual art as a means of understanding cultures, an important component of identity development and exploration in diverse classrooms, both for students and for teachers.

Teachers’ healthy identity development in the classroom is equally as critical as students’:

Teachers of all backgrounds must be willing to engage in significant self-reflection about their own racial and cultural identities...to understand the assaulting stories they tell without conscious awareness. They also need to be willing to learn deeply about the lives of their students in their full cultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical contexts in order to affirm their identities authentically—with identity stories of hope and empowerment (Tatum, 2007, pp. 26-27).

Approaching our own pedagogy with a willingness to reflect honestly and deeply about the ways in which our identity may be affecting the way we interact with our students is a crucial component of being a transformative educator.

In addition to teachers, adolescent students especially need opportunities for autonomy, reflection and socializing, all of which naturally arise in a creative setting (Wexler, 2002) and can contribute to the understanding and construction of visual narratives. Furthermore, narratives contain an inherent emotional power, and “carry a charge of emotion that greatly enhances the likelihood of retaining the meanings conveyed because memorable events tend to be those associated with strong emotions” (Eder, 2007, p 5). According to Siegel and Hartzell (2003),

Stories are the way we make sense out of the events of our lives.

Individually and collectively we tell stories in order to understand what has happened to us and to create meaning from those experiences.

Storytelling is fundamental to all human cultures, and our shared stories create a connection to others that builds a sense of belonging to a particular community (p. 39).

Deep learning is possible when we make sense of our lives through visual narrative (Zull, 2002). Furthermore, classroom engagement is enhanced by virtue of students participating in a conversation about their own work (Barrett, 1988) or voicing their personal opinions about the work of other artists.

Narrative is a tool from which to develop student identity, build relationships, and process emotions (Zander, 2007). It is not just an activity for a teacher; all members of the classroom should participate. This collective sharing fosters self-efficacy (Moorefield-Lang, 2010), inner growth (London, 1988), and an ability to appreciate peers. Mullen (1999) demonstrated through her work with female prisoners that an arts curriculum centered around sharing personal narrative can be used to foster emotional healing and development. Further, such sharing serves to heighten student investment (Nakkula, 2008) in learning, enhancing overall classroom experiences and providing opportunities for growth.

Schiffrin (1996) examined the role of sharing narratives in the cultivation of identity, noting “who we are is sustained by our ongoing interactions with others, and the way we position ourselves in relation to those others” (p. 197). In the context of an established visual arts classroom, consistently engaging in visual and verbal interactions allows students to develop and explore potential identities. In his work as a multimedia instructor, Emme (2001) discussed the self-portraits that his students created, which he felt indicated the importance of using visual strategies to reflect on identity. Cohen-Evron (2005) described art education as a means to broaden the gaze on the ‘Other,’ which is critical for students’ developing identities in relation to one another. By considering the perspectives and ideas of their diverse classmates, art students were able to re-examine

their positions about aspects of identity including race, gender, and sexual orientation (Cohen-Evron, 2005).

Additionally, in considering identity, critical thinking skills have the potential to be activated. This combination—of critical thinking and identity—was one that I also wanted to investigate in this action research project.

### **Research Question**

For this action research project, I used qualitative data collection methods to study the way visual narrative affected both students and teachers in a secondary visual arts classroom. I used the following question to guide my research: In what ways can visual narrative be used as a vehicle to foster critical thinking and identity exploration in a middle school art classroom?

Studies have demonstrated the impact of visual narrative on critical thinking and identity exploration (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007; Mullen, 1999; Sarris, 1990; Wexler, 2002; Zander, 2007), but none of these have been specifically documented in the context of a middle school visual arts classroom, nor have they employed qualitative methodology integrating the perspective of the artist-teacher-researcher. By including our own positions as artist-teacher-researchers in the classroom, educators are “seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry, but also in navigating the relationships with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing the emergent themes, and in creating the narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 13). Further,

Countering decades of admonition against the intrusive effects of subjectivity, this investigative report has what literary critics call a "voice." It is related through the first person "I" and reveals the personal

perspective of the researcher. Though traditionally avoided as a form of research pollution, there are qualitative researchers who feel that voice imparts an authenticity and a sense of ownership to ideas (Stout, 1995, p. 174).

By maintaining clear and unapologetic explanations for her approachable, first person narrative style, as well as her subjective position as both teacher and researcher, Stout (1995) accentuated her study's dependability and confirmability. Thus, in this qualitative action research paper, my perspective, personal insights, and first-person accounts are presented. This method of writing is not meant to undermine the academic validity of the study, because careful methodology was employed throughout the entire process.

Another qualitative research study that supports the use of visual narrative is by Wexler (2002), who provides strong evidence for the impact of arts on adolescents with disabilities working within a hospital art studio. Wexler (2002) found that adolescents, as they enter into the natural period of identity crisis, experienced a heightened and further fragmented sense of identity when they had disabilities, and the process of making art and engaging in critique and reflection served as tools to help guide adolescents through this tumultuous period of development. These findings can potentially be translated to a diverse classroom of art learners, regardless of whether they are disabled. In another study, Mullen (1999) documented her experiences implementing an arts program for incarcerated women. Both Wexler's (2002) and Mullen's (1999) projects had a clear impact on diverse populations, with notable improvements in communication skills, critical thinking skills, and identity development.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

### **Participants**

Students who participated in this study attended a suburban middle school in the western United States. Of the 626 students attending Woodland Middle School<sup>1</sup> at the time of data collection, 44% were on free or reduced meal plans, and living at or below the federal poverty line (Tribiano, 2014). The school's ethnicities were represented as follows: 59.7% White, 15.8% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 4.3% Black, and 0.8% American Indian/Alaskan Native (Woodland School District, 2012). The school was comprised of sixth, seventh and eighth grades; this study examined all three grades. During the data collection phase of this action research project, there were three classes of sixth graders and two combined classes of seventh- and eighth-graders. The classes included in this study reflected the demographics of the school-wide population.

As a teacher-researcher, I collected data during the first of two student teaching placements through a Master in Teaching program. The mentor teacher I worked with during my student teaching, Mrs. Glen, had been teaching art for over 25 years and mentored over ten student teachers. This was her eighteenth year in the district and her second year teaching at Woodland; she was hired to teach the newly added sixth grade. Prior to student teaching at Woodland, Mrs. Glen was the cooperating teacher for my practicum placement, which took place over the course of eight months in the preceding year. As a practicum student, I spent time in her classroom as an observer, helper, and teacher and thus had a well-established working relationship with her.

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<sup>1</sup> All names involved in this action research project have been changed to pseudonyms.

## Methods

In order to investigate my research question, I implemented three major processes: 1) A VTS (Yenawine, 2013) worksheet and discussion for the sixth graders; 2) A visual narrative assignment and reflection for sixth graders; and 3) A visual narrative assignment and reflection for seventh and eighth graders. These activities all took place during my student teaching placement in the fall of 2014 over the course of three weeks. For all components of these processes, I gave direct instruction and/or facilitated discussions with each class. I did not introduce or define the concept of visual narrative to students; instead, I focused on engaging them in the projects and reflections.

The renowned African American artist and activist Faith Ringgold was my inspiration for the sixth grade VTS and visual narrative assignment. I chose to engage students in Ringgold's work throughout the project because of her story quilts, which are bright and colorful visual narratives that offer poignant social commentary (see Figure 1). Since students were to make their own story quilt squares, these works of art seemed an ideal vehicle for engaging students in thinking critically about both the work of Ringgold as well as their own work at hand.

Throughout the project, different posters of Faith Ringgold story quilts were on display in the classroom. Students examined these works throughout the project by responding to questions for their "do now" activities at the start of class, and later, at the end of the project, we engaged in the VTS discussion of her story quilt entitled *Tar Beach* (1988).



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*Figure 1.* Faith Ringgold (American) b. 1930. *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, tie dyed, pieced fabric border, 74 X 80." Private Collection. This piece was one of several shown throughout the project to elicit thinking from students regarding visual narratives.

With Faith Ringgold as an inspiration, the sixth grade classes embarked on the process to make story quilt squares. To start the art project, I asked students to activate their memories and respond to three prompts with sketches and text in their sketchbooks. The three prompts were 1) a time they were brave, 2) a time they were happy, and 3) a time they were scared or sad. I chose to have students use real memories because I wanted them to have a clear vision for their visual narrative that, in this case, was a significant and memorable moment in time.

After sketching, I introduced students to the concept of warm and cool colors, and explained their connections to mood. Then, based on their knowledge of color and mood, students chose which of their three initial sketches they wanted to make into a paper quilt square,



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*Figure 2.* The completed story quilt by the sixth grade art students at Woodland Middle School. Squares were made using colored pencils, collage, and handwritten text.

and decided on color scheme to convey the mood(s) and/or emotion(s) of the memory. When students completed their quilt squares, they engaged in a written self-assessment process. In self-assessing and reflecting on their artwork, students had an opportunity to think critically about the choices they made throughout the project, especially the colors they used to create the mood of their quilt squares. Finally, I assembled all of the squares into a giant paper quilt (Figure 2).

In the seventh and eighth grade classes, the identity box assignment required students to examine how they were perceived by the world, and how they saw themselves internally. We started the lesson by brainstorming character traits that define how people see us on the outside, versus traits that are invisible or internal. Then, using a box template, students used magazines, scissors, and glue to make a collage representing their

inside and outside identities before assembling the final box. The final step of the project required students to engage in a written self-assessment and reflection.

The written self-assessments in all of the classes were an opportunity for students to express insights that related to their lives and experiences and provided an alternative to verbal sharing, potentially enabling some students to be more candid (Stout, 1995). For example, seventh- and eighth-grade students considered their interests and passions in order to create boxes representing themselves inside and out. The written reflections provided insight, in some cases, as to how the artwork impacted students.

I chose to work with identity boxes for this project with the seventh and eighth graders because I wanted to combine the two major themes of this research: 1) to have them think critically while 2) exploring their own identities. The brainstorm before the project, the project itself, and the subsequent reflection, provided opportunities for both critical thinking and identity exploration for students.

Both projects served as visual narratives, as explained by Pimenta and Poovaiah (2010), where “any visual that is represented with an idea to communicate a story to the onlooker qualifies as a Visual Narrative” (p. 32). Students’ story quilt squares told the narrative of a particular moment from their unique lived experiences, while their identity boxes told the more fluid, evolving story of who they were.

### **Data Sources**

I gathered data from several sources: student artwork, student reflections upon the completion of assignments, VTS worksheets and audio recordings of VTS discussions, and my reflective research journal. Table 2 illustrates the data collected for this action research project.

## Artwork

Student artwork was considered data in this study as a means of examining visual narrative for critical thinking and identity exploration. The two sets of artwork included in this study are the sixth grade story quilt project, and the seventh- and eighth- grade identity boxes.

**Table 2.**

*Data collection and quantities.*

Grade	Number of Students	Data Collected
6	35*	Story Quilt project
	35*	Story quilt self-assessment
	35*	VTS Worksheet
	44	VTS Discussion
7/8	26*	Identity Box project
	26	Identity Box reflection

\*Indicates number of projects turned in by the time my student teaching was finished.

## Self-Assessment Rubrics and Written Reflections

Throughout the semester, I expected students to self-assess their work upon completing each project. The rubric contained each learning target or step in the art-making process, followed by three self-assessment choices: 1) I didn't do this, 2) I met the guidelines, and 3) this is my best work (see Appendix A). I asked students to provide written evidence from their artwork to support their self-assessment choices. Providing evidence was a source of data for critical thinking skills, namely: 1) Use the vocabulary

of the discipline appropriately and precisely, and 2) Support opinions with credible information, examples, explanation, and descriptive details (Stout, 1995).

### **VTS Worksheets and Discussions**

In preparation for our VTS discussions, I gave students a worksheet to fill out to answer each of the questions as a means of helping them feel prepared to participate in the discussion. The questions, as cited in Chapter One, were as follows: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? Additionally, I asked students to think of one or two questions they might like to ask the artist. Students wrote these questions on their worksheets. Because the worksheets helped students prepare for the ensuing discussion, it served as a method of triangulation for documenting critical thinking skills.

Each of the VTS discussions in the classes were recorded on audio, and the worksheets also allowed me to triangulate my audio data with written data. As both the teacher and the researcher, audio enabled me to capture dialogue that took place during discussions without disrupting the learning. Each of the discussions were based on Yenewine's (2013) Visual Thinking Strategies and followed the same questions students completed on their worksheets. The audio recordings allowed me to reflect upon and analyze data retrospectively, supplementing my written observations and wonderings. Audio also worked in conjunction with student artwork and reflections, enabling me to triangulate student visual and written work with student verbal work.

### **Teacher-Researcher Reflective Journal**

Upon the completion of both the story quilt and the identity box lessons, I wrote detailed reflections about what worked well and what I needed to change for future

instruction. Additionally, I kept a detailed and reflective research journal recording my musings, wonderings, and ideas as I began to make sense of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were carefully analyzed using several methods appropriate for qualitative studies. These included maintaining a research journal, as well as creating content logs and using a system of coding (Merriam, 1998).

I analyzed student artwork in conjunction with analyzing student self-assessments. In order to do this, I created tables documenting student use of materials. I referenced the messages that I interpreted from the work, identified what students wrote in their reflections, and noted any possible recurring themes. Next, I went back and looked at the student work and reflections a second time to solidify recurring themes and develop an understanding of what worked well and what needed to be improved in each lesson to foster critical thinking and/or identity development.

When analyzing the classroom audio, I followed several steps. First, I listened to the audio in its entirety, noting—in my research journal—the prevailing themes and ideas I observed in relation to my research question. Next, I created a content log by documenting the audio in five-minute increments, noting my questions and ideas, as well as possible points where my research questions might be addressed. I also began to consider potential coding labels, using the broad definition of visual narrative (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010). This process of initial analysis helped me begin to identify areas requiring closer examination and allowed me to develop a more cohesive framework for distilling data.

Once I determined the portions of the audio that might have been relevant to my research question, I fully transcribed those sections, continuing to note my thinking in my research journal and to consider potential coding labels. After transcribing, I finally began a detailed coding process in order to address my research question with relevant and possibly recurring themes related to critical thinking and identity development.

### **Limitations of Conclusions**

While this study yielded interesting and useful information for the field of visual arts education, there were several limiting factors that may contribute to its overall validity. These included a threat to dependability because of my own bias and position as the teacher and researcher. Nonetheless, I hoped to negate that threat to dependability as I remained clear about my position as a first-time researcher and the teacher throughout this action research project.

The transferability of this study was weakened because of the limited timeframe and narrow context of the study (i.e., three weeks to collect data in just one classroom where I was a student teacher). Additionally, credibility may have been threatened by the lack of other research by which to compare my findings; however, having peer reviews throughout the process of this data analysis lent strength to the credibility of the study.

## CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

I approached my research question (In what ways can visual narrative be used as a vehicle to foster critical thinking and identity exploration in a middle school art classroom?) for three weeks during my student teaching in a visual arts classroom. As a student teacher, I was not able to develop and initiate regular classroom routines incorporating VTS. In addition, I did not have an opportunity to implement the activities I had planned encouraging students' personal connections with their peers and inspire a willingness to share personal visual narratives. Nonetheless, students engaged willingly in the tasks and provided a rich set of data in the form of worksheets, discussions, artwork, self-assessments, and reflections. The data I collected and analyzed lead to findings I was not necessarily expecting: new insights into my own pedagogical approach to classroom discussions, as well as ideas with which I can move forward in the classroom on a practical level to support students' critical thinking and identity development.

Through my analysis of the data, I uncovered three major findings: 1) Applying VTS to a visual narrative engaged students in critical thinking; 2) Applying VTS to a visual narrative engaged students and teacher in critically thinking and talking about racism; 3) Creating visual narratives, self-assessing, and reflecting led students to demonstrate critical thinking skills and a willingness to explore identity.

### **Visual Narrative, Critical Thinking, and Identity Exploration**

There were several noteworthy findings regarding the way in which visual narrative sparked critical thinking skills, as well as reflection upon identity, during this

study. In the sixth grade class, our VTS worksheets and discussions, as well as students' completed visual narratives and self-assessments, all provided valuable insight into critical thinking skills and identity exploration. In the two seventh- and eighth-grade split classes, the identity box project was an opportunity for students to use visual narrative to consider how they might appear to the outside world, and what is happening for them internally that people might not see.

### **Connections Between Critical Thinking, Visual Narrative, and VTS**

The sixth grade art criticism discussions using Yenewine's (2013) Visual Thinking Strategies, as well as the worksheets students completed prior to these conversations, yielded rich information about critical thinking on behalf of both the students and the teacher-researcher. Writing and talking about visual narratives using VTS questions elicited critical thinking from students in several ways. Recurring critical thinking skills across each of the sixth grade classrooms included employing the skills of meticulous observation, looking beyond the surface to the discovery of the richness of details, seeing and discovering relationships, supporting opinions and wage arguments with credible facts, information, examples, explanation, descriptive details, illustrations, quotations, incidents, and recognizing the plausibility of more than one correct answer or solution to a problem (Stout, 1995).

For this particular VTS activity, students examined Faith Ringgold's story quilt entitled *Tar Beach* (1988; Figure 5). The additional component of including a question for the artist strengthened the evidence of students' critical thinking. The questions that the students wrote demonstrated their ability to consider the perspective of the artist, as well as to look at the choices she made, wonder about the context, and ask about

**Table 3.**

*Student-generated questions for the artist Faith Ringgold, regarding her Tar Beach (1988) story quilt.*

<b>Question for the Artist</b>	<b>Times asked</b>	<b>Critical thinking skill(s) used</b>
Why do you make pictures that tell stories?	1	Look at bigger picture; consider another perspective
Did she have a good time making this?	1	See and discover relationships; analyze information and ideas and understand their relationships; consider another perspective
What inspired her to make this?	4	Draw inferences and form logical interpretations based on observation, reading, and other forms of communication; consider another perspective
Why did you call it <i>Tar Beach</i> ?	2	Analyze information and ideas and understand their relationships; see and discover relationships
What is happening?	2	Withhold judgment or evaluation until valid and adequate evidence has been established
Why did you do it on a roof, and why did you choose flowers for the borders?	1	Employ the skills of meticulous observation, looking beyond the surface to the discovery of the richness of details
Why are there kids outside on a mattress at night?	1	Employ the skills of meticulous observation, looking beyond the surface to the discovery of the richness of details
Why are they on a roof eating?	1	Employ the skills of meticulous observation, looking beyond the surface to the discovery of the richness of details
Where does this scene take place?	4	Withhold judgment or evaluation until valid and adequate evidence has been established
Was that her when she was little laying down?	1	Predict; make informed decisions and reasonable choices
Is it a family gathering or a talk?	1	See and discover relationships; compare and contrast
Who are the people in the pictures?	1	Withhold judgment or evaluation until valid and adequate evidence has been established
Why is there a person flying?	15	Withhold judgment or evaluation until valid and adequate evidence has been established

*Note: Similar questions were grouped into one single question for organizational purposes.*

technique. These questions are outlined in Table 3, using Stout's (1995) adapted framework for critical thinking. Upon completing their VTS (Yenawine, 2013) worksheets, students were prepared to engage in a classroom discussion addressing visual narratives.

During the ensuing discussion of Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach*, students' comments spoke to the interdependence of their diverse range of critical thinking skills as they addressed details, wonderings, and ideas. Furthermore, students began connecting *Tar Beach* to Faith Ringgold's biography, which we had discussed prior to the VTS activity. One student speculated that one of the characters in *Tar Beach* was Faith's brother, while others said it couldn't be, since he had died of pneumonia before Faith was born. Several students were especially interested in the details of her brother's death, and one student commented that he also had pneumonia when he was younger.

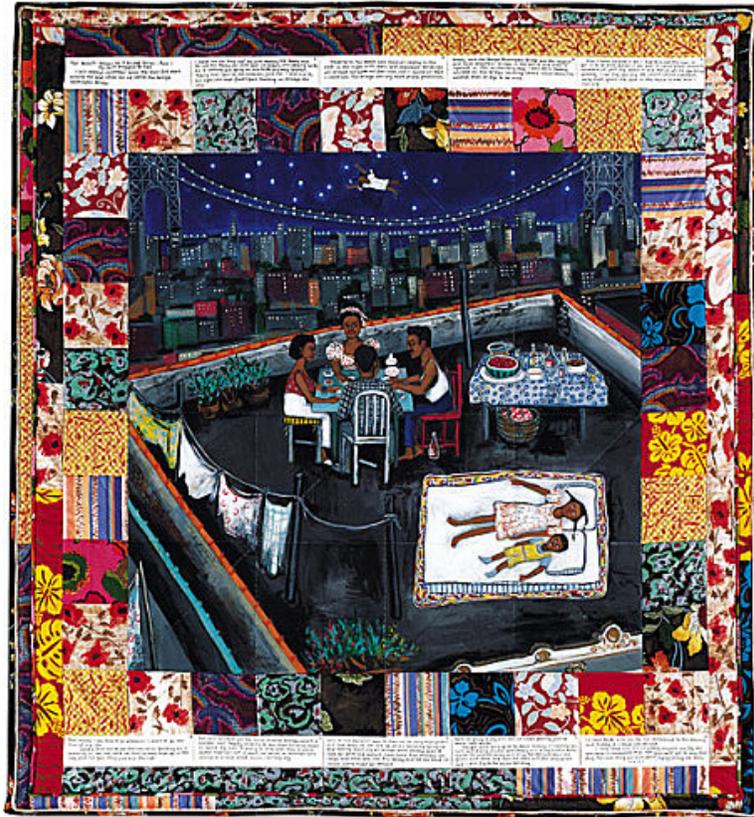
Making another connection outside of *Tar Beach*, a student speculated that the bridge in the story quilt was similar to a bridge in another work of art by Ringgold, *Sonny's Quilt* (1986). Indeed, both works depict the George Washington Bridge in New York. In connecting the work in front of them to other works of art as well as the artist's life, students demonstrated the following critical thinking skills: transferring their learning from one situation to another, and predicting and seeing relationships.

### **Connections Between Critical Thinking, Visual Narrative, VTS, and Talking About Racism**

As we examined a variety of artwork by Faith Ringgold during the sixth grade story quilt project, students brought up issues related to racism on several occasions. In connecting a work of art to issues of racism, students were applying several critical

thinking skills as delineated by Stout (1995). These included drawing inferences based on careful observation, analyzing information, and perceiving complexity (Stout, 1995).

One poignant example of this concern occurred during the VTS discussion when we were examining the *Tar Beach* story quilt, which depicts an African American family on a roof at night, and a young girl flying over the George Washington bridge (Figure 5). “For Ringgold, this phantasmic flight through the urban night sky symbolizes the potential for freedom and self-possession. ‘My women,’ proclaimed Ringgold about the *Women on a Bridge* series, ‘are actually flying; they are just free, totally. They take their liberation by confronting this huge masculine icon—the bridge’” (Spector, 2015). After students wrote their answers on their worksheets about this piece, I asked them to tell me what they wrote for the first prompt: what is going on in this picture (Yenawine, 2013)? A student raised his hand and asked me if it was made “after all or most of racism stopped.” When I asked him what he meant by racism, his reply was, “remember how, um, Martin Luther King, Jr., he like, he gave that speech and then, like black people were treated equally. I wanted to know if this was before that.” Instead of asking more questions of the class about whether racism stopped after the Civil Rights Movement, I explained that the piece was made in 1988, long after the aforementioned King speech. In a feeble attempt to continue the discussion, I asked the student what he saw that made him wonder that. Almost immediately after he answered, I got distracted by a noisy table group, and I flitted away to the next topic without looking back.



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*Figure 5.* Faith Ringgold (American) b. 1930. *Tar Beach*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, bordered with printed, painted, quilted, and pieced cloth, 74 x 68". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Judith Lieber.

Another instance occurred when we began to examine the flying character in the background of the painting, a detail that students were especially curious about. “It looks like, well it looks peaceful like because there’s somebody flying. Maybe they’re thinking like yippee because slavery is done, and so is racism,” commented one student.

Immediately, another student asked, “Yeah, why is there a guy flying up there?” Again, instead of bringing the conversation back to the important and relevant topic of racism, I

pursued the question by asking, “Why is there someone flying up there? Anybody have any ideas of what that might be about? Why would the artist show that?”

### **Creating Visual Narratives, Self-Assessment, and Reflection: A Vehicle for Identity Exploration and Critical Thinking Skills**

Prior to the seventh- and eighth-grade students developing their identity box projects, I talked with Mrs. Glen about how we could support students as they literally cut and pasted pieces of their identity onto the box templates. We came up with a few ideas to help start a conversation with students about how to articulate their identities with collage. As a result of this conversation, Mrs. Glen facilitated a discussion with students about what might constitute “inside” versus “outside” identity. The aim of this conversation was to foster critical thinking about possible images or themes to collage onto the different components of individual boxes. The conversation resulted in students coming up with several criteria, outlined in Table 4.

In the sixth grade story quilt project, the overarching connection between the memories students chose to create, the mood of their pieces, and the colors they chose to express that mood activated students’ critical thinking in several ways. Firstly, many

**Table 4.**

*Student-generated ideas for inside versus outside identities.*

<b>Inside Identity Traits</b>	<b>Outside Identity Traits</b>
Favorite colors	Food
Favorite animals	Places
Hobbies	Fashion
Music	Sports
Video games	Hair
Anime	

students realized early in the project that there was not a right or wrong answer to the color choices, and some students chose to include both warm and cool colors to represent a variety of emotions associated with the memory. These ideations were supported by students' self-assessments.

The self-assessments at the end of each project asked students to cite evidence from their work to support the choices they made about their projects (See Figures 3 and 4) and, in the case of the identity boxes, to explain the elements they chose to represent their inside and outside identities. The critical thinking skills involved in the self-assessment component were 1) Use the vocabulary of the discipline appropriately and precisely, and 2) Support opinions with credible information, examples, explanation, and descriptive details (Stout, 1995). Across both the story quilt and identity box project, many students demonstrated the use of critical thinking skills when they self-assessed after completing their art; however, in several cases, the art spoke more clearly than students' writing. There were also students whose writing explained elements of the project that I did not see upon looking at the art. Thus, the self-assessment component demonstrated the potential to nurture critical thinking skills, but will require some modifications (see Implications For My Teaching Practice).

Stout (1995) speculated that adding a written component upon the completion of visual narratives could be an opportunity for students to express themselves in ways they may not otherwise. Analyzing students' completed art projects and self-assessments suggests that this theory can work in two directions: some students, such as English Language Learners (ELL), students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), as well

as any others who may have required differentiation, expressed themselves succinctly on their completed visual narratives, while others had a clear viewpoint in their reflection that was not necessarily apparent from looking at their completed artwork. There were also students who had clearly expressed ideas in both their artwork and in their written reflections. Here I will present three clear examples of student art expressing more ideas than the subsequent self-assessments: two students classified as ELL who did not complete their self-assessments, and a student with an IEP who, although she used words cut from magazines on her box, struggled to complete the written self-assessment.

One student from the ELL program, a very bright seventh grade girl, struggled with written reflections. Thus, upon finishing her identity box, she only completed the self-assessment portion of the rubric, and did not write her reflection. The outside of her box featured shoes, coffee, and bright colors, while the inside touted the word “danger” and showed animals, flowers, and food.

A sixth grade student, classified as ELL, turned in her quilt square without the self-assessment. It was a drawing of a girl on a stage with a piano in front of a large audience; the scene clearly represented a memory of a piano recital. The text across the top, which was supposed to be about the memory and the emotion, instead read, “I liked this project, but the drawing was hard.” Upon seeing this, I spoke with her quietly at my desk during student work time. I explained that she would need to write her memory of the moment, just as she had done in her sketchbook at the start of the project, and re-glue it to the top of the square. I told her that I appreciated her reflection on the project, and to write it on the self-assessment. She re-wrote her memory and glued it onto the square (see Figure 6).



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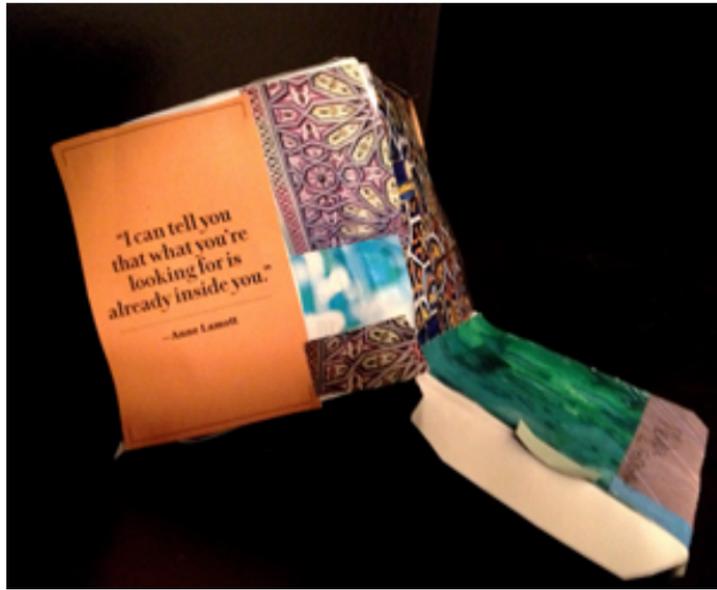
*Figure 6.* A student classified as ELL made this story quilt square of a time she was brave.

A student who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for reading and writing, had been frustrated with her abilities during the preceding assignment, which involved using oil pastels to create a landscape. She embraced the collage component of the identity box assignment with gusto and seemed proud of her work. She was especially excited about the quote she added to the outside of her box, which she had cut out from one of the many magazines she worked with: “I can tell you that what you’re looking for is already inside of you” (Figure 7). The inside of her box, while decorated more sparsely

than the outside, featured an image of friends, as well as several cutouts of vibrant textures and colors. For the inside of her box, she wrote that she included “kids” and “books;” however, these items were not clearly visible.

An example of a student who utilized the reflection to explain some of her choices on the box occurred when the box featured words such as hunting, fishing, and country life, which were all included as pop-outs on the outside of the box (see figure 8). Her reflection supported her choice to display these words in this fashion, as she wrote, “My 3-D letters that pop out mean what I like to do.” This student took the opportunity to use the written portion of the assignment to make her intentions clear.

A student who completed both the box and written reflection with clear messages used both the box and the writing as an opportunity to deeply explore her identity with the materials at hand. The outside of her box featured many elements, including the quote “rude to stare” as well as a photo of a man with a woman’s face (see figure 9). The student wrote, “When somebody looks at you, they always judge in some way. I feel uncomfortable when someone stares at me. I put a man with a lady face because I think I



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*Figure 7.* A student with an IEP for reading and writing used of a quote from a magazine, “I can tell you that what you’re looking for is already inside you,” to demonstrate her feelings about identity.



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*Figure 8.* A student explained her choices for pop-out words on her box in her written reflection: “my 3-D letters that pop out mean what I like to do.”



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*Figure 9.* This student completed both the box and written reflection with clear messages. She explained her choices for her quote “rude to stare” in her written reflection: “when somebody looks at you, they always judge in some way. I feel uncomfortable when someone stares at me. I put a man with a lady face because I think I look/have a man body shape like broad shoulders.”

look/have a man body shape like broad shoulders.” The inside of the box was jam-packed with music, animals, baked goods, and an array of other items. The student wrote, “I like to get inspired by people to push myself on something I really like to be.”

After creating their quilt squares of a memory tied to a specific feeling (happy, brave, scared, or sad), sixth grade students were expected to demonstrate an understanding of how to apply color to convey a specific mood or emotion, and to be able to justify their color choices upon completion of the project. For instance, one student



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*Figure 10.* A student's use of warm and cool colors to "show fright and happy" the first time she went parasailing.



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*Figure 11.* This student described using "mostly cool colors" because he "felt scared" when his sister jumped out at him.

wrote that she “chose warm and cool because feeling happy and cold [SIC]” (see Figure 10). Another student who created a memory of her first time parasailing said, “I used warm and cool colors to show fright and happy.” Others chose to use only one set of colors to stick with one particular mood: “I chose mostly cool colors because I felt scared” (see Figure 10).

While many students made clear connections between color and mood, as well as other choices artists make, some did not demonstrate understanding or justification for their color choices (see Implications For My Teaching Practice).

### **Implications For My Teaching Practice**

In analyzing the data from this action research project in response to my research question (In what ways can visual narrative be used as a vehicle to foster critical thinking and identity exploration in a middle school art classroom?), I discovered that there are potent classroom strategies using visual narrative to activate critical thinking and identity exploration for both students and teacher. Within this discovery of strategies, I also met with challenges and opportunities for growth. In this section, I will reflect on the implications for each finding, including how the findings will affect my future teaching practice.

### **Critical Thinking, Visual Narrative, and VTS**

Consistent use of VTS is a promising, powerful vehicle for engaging students in critical thinking and social interaction. Considering that this was the sixth grade students’ first time using VTS, they responded to the task well; however, many students were unsure of how to address the third question (What more can we find?). In retrospect, it would have been helpful to model filling out the worksheet as an example with a

different work of art, and to use Yenawine's (2013) strategies to scaffold the process throughout the semester. In order to help students understand the questions in the future, I will implement weekly VTS activities for students so they come to know what to expect and so that they continue to nurture these vital critical thinking skills.

The unexpected finding—students drawing connections between Ringgold's biography and the work of art we were examining—demonstrated enormous potential for integrating artist contexts into future VTS activities. In the case of the Faith Ringgold story quilt, students were inquiring about the quilt as a direct reflection of Ringgold's identity. This could be a key component to engaging students in learning about the role of art as an expression of identity. Knowing that this connection between art and identity is accessible, in the future I will intentionally introduce stories about artists' lived experiences prior to engaging in VTS activities, and engage students in maintaining dialogue journals (Stout, 1995) as we explore artists' biographies and work.

### **Critical Thinking, Visual Narrative, VTS, and Talking About Racism**

In each instance of students' questions and comments about racism, I was at a loss for effective tools to guide the conversation. I desperately wanted my students to talk about racism and to feel safe doing so, but each time it came up, I seemed to lack the skills and experience to do so in an effective manner. Although seemingly distracted and forgetful (which is unfortunately true on occasion), a deeper meaning was behind my casual move away from racism and to the next topic: I was afraid to talk about racism. I realized afterward that I do not have any practice talking about racism as a teacher, and completely lacked the tools to engage in a productive conversation about it. In Sadowski's (Ed.) *Adolescents at School* (2008), Beverly Tatum writes,

There is always the risk of discomfort when raising these issues, but one of the things you learn from doing it is that the discomfort often starts to subside. Sometimes what seems like fear can change to excitement. ‘You mean we can talk about that elephant in the room?’ Once people are able to talk about what they’ve known was there all along, it’s such a relief that it feels energizing. When you get to a point in the conversation where people start to feel the benefits of it, it’s extremely powerful (pp. 49-50).

Clearly, there is tremendous power in critically examining visual narratives to create dialogue about racism, and likely other socio-political issues, in the classroom. As a new teacher who has no experience in this realm, it is crucial for me to both practice these conversations and to develop effective tools to help students think critically and constructively about racism in the United States.

According to Bell and Roberts (2010), establishing classroom norms that support the normalization of discussing difficult issues such as racism is one key factor in allowing such conversations to take place. Establishing norms requires care, reflection, and persistence from the beginning of the school year or semester. As a student teacher, although I was with my students from the first day of school, I chose not to impose on my mentor teacher’s clearly established routines and expectations for her students, especially because she wanted to keep them in place after I left. In the future, I would like to foster the creation of norms with trust-building activities and a baseline of mutual respect among students and between my students and me.

Bell and Roberts (2010) further explain that visual narratives are a vehicle for “engaging emotion, ideas, worries, wonderings, questions, for keeping us aware of the

hidden and unconscious ways that social injustices operate in our society and more intimately in our lives, in our communities, and in our schools” (2302-2303). These tools of engagement are crucial to fostering critical thinking skills, and there was a rich opportunity in my classroom to work with Faith Ringgold’s poignant visual narratives as a vehicle for engaging these important skills. While we did find success in several other methods of critical thinking, avoiding the issue of racism is something I do not wish to repeat. Instead, I will work to bring art into my classroom that fosters dialogue about racism, as well as other contemporary issues that might engage students.

Upon further reflection, it is clear that the aforementioned experiences were all reactions; I did not actively plan to engage students or colleagues in discussions about racism. As a transformative educator, it will be crucial for me to engage in proactive pedagogy, creating a classroom space in which addressing racism is expected and understood. Without adequate preparation for addressing issues such as racism, students may not be equipped to participate in a classroom discussion (Milner, 2012). Tatum (2008), however, is correct in her assertion that “if you can push through the discomfort, sustain yourself, and get to the next level, you can start to make meaningful progress” (p. 50). In my upcoming teaching experiences—both in my second round of student teaching, and when I enter the profession next fall—I will push through my fear and engage my students and colleagues in discussing this vitally important issue, as well as other social justice issues directly affecting the students in my classroom.

### **Creating Visual Narratives, Self-Assessment, Reflection, and Identity Exploration**

In order to take this action research project a step further to engage students in critical thinking through the art-making process, I would like to follow Emme’s (2001)

model. He asked students to create their own art as a means for critically examining other works of art. In this case, students' quilt squares would be a response to *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1988) and depict their questions, thoughts, interpretations, and analysis. This project, coupled with student self-assessment, could be a very powerful method to develop and elicit critical thinking skills from students.

Student self-assessments from this action research project, especially the prompt asking them to provide evidence to support their assessment choices, showed me that I must engage my future classrooms in clear and consistent instructions for the process. During my student teaching, I modeled the self-assessment process for students at the beginning of the semester, and when grading, wrote that I wanted to see more evidence from students. Data compiled from both the story quilt and the identity box rubrics shows that further instruction needs to take place in order for all students to fully engage in the process of providing evidence from their work to support their self-assessment choices. Additionally, when students say that something is not their best work, I want them to explain what they would do differently next time. This provision of evidence has a demonstrated correlation with the development of critical thinking skills (Yenewine, 2013). I will modify my teaching to improve student performance on self-assessments by scaffolding the process on a weekly basis. Incorporating the citation of evidence into VTS conversations and pointing out the connection between evidence in VTS and evidence in one's own work will be a helpful step in the scaffolding process.

The list of internal and external identity traits outlined in Table 4 is certainly a good start, but are lacks in the depth I was hoping to see from this project. The list was generated on the first day of the project. I believe the resulting ideas were strong.

Nonetheless, in order to differentiate the task of generating a list of identity traits, in the future I will explore Emme's (2001) initial process for the beginning of a self-portrait project in which "students were encouraged to collect stereotypical images from the media that represented or misrepresented them as preliminary to creating a self-portrait that would show these individuals the way they wanted to be seen" (p. 68). This initial process would achieve the purpose of engaging students in critically reflecting on their "outside" identities while generating ideas for traits to contribute to the list.

An additional approach to fostering a student-generated list of identity traits would be to have students work in small groups to create a consensus board. This process entails students working individually to come up with a list of traits and then working together to come up with one cohesive list for their small groups. Finally, each group shares its list to the whole class. By having students work individually and collectively, this activity could foster relationships amongst students (Milner, 2012), as well as hone critical thinking skills. I look forward to trying it in my classroom.

In spite of students' authentic engagement in the conversation about inside and outside identity traits, the implementation of the project was limited by the materials available, which consisted of many magazines but with limited genres. One student asked if he could bring in his own magazine, and I said yes, but in retrospect I should have opened up that option to the whole class. Even better, resources permitting, we could use the computer lab and printers in order for students to have a broader choice of imagery for their collages. An additional limiting factor was that the data for the identity box portion of the research represented a relatively small set, because not every student turned

in their finished box and reflection; only about half of the boxes and reflections serve as data for this portion of the action research project.

There was a clear connection between student artwork and writing, with some students embracing the opportunity to explain their work with written reflections, while others finding themselves more comfortable letting the work speak for itself. Because the students who didn't complete the written reflections were classified as ELL, held IEPs, or required other differentiation, it would have been useful to scaffold the writing portion of the assignment, or to provide alternative means of reflection, such as verbal. One way to scaffold the writing is to provide examples throughout the project of ways that students could write about their work. These examples could be posted in the classroom as a resource for those who aren't able to come up with the words, or are just feeling uninspired. Having the resource available to everyone is equitable because it does not single out students based on perceived abilities.

### **Future Research**

This action research project shed an enormous amount of light on my own teaching practice, but further research must be conducted in order to better understand the connections between visual narrative, critical thinking, and identity development in secondary visual arts classrooms. Especially imperative is the need for multiple studies involving the use of visual narrative to talk about racism and other social justice issues in the classroom. This future research will provide teachers with a much-needed framework to begin the discussion in their own practices as we begin to examine and dismantle pervasive forms of injustice. In the visual arts classroom, Bell and Roberts' (2010) Storytelling Project model of engaging students in storytelling as they create works of art,

combined with Tatum's (2008) recommendations as well as Visual Thinking Strategies using visual narratives, provide a powerful starting point for visual art educators to invite critical discourse about, and to eventually address and heal from racism.

In terms of using visual narrative as a vehicle for examining student identity, there is simply a dearth of research literature. Student discussions, visual narrative projects such as the box assignment, and self-reflections are wonderful ways to explore identity in the visual arts classroom. Educators and researchers could take these projects a step further, like Emme (2001), challenging students to think critically about the ways they are perceived. More research about students self-perceptions and the ways that they believe themselves to be perceived would serve to address several points about critical thinking and identity development, including: racism and/or stereotypes, self-reflection.

### **Conclusion**

Visual narrative is a vehicle that provides my students and me opportunities to broaden our knowledge base, develop critical thinking skills, explore identity, and bring a social justice perspective into the classroom. These explorations are all critical components of transformative education, and even when I don't have the answers to tough questions, my willingness to explore and grow will serve all of us as we create, explore, reflect, and learn.

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## APPENDIX A

### Story quilt rubric

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Story Quilt Rubric

Description of Skills for This Project:  The artist has...	Self-Evaluation			Evidence from your work:  Use examples from your artwork to explain why you gave yourself “met the guidelines” or “best work”	Teacher Evaluation
	I didn't do this	I met the guidelines	This is my best work!		
...Drawn three memories in their sketchbook. (3 points)					
... <b>lightly</b> and <b>neatly</b> drawn a memory in pencil on a square of paper. (3 points)					
...selected and <b>carefully colored warm or cool</b> colors to represent the mood of their memory with colored pencils. (5 points)				Warm or cool? Why?	
...Used a ruler to create a <b>clean</b> border around their memory, and <b>carefully</b> cut out magazine squares and <b>neatly</b> glued them to the border of their memory. (4 points)					
... <b>neatly</b> written their memory with flair pen and <b>carefully</b> glued it to their picture. (3 points)					
... <b>carefully</b> added “stitches” to their memory with flair pen. (2 points)					
...Examined and described art by Faith Ringgold. (3 points)				What did you say about it?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...signed their art on the bottom with full name and class period</li> <li>• ...completed a rubric</li> <li>• ...taped the rubric to their art and turned it in! (3 points)</li> </ul>					

