

Canopy Oaks teacher cultivates artistic behavior

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As a veteran art teacher, Leslie Anderson has developed an impressive collection of lessons over her career. She doesn't like to repeat projects so she's constantly looking for ideas and inspiration. While most teachers design and implement a few new projects each year, they rarely adopt an entirely new teaching philosophy, but that's exactly what Anderson has done.

Last summer, as Anderson was preparing for the upcoming school year at Canopy Oaks Elementary School, she stumbled upon a blog focused on an approach to art education known as Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB). "I read it and I clicked on the next article. I read that one and I just kept clicking. I was totally sold. I was on fire," Anderson

said.

The more research she did, the more excited she became. She only had a few weeks to overhaul her curriculum, instructional style, teaching materials and classroom setup. She got advice from Fort Braden School's art teacher, Heather Clark, who recently implemented the TAB philosophy in her own classroom. Anderson rearranged the physical layout of her art room, with the help of her niece, and she was ready to go when students arrived on the first day of school.

In the early 1980s, the leading framework for art teachers was Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE). This approach focuses on art history, aesthetics, art criticism and art production. The TAB model is a student-centered, learn-

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Canopy Oaks students are encouraged to make their own creative choices, just like an artist in a studio. AMANDA THOMPSON



Leslie Anderson shows off a student's artwork as an example of innovation. It contains an element that goes off the page. AMANDA THOMPSON

Anderson

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er-directed and choice-based practice. Though Anderson was trained as a DBAE art teacher and has been teaching for nearly 30 years, she is now a TAB convert.

"I like the idea of having them in control of the project from the beginning to the end," said Anderson, though she admits getting her students in that frame of mind is an ongoing process. "They come to me and ask, 'can I use a marker, can I use a crayon?' I say 'who's the artist?' I see how they are starting to test their own abilities and they're coming up with more creative ideas."

After brief introduction and demonstration by Anderson, her students can choose to work at various stations in the classroom. These stations present the students with a tantalizing challenge and an opportunity to explore different art methods and materials. "The goal is to transfer the decision-making from the teacher to the student," explained Anderson.

Though she started with 11 stations, Anderson quickly realized she needed to streamline. Students can currently choose from three stations: drawing, painting and collage. Each one offers specialized media for that specific technique and, in the center of the room, students have access to a multitude of other art supplies.

They're encouraged to make their own selections at any point in their creative process, just like an artist in a studio. With students frequently getting up from their chairs and moving around the space, Anderson recognized the need for different seating. She applied for grants from the Council on Culture & Arts and Envision Credit Union. "These were the first two grants I've ever written and I am so humble and so excited at the same time because I got both of them."

With the grant funds, she was able to purchase active learning stools which take up less space, provide more flexibility and allow her students freedom of

movement.

"I'm going to be honest, the first week I got the stools I was like what did I get into. I had horses, spinning, students found all kinds of creative ways of using these stools. I thought, I'm just going to let them get this out of their systems and by the second week, that was all gone. Before, we had these heavy chairs and just to have them stand up and push those heavy chairs was a task. With these stools, they quickly stand up, they are painting, then they sit. It's been fantastic."

Even these kinds of changes to the physical environment reinforces the TAB approach. Student have been provided with the tools they need to be successful and they are flourishing with the ability to express their energy, ideas and opinions in their own way.

Kami Smith is one of Anderson's third-grade art students and she's a fan of the new stools. "Whenever we're doing something hard, you don't have to get all nervous. On the stools you can roll around, smooth out your brain and get all the artwork out of you. They make me feel calm and stay focused."

Kami's classmate Dale Stringer agreed and added "the stools are helpful because they're lighter than the chairs. I can move it around and face Mrs. Anderson when she moves to different points in the room."

While her students are unaware of the particulars within the newly implemented TAB philosophy, they appreciate the change and the freedom it offers. The results have been quick and impressive.

Anderson has seen improved problem solving and higher-order thinking skills as well as increased levels of innovation, confidence and peer to peer communication.

"This year I hear them say, 'I'm excited, I cannot wait to start. I love art.' I've been listening to them and they are in a different mind-set. That makes me happy."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Interim Executive Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).