



Matt Grundler: Hey everybody. This is Matt and Laura Grundler, and I want to welcome you to the next episode of the Creatively Connected Classroom. Today, on our podcast, we are talking with Holly Bess Kincaid. She hosted a chat for us several weeks ago about meeting the needs of diverse learners. First off Holly, just want to welcome you, and really looking forward to having this conversation with you today.

Laura Grundler: Yeah. Holly, we were so excited to have you. I had the opportunity of spending a week with Holly this summer, and getting to know her even better. We were at the School for Art Leaders together, so that was really fun. But Holly, can you tell us a little bit more about your own teaching experience, your background, your journey, and maybe even, because I find it so interesting, where you teach and the kind of community you teach in.

Holly Bess K.: Sure. Well, thanks for having me. I have had a diverse background, I guess, too, that's led me to where I am. I am in my 25th year of teaching, and I started off in a very rural community, one stoplight town, and I've taught elementary and middle school, so I've done some different levels. I taught in that rural community for about 12 years, and then headed off to the big city of Houston, so I went from a one stoplight town to a giant city.

Laura Grundler: Wow.

Matt Grundler: That is a big jump.

Laura Grundler: That's a big jump.

Holly Bess K.: Yes. And so I was teaching elementary and intermediate school down in Houston. Then, back to Virginia, and I'm in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, in a town called Harrisonburg. It's the home of James Madison University. It's a lovely little valley town right in the Blue Ridge mountains, but we are a really unique community. My students speak about 44 different languages at home and my school. In the district itself, I believe we have 63 different languages spoken at home. Many of our students are refugees or immigrants, and they are in our school sometimes within



the first four months of being in the country. It's really an interesting environment in which to teach.

Laura Grundler: Wow. How do you ... I've worked with newcomers before, and I know that having that safe environment is so important, but with so many different languages and so many different cultural and diverse backgrounds, how do you provide a safe learning environment for those kids? Because everything is coming at them in a new ... I just can't imagine walking in their shoes. How do you provide that safety net?

Holly Bess K.: Well, it starts with really getting to know your students, and building a community. I think that's with any school. No matter where you are, it's creating a safe space for students to feel like they can use their visual voice and they can share things and use their artwork to be an outlet for a lot of things that, especially middle school students I think, are dealing with and coping with on a daily basis. It's hard. It's hard to be a teenager these days. I am just really blessed. I think it's a matter of being open and honest with students, and getting to know them, allowing them time to share. I am just so amazed by my students. Each year, they teach me so much, and it's giving them that chance to really find success in sharing who they are and where they come from, because I am learning about parts of the world that, honestly, I didn't know some of these country names before I came, and teaching these students. It's a mutual learning environment.

Matt Grundler: Wow. I guess that kind of leads me into one of the questions that you had, was thinking about all of these different learners, these diverse cultures, you also have that big, giant language barrier. It just seems overwhelming. You just said 44 different languages. That just seems huge. What are some strategies that you use to, not combat that, but to help ease that, and ease it for the student as well as for a teacher who might be in those same shoes?

Holly Bess K.: Yeah. It's really interesting. I actually did a presentation at NEAE last year with Trina Harlow, and we were talking about the refugee students. But I think working with this population is really interesting. With our school, and our district, we are required in every single classroom to have the students speaking, reading, or writing every day. In every class, we're trying to encourage the students to talk. I'm getting them to talk about



their artwork, to write their art statements, to write about art history pieces that we might be studying, for different things that I might do. But even in the simplest prompts or drawing prompts, I remember a student, and we were talking about the sketchbook prompt was, "Imagine that you're traveling through space, what would you see? What would you experience?" One of the other students said the word alien, "I might see an alien." That caused an uproar in my classroom. That one word, and trying to, you know, wait a minute.

Laura Grundler: Wait, that's not what they guessed. Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Wait. Yep.

Holly Bess K.: Then, I had a student who had no idea what planets looked like, because where he was from, that was not something that was studied or even discussed. It's really opened up my mind and my perception of different words and meanings. Even doing the Inktober prompts have really been interesting to talk to some of these students. I loved it though, because they're really talking about how words have different meanings, and they're looking them up. I have technology available for the kids so they can google it. I think it's just having resources available the students feel like they have ownership of, that if they need to look something up, they are welcome to do that.

Laura Grundler: That's fabulous that you have those resources. Not every school district has that. I do find that we're maybe at an advantage in the art room, because we are so visually dependent. I remember the first time I had a student that spoke Farsi, and I didn't have any other kids. In Texas, a lot of times what we have is Spanish speakers, and usually there's a couple of kids in the room that speak Spanish and English, and they can help me work through those issues, but the first time I had a student that spoke Farsi, and I didn't have anyone to help me translate, I relied heavily on those visual cues. I think that that was the benefit of being in an art room.

Laura Grundler: But I also know what you mean about those refugee students. There's a certain trauma of just being in middle school, but then when you add the layers of some of these experiences that children have really endured, and I mean trauma, I look at that, and one of your questions was that everyone's art is valid. I think about something you said earlier, about



being able to express themselves, and feeling safe in that expression. How do you help them, or has there ever been a time where you've had to help kids work through some trauma?

Holly Bess K.: Yes, and I think being vulnerable myself as a role model, and how my own artwork sometimes has helped me to work through those moments where I didn't have the words to talk about the way I was being hurt within, to share with those kids those really vulnerable moments. I actually did a prompt, and I've done this a couple times, where I've asked the students to do artwork based on memories. I allow my students, it's a fairly choice based room, so the students have access to a variety of materials and mediums in which to work. The results of memories, just as a prompt, was so powerful with my students. Some of them started off with very childlike, playful, fun memories, but I required them to do three. As they did the second one, and then they did the third one, they became a little bit more brave.

Holly Bess K.: When they started sharing and talking, other memories bubbled up, and it was really wonderful. I actually use circle time to talk about different things and to share, so we pass a little ... I have a little snowball that lights up and we'll throw it, so whoever's got the talking snowball, they just snowball those ideas out. But it's really fun to see what they share, because within those kids, finding such powerful artwork, and some of it still resonates with me today, and when I see them, I'm like, "This is something that deserves to be in a museum, because it's that powerful."

Matt Grundler: That's awesome.

Laura Grundler: Based on your snowball comment, you also had a ... Well, I was just thinking about instructional strategies. You know, we all have different tips and tricks that we use in the classroom. What are some instructional strategies that you use on a regular basis, that help you incorporate all different learning styles?

Holly Bess K.: Well, definitely in a choice based room, I'm able to have the kids working on a variety of different things. I actually have a student who is coming, and she's really coming in just for the social interaction, and she's learning some work skills. She's very artistic, and she's in one of our special needs classrooms. She comes with a student aide who's working



with her, but it's really fun to see how I can engage her, and get her to create, and then also to do some work and to interact with other students.

Holly Bess K.: But I have the ability, since they're working on so many choice projects, that I'm able to challenge some of my really gifted students and at the same time nurture and, by maybe grouping kids at certain tables, they're working on certain materials, to kind of teach each other. One of my favorite moments in the last couple weeks, I have a student who, really his confidence level has been struggling. I showed him a couple little techniques with paint brush strokes, and getting some different things, and now I'm like, any kid that's wanting to know how to grass or textures with paint, I'm like, "Hey, go over and see him. He can show you."

Laura Grundler: That's awesome.

Holly Bess K.: Really activating the student as a teacher and a leader in the classroom has been fun to watch, and the kids just really blossom. They love those opportunities. That's something that I'm really embracing in a choice room.

Matt Grundler: That's awesome.

Susan Riley: Hi there. It's Susan Riley from Education Closet. Did you know that we have an online arts integration and STEAM conference that you can access from anywhere? Sit in your PJs, grab a journal, and just enjoy some great presenters and sessions, all from the comfort of home. Plus, you'll get 10 PD hours and lifetime access. You in? Then hop over to artsintegrationconference.com, and check out all the details. We'd love to help you reach your goals. Now, let's get back to Holly, Matt, and Laura.

Matt Grundler: You touched on a couple times already, but you were talking about these kids that are coming from different places just around the world, that have these different experiences. Do you specify, or do you go specifically and find artists that might help broaden the understanding, especially on a global scale? We talk about artists and how they can affect their community. We talk about how artists can affect basically the world around them. Do you go and look for specific artists, or maybe share some of the artists that you've used to help kids understand,



especially if they're from that particular area that they might be coming from?

Holly Bess K.: You know, it's really been interesting. Some of ... There have been moments where I've definitely done some research, but the students, honestly, bring so much to the table when it's discussions. Last year, I remember doing a clay project, and I learned a new clay technique from a student, a seventh grade boy, who was a newcomer from Africa, and he was applying and creating a hand build clay piece of pottery, like a vase, and he was using little balls and pinching them all the way around, and created the most amazing vase that I'd ever seen. He was doing it so fast. I actually stopped and had a little conversation with him, and he was telling me that as a child, that that's what the children in his village did. They actually made pottery, and would sell it.

Laura Grundler: Oh wow.

Holly Bess K.: It's really amazing that when you can stop and notice and talk to the kids, they will bring forth some of the artwork from their communities, and the skills that they've learned. I was amazed at his quality of workmanship with his pottery pieces. He actually ended up teaching some other students this technique, because it was beautiful, and it had such an interesting texture to it. I think there is a part of me, as an educator, who wants to seek out and find, but there's also part of me that wants to learn, and allow the students to share from their experience, because I wouldn't have been able to research that. That was something he brought as a firsthand experience of something that he learned. That in itself is priceless. That's something that google couldn't have taught me.

Matt Grundler: No, absolutely. It's authentic. I mean, we were just talking with a previous person about authenticity. You don't get much more real than that.

Laura Grundler: Well, and you're validating his experiences and his place in the world, and that he's bringing this to the table. I mean, he must have felt so good.

Matt Grundler: Oh, to be able to share it.

Laura Grundler: To share that with other people.



Matt Grundler: With others, yeah.

Laura Grundler: I'm wondering, earlier you mentioned, it's kind of a two pronged thing, you definitely have embraced the choice based art studio, which sounds like a lot of juggle, but you've also talked about this term visual voice. Can you kind of meld those two together, and give us an idea of what it looks like to be in your classroom?

Holly Bess K.: It's really fun. I had pretty much every administrator in my building that just stopped by last Friday. They just stopped by, they were doing a nice little deed for the teachers, it was like do something kind day, and they brought us pastries and coffee. But while I was in the hallway, they walked in, and took a few minutes to see what the kids were doing. Imagine 27 students, eighth graders in a classroom, and you would see probably seven to eight different materials being used at the same time, a variety of different projects from working in their sketchbook, or working on their digital portfolio creations on their iPads, or painting, but the students were all engaged.

Holly Bess K.: They were all working, and several of the students were using what I call their visual voice, expressing their own feelings, opinions. Trying to help my students to understand that artists might express ideas, express feelings, express things that might help make our world a better place, I'm constantly trying to encourage my students to use their artistic talent to express their thoughts and their ideas, because for me, that was the most powerful thing that my high school educator, art teacher, taught me, was to allow me to, in a very difficult moment in my life, to let art be my voice. That was a powerful moment for me, and I know that these students are going through trauma, and I want them to be able to, almost in an art therapeutic way, use art as a way to express themselves, and maybe get some of that frustration out in a kind way, through paint and marks on a paper.

Laura Grundler: We need more of that. That's all I'm going to say about that, is we need more.

Holly Bess K.: The kids will amaze every day, if they're given an opportunity. Really validating what they have to say, because it could be the simplest thing about a pet that was really important to them, but there's going to be a



reason behind that. If you can then have them dig deeper into that idea, that's just ... They might be teenagers, but they have so many experiences already. To capture those is priceless, for them, and for us as educators.

Laura Grundler: One of the things I love hearing you say again, over and over, Holly, is that we're always learning. I always feel like I'm learning just as much from those that I'm teaching, that I'm getting just as much out of it, which is one of the reasons I'm so passionate about education, is that we're always growing. That's what's so beautiful about it.

Holly Bess K.: Yeah, I know. My mom taught for 32 years, she's 90 years old, and she always said you've got to constantly be learning. My mom, and she's still learning and still has that thirst for more information and more knowledge. She always told me that if I ever felt like I knew it all, I needed to really stop and check myself, because we all have so much to learn. Our world is changing, and I feel this hunger to try to gather more information constantly, because there's so many interesting things happening.

Laura Grundler: For sure. I'm like, you know what? We get involved in these discussions, and I always think Matt and I say we have a lot of wow moments, or that we just really agree. There's a lot of head nodding. I know the people out there on the podcast can't see it, but we're just like, "Oh yeah." You know, the discussion when you hosted K12 ArtChat was fierce. It was really a great discussion. There was a lot of talk during the chat. Just curious if you had gotten any feedback after the chat or during the chat that maybe continued, or you had some aha moments yourself from?

Holly Bess K.: Yeah, it was pretty fast-paced. I've had to go back and look through some of the conversations that went on, and I really enjoyed even the slow chat that followed, because there were some great things that I think were shared, and came from that. But even locally, just sharing with some of my fellow colleagues, discussing some of the ideas, has been really interesting to talk about even in my own school, because we're all struggling with a diverse population and how we balance that. I think really thinking about the ways that we can use project-based learning to help students in every classroom to give them a voice, and help them to share their learning in a different way.



Holly Bess K.: I even brought back some ideas with some of my colleagues about using ChatterPix, and I did an arts integration project with having my students illustrate stories from the Civil War, and create it in a sort of a Kara Walker style, some silhouetted imagery, but then use ChatterPix to tell a made up story, putting themselves in that time period, and what might have happened, and what was going on. They were writing, they were speaking, they were illustrating, and they were basically sharing, visually, the things that they were learning in their History Civics classes. It was a great way to really document learning that was happening in the classroom in a different way. I think there's just so much opportunity that we might have to embrace art, and the power it has to get our students to communicate what they are actually taking in from our classes.

Matt Grundler: I think it's a lot more than some people give them credit for. I think we really underestimate them. I've seen that at the middle school level as well, just this year so far. With that being said, and kind of ending on that note, is there any last bits, words of wisdom, not that it hasn't been wisdom-filled already, but is there any last bits of wisdom you could share with us as we part?

Holly Bess K.: Well, you know, I'm constantly learning new ways to bring out the inner artist in my students and to get them to communicate. I'm doing mindful moments with some of my students, and doing different things. But I think, I guess, I would just encourage educators to maybe stop and listen a little bit more, to observe a little bit of what they are creating, and find those little tiny things sometimes that are hidden in the sketchbooks, or hidden in drawings, that might be interests for the students, that might bring them out a little bit. I think just being a good listener, being patient, and opening our eyes to be observant to our students, because they're going to tell us what they need. That's what I'm there for, is to nurture that inner artist, and the passion that I have for art, and try to pass that on to them. That's my way of saying thanks to my high school art teacher, Ms. Doman, who inspired me. Every time I inspire another child, that's my way of saying thanks to her.

Laura Grundler: I'm tearing up.

Matt Grundler: That's a Peter Reynolds moment there, for sure.



- Laura Grundler: That was awesome. That was just, yeah. I'm crying, because I think that that's what it's all about, Holly. Inspiring that next artist, and inspiring that place to give a visual voice to the kids. Cannot thank you enough for being on the podcast tonight. I know we'll be connecting again.
- Matt Grundler: Oh, absolutely.
- Laura Grundler: I know you're presenting at NAEA this year, and we'll be excited to see you there.
- Holly Bess K.: Yeah. I look forward to every time we're together, it's always great. It's always inspiring. We got the best PLN.
- Laura Grundler: We do. I agree. I agree.
- Holly Bess K.: Well, you all have a wonderful evening, and thanks so much for having me.
- Matt Grundler: Absolutely, Holly. Thanks again.
- Laura Grundler: It was definitely wonderful.
- Matt Grundler: All right. We will talk with you later.
- Laura Grundler: Bye Holly.
- Holly Bess K.: Bye.
- Susan Riley: Heads up seven up, friends. If you've been enjoying these episodes, be sure to subscribe to the Creatively Connected Classroom podcast. You'll get a notification every time we release a new episode, each and every week. And, take a screen shot and put it on your favorite social media, Twitter, Insta, Facebook, you name it. Tag EducationCloset and K12ArtChat, so we can reach out and say thanks. If you really love us with all the feels, give us a review and/or a rating over on iTunes. It helps others find the show and connect with our incredible community. Thanks for all your support.