

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Art Education Programs: Empowering Social Change

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The aim of this article is to bring attention to an important connection between art education programs and the development of social justice practices in K-16 classrooms. This article is organized into three sections. The first is an analysis of the hierarchical and unilateral approach to education that urban students experience throughout their schooling, and how this educational model fails to develop traits that can empower students to promote social justice for those who are marginalized or oppressed. The second section advocates for the promotion of art education programs infused with particular aesthetic experiences that can help students develop the missing traits. The closing section discusses the changes that will be required to institute these programs in the United States in general and New York City (NYC) in particular, and the challenges this will entail. The author is a lifelong resident of NYC, which is both her hometown and one of the largest urban cities in the world.

## THE BANKING APPROACH

My teaching experiences in urban K-16 settings indicate that students' educational experiences are being formed by a pedagogical system that is hierarchical and non-interactive. Freire (2000) refers to this model as the "banking concept of education" (p.71) in which students are reduced to storing bits of information provided by the instructor, who considers her/himself a superior authority, and "turns them [students] into receptacles to be filled" (p. 72). In this educational model, students' experiences and ways of interpreting the world are not valued. The learning process has no personal relevance, and students are discouraged from creating meaning in the classroom or their lives. Over the course of time, this educational approach can weaken students' faith in their own

power to transform the world, leaving them at the mercy of authority figures who tell them how to live. This process separates students from what somatic theorists call their *somatic sensibility*.

Tomas Hanna defines *soma* as "the body as perceived from within by first-person perception" (Green, 2001, p. 2). The *soma* represents a subjective understanding of our emotions and motivations as we perceive them inside our selves, as opposed to the objective viewpoint of a detached observer. Somatic Theory focuses on embodied experiences such as sensation, movement, and intention, which carry memories connected with feelings of love, joy, passion, compassion, and sorrow. I suggest that our understanding of the world is not restricted to our minds, but also deeply embedded in our bodies in the form of experiential memories. If we take a minute to consider, we realize that memory is triggered not only by language or thought, but sometimes by odors, sensations, or colors. A disembodied experience is emotionless; it can be recalled by our memory, but this recollection does not arouse the feelings that accompanied the experience when it entered our lives. Somatic sensibility allows us to recall the emotions connected with our experiences, and this gives us a stronger visceral understanding of how they affect our lives and shape the way we see ourselves and others.

Students come into our classrooms already accustomed to the banking model of education, in which their individual ways of interpreting the world are disregarded and the learning process is detached from personal experience. They have learned to see the world as fixed, with units of knowledge set and defined by authority figures pontificating in front of the class. Over time, students lose both the ability to question the status quo and the confidence to change it.

The world they are to inherit is seen as unchangeable and static. Greene (1995) describes this situation well:

My argument is simply that treating the world as predefined and given, as simply there, is quite separate and different from applying an initiating, constructing mind or consciousness to the world. When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility. (p. 23)

Because this type of learning process is predetermined and leaves little room for critical and independent thinking, it reduces students' capacity to imagine, which Greene (1995) defines as the "ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 19). This is the same skill displayed by an interior designer who walks into an empty room and creates a mental image of how s/he wants it to look, then works towards the realization of that image. We must be capable of imagining things as we want them to be before we can see ourselves as agents of change. If students cannot develop their imagination, they cannot envision their own power to create and recreate the world.

The next section will briefly explain how certain types of aesthetic experience can enable students to engage in social change by encouraging them to identify with others who share similar experiences. I will advocate for infusion of the arts into K-16 classrooms as a way of producing focused aesthetic experiences that can facilitate this process. The goal is to bring the body (*soma*) and its somatic sensibilities into the classroom along with our students' minds.

## THE AESTHETIC PROCESS

Greene (2001) defines the field of aesthetics as "concerned about perception, sensation, imagination, and how they relate to knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world" (p. 5). An

aesthetic experience can be described as the relationship created between an observer and a specific artwork, and the way that work of art affects the observer in light of his/her background and personal history. Aesthetic experiences differ in their effects depending upon what each observer brings to the encounter. Susan Stinson (1985) discusses three different levels of aesthetic experience and explains why they must be used carefully in educational contexts, because not all of them will encourage constructive engagement with the world. This article will briefly discuss the first two, but the third level of experience is the one I am interested in promoting as an educational resource. This is the type of experience that will help students to embrace their own power to create positive social change.

Stinson's first dimension is limited to appreciation of the particular beauty of the artwork. According to her analysis, the observer is not deeply moved at this level of perception because the artwork bears no connection with his/her previous experiences. For this reason, the first level of aesthetic experience cannot release the imagination or empower the observer. This is analogous to the banking method of education, in which students are limited to storing new information without applying critical thought or interpretation.

Stinson's second level of aesthetic experience concerns the way in which the artwork moves the observer. The effect the work will have in this dimension depends upon the life experiences the observer brings to the encounter, and thus upon the degree to which the observer can relate to the piece in question. Some will see this level of experience as a transcendental moment that can give the observer the strength and security to create positive change in her/his life. Stinson (1985) describes this kind of experience as a "source of knowledge of God and a major source of meaning in life" (p. 77).

Aesthetic experiences at Stinson's second level can release the imagination and allow the observer to see a path towards a better life, but this does not necessarily encourage movement beyond the personal into the social realm. The experience fails to engen-

der compassion, which according to Fox (1999) "is political as well as personal" (p. 109). I share Fox's belief that "compassion leads to work" (p. 8), and that without it, social empowerment will have no relevant effect. For this reason, I agree with Stinson's concern that "transcendent experiences may too often simply refresh us – like a mini vacation – making us better able to tolerate some things which we ought not tolerate" (p. 78). Though I would not wish to devalue the positive effects felt at this level of aesthetic experience, the particular type of educational encounter I am promoting is intended to engender both personal empowerment and a desire for social change. Stinson describes a third level of aesthetic experience that strengthens the relationship between the observer and the world around her/him. The work of art becomes a vehicle for appreciating other people's suffering and connecting it with our own. Stinson elaborates by quoting Maxine Greene:

... certain works of art are considered great primarily because of their capacity to bring us into conscious engagement with the world, into self reflectiveness and critical awareness, and to sense moral agency, and it is these works of art which ought to be central in curriculum. (Greene cited in Stinson, 1985, p. 79)

In order to create an environment in which students can reach this third level of aesthetic experience, we must offer quality education programs that expose them to artworks that will help them to recognize common sources of oppression. These encounters must involve the body (soma) as a mediator of experience and employ its somatic sensibilities to explore the work of art. This is the only way in which observers can fully appreciate the human emotions that are represented in the work. This process helps students to achieve what Greene (2001) refers to as "uncoupling" (p.69), or using our imagination and our own personal history to help us *feel* what the artist means, rather than simply seeing or hearing it. Encounters of this kind have an extraordinary capacity to release the imagination and engender compassion, because they

engage our personal experience at the bodily level. This process reconnects us to our somatic sensibility, which is the source of our power to create and recreate the world in which we live.

I have briefly explained how creating a particular type of educational aesthetic experience is of the utmost importance in empowering students to promote social justice for those who are marginalized or oppressed. On the one hand, this process helps students understand how oppression affects them personally, which will allow them to initiate a healing process. On the other hand, students can use this critical lens to see how, consciously or unconsciously, they have oppressed others, and this will help them to appreciate the commonalities in all human suffering. The compassion they develop through this kind of encounter will eventually empower them to create social change. The final section of this article will discuss the challenges involved in establishing this kind of art program in our urban classrooms, and the changes that will be required.

## CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Infusing the arts into K-16 classrooms will involve substantive change in our educational system, and will therefore present serious challenges for administrators and teachers alike. This final section will examine some of these challenges, and in particular, how to achieve the level of financial support required for educational programs that use the techniques I have described. Finally, speaking as a New Yorker and a Teacher Educator involved with Aesthetic Education, I will end the discussion by demonstrating the limited value that has been placed on art education by the New York City Department of Education in the past few decades, and by describing the changes needed to ensure the implementation of art programs at the local and national levels.

Interest in new progressive pedagogies will always be initiated by concerned educators who submit requests to administrators for the adoption of new or revised curricula. A difficult step in the introduction of arts-driven curricula is convincing education ad-

ministrators of the importance of this approach. Before they will agree to the necessary changes, administrators must come to value the arts as an indispensable part of the education of all children. Then they will be more willing to allot funds for the use of artistic venues that are available in the community, and to allow teachers to use aesthetic curricular approaches that develop skills not measured by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandated tests or the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards. Educators must advance strong arguments in favor of the idea that artistic programs can be implemented successfully in all curricular areas and will develop qualities in students that strengthen academic performance.

### At the Local Level

The likelihood of the arts playing an important role in a child's education is ironically slim in New York City, the artistic capital of the world. Since the fiscal crisis of the 1970's, art education has essentially been eliminated in New York City's public schools. The situation has barely improved in recent years, despite the efforts of Mayor Giuliani, who in 1997 created Project ARTS (Art Restoration Throughout the Schools) with the assistance of the Department of Education. This program was designed to restore arts education to all New York City public school curricula over a three-year period, with one third of all schools joining the program each year. Seventy-five million dollars were allocated for this project, but "as of the 2004-2005 academic year, out of 1,356 public schools over 152 schools have no art education program, and more than 160 elementary schools that have more than 500 students have one or no art teacher" (Moskowitz, 2005, p. 2).

Although funding for this program has been in place since 1997, the New York City Department of Education has repeatedly found ways to put these monies out of reach, with the explanation that "nearly half of its middle schools are already deemed in need of improvement" (NY1, 2004, p. 4). Luckily for the children of NYC, the city's artistic and cultural institutions recognize

the importance of art education and the effects of restrictions posed by low per-pupil budgets and wide funding gaps between urban and suburban schools. Whenever possible, organizations such as the Lincoln Center Institute and Project ARTS have shouldered a large portion of the financial responsibility for promoting the arts in NYC public schools. However, in a city served by over 1,350 public schools with an average of 1,000 students per school, the monies allocated for arts education are spread very thin. Some urban districts that educate large numbers of poor minority children and cannot count on the support of local artistic and cultural institutions have even fewer opportunities to expose their students to the arts.

Quality art programs are indispensable in the schooling of urban children. Through the arts, children can learn to imagine possibilities, to "look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 1995, p. 19). The aesthetic learning process can enable students to broaden their perspectives, to overcome the taken-for-granted, and to envision a better world. If we prevent underprivileged children from developing these capacities, we close the door to a brighter future for them and for our country. Greene (1995) argued that "Too rarely do we have poor children in mind when we think of the way imagination enlarges experience. And what can be more important for us than helping those called at risk overcome their powerlessness?" (p. 36). Unfortunately, the essential capacities for imagination, compassion, and social responsibility are not measured in the state mandated standardized tests, nor are they considered in the standards required by NCATE.

### At the National Level

Before quality art education programs can reestablish roots in our urban schools, we must take a long hard look at our required learning standards and traditional assessment tools. Existing standards should be amended to allow educators more flexibility, and better criteria should be devised for measuring student learning. This will allow teachers to abandon

"banking" models of education, and to experiment with alternative methods such as I have described – using the arts to help children understand the world, their roles within it, and their capacity to change it.

Each state should commit to providing an adequate and equitable funding system for its public schools. As things stand today, public schools in urban neighborhoods receive much smaller annual per-pupil allowances than those in the suburbs and other privileged areas. The year-by-year perpetuation of this disparity demonstrates our politicians' inadequate concern for the education of our urban youth, and it seems increasingly unlikely that they will voluntarily pursue the establishment of art programs that could teach students to question the inequalities and injustices of the existing system.

This is the biggest challenge that promoters of aesthetic educational methods will face when approaching education administrators for approval of art-related curricula. The challenge to the system is twofold: the new methods will require additional expenditure, and they will empower students to question the status quo. Individuals educated through the exploration of aesthetic experience are more likely to challenge existing power structures and imagine how they can be changed to benefit the socially disadvantaged. If students feel empowered in this way, they will develop a sense of entitlement that will allow them to take a stand when necessary in the name of social justice.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The absence of arts programs in urban public schools constitutes a violation of human rights, harming the neediest of our children. I can attest that art education programs are well worth fighting for, because after infusing arts into my teacher education curricula, I have witnessed powerful changes in students' consciousness as they exit my classrooms and transition into their teaching careers. They have blossomed into newly empowered individuals with a strong desire to change the lives of the children they will teach. I believe in the ability of a committed community to

create change because I have seen this process in action. By infusing art education programs into K-16 classrooms, we can teach students to appreciate and exercise their power to change the world. The educational communities they go on to build will contribute to the empowerment of all people.

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