

## COMMENTARY

## On Culture, Art, and Experience

By Carolyn Chernoff, University of Pennsylvania

While the arts in the United States are themselves often controversial, arts in public schools rarely are. That is to say that teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members tend to agree that the opportunity to participate in the arts is beneficial to students and to the wider society. Whether discipline-based arts education (DBAE or “art for art’s sake”), integrated arts (art that promotes core content knowledge—literacy, numeracy, critical thinking—alongside self-expression), or somewhere in between, the *desire* to have art (including music and theater) in public schools is well-known. Also well-known, however, are the local and national pressures and mandates that place arts at the bottom of the list of school priorities and possibilities.

In their thoughtful articles about the centrality of arts in education (included in this volume), Gulla, Milman, and Norman raise a series of interrelated issues amidst snapshots of best practices. School funding, the pressures of standardized testing, and the lack of opportunities for engagement in the classroom all present a reminder that it is particularly because of these realities that schools, teachers, students, and communities need arts in the classroom. The authors also remind us, through evocative description of best-practice programs, that arts participation enables students to engage deeply with subject matter and school itself, countering grim notions that the most vulnerable students in the most vulnerable schools are necessarily the least engaged. Arts involvement for academic achievers and others is correlated with higher rates of school completion, lower rates of delinquency, higher levels of self-esteem and efficacy, and a host of other “magic wand” type effects.

And yet the same cries echo in the

corridors of schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York: there’s just no money for arts. There’s just no time. There are no personnel—and besides, aren’t “arts and culture” a luxury?

As poet Gwendolyn Brooks neatly illustrated in her 1967 poem “The Chicago Picasso,” this tension over experiencing art as essential on the one hand and elitist or alienating on the other hand is not a new one. She asks, “Does man love Art?” Answering her question, she reminds us that Man visits Art, but squirms.

Art hurts. Art urges voyages—  
and it is easier to stay at home

Art is not necessarily easy. Arts provide a place to question the heretofore unquestionable, to imagine a different world. While critical for imagining new possibilities, this realm of the imagination can be frightening. Teachers who lack deep experience with art, in the sense of art as experience promoted by John Dewey (1932/2005), may be afraid—or at least likely to squirm in its presence. Students may lack exposure to museums, public sculptures, and works of art across the spectrum even in some of culturally richest cities in the United States. Proximity to museums, theaters, and other formal venues does not necessarily guarantee access.

But beyond art in its cages, in its “official” homes in cities around the world, there is the reality that art is a part of everyday life. In that, no teacher, no student, no community is a stranger to art. As Stern and Siefert (1998) remind us, the most underresourced and historically excluded sections of Philadelphia and Camden are full of people who are artists, who boast high levels of arts participation, who integrate arts into their daily lives. From gardening to cooking to home decorating, to singing and listening to music on the radio, to attending performances at

religious institutions and schools, art is alive and well—well, everywhere.

Yet this notion that art is somehow foreign to students, particularly low income students of color attending schools in highly concentrated areas of poverty, persists. Brooks illustrates and mocks this point of view, writing,

But we must cook ourselves and  
style ourselves for Art, who  
is a requiring courtesan.

We squirm.

We do not hug the Mona Lisa.

And yet children above all know that art can be anything, that everyone is an artist, that art is all around us. And adults know this too, even if they rarely articulate it. The reality of art—of cultural expression, of the joy and pain of being alive in this world right now—is too often seen as separate from the world of Art that Brooks pillories. Even dedicated arts activists and educators too often labor under the belief that art lives in museums, that art is a language too tricky for most of our tongues, and, most of all, that art is an experience that trained professionals need to bring to students.

These three articles provide hopeful visions of what can happen when arts are included in the classroom, even amidst the funding crises, the standardized testing schedules, and the challenge of administering any innovative program in overburdened and under-resourced public schools. But these articles raise important questions as well, some of which go unanswered. While arguing for *multicultural* art experiences, there remains the whisper that *real art is Western European*, that *real art is for wealthy people*, that *you have to dress up and speak English to visit real art in its faraway home*. Is the hopeful vision of arts in education one that encourages all people to participate in certain kinds of art, or perhaps

suggesting that certain demographic groups should participate in certain kinds of art (either demographically similar, or a more traditional notion of “high art,” or the art of the powerful)?

If *everything* is art, then there may be no need to “include” it in school; it is already there. That is one danger of taking a position that says *art is everywhere, all people have art, we are all artists*. But that is an extreme and almost deliberate misinterpretation. If *everything* is art, then we can provide spaces in which to look and listen more closely to the art all around us, including young people’s practices of visual art, poetry, and dance too often deemed anti-social by well-intentioned school administrators and other authorities. Rap, graffiti, dancing, cell-phone photos and movies—these are often seen as orthogonal to “real” learning, the learning that is tested and almost always found lacking. But too, to include youth culture in our canon of art is not necessarily to say that is the only art young people under-

stand. It is, however, a point of entry.

These three articles remind us that good intentions are not enough, that narrow visions of art will not necessarily lead to a sweeping social change that will enable all youth to paint themselves into a beautiful mural of learning and sharing and positive growth. The arts—or “real art”—can reflect and reproduce the hierarchy, tedium, and inequalities of larger society and of public schools. The arts, the *real arts*, can also act as Brecht’s hammer to shape society. But to do this, we need to consider not only the constraints of public school funding and test mandates, but larger notions about what art is—and whose art it is.

**Carolyn Chernoff** is a joint Ph.D. candidate in Sociology and Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. An ethnographic and qualitative researcher, Carolyn’s research interests center on cities, social change, and the arts as well as broadly-defined issues of difference, inclusion, and democracy. As

a teacher, consultant, and program director, she has worked with a wide variety of nonprofit and community-based organizations in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Oaxaca, Mexico. A board member of Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education, Carolyn is also co-founder of The Girls’ DJ Collective.

## REFERENCES

- Brooks, Gwendolyn. 1968. Two Dedications (companion poems): I. The Chicago Picasso. In *In the Mecca: poems*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dewey, John. 1932/2005. *Art As Experience*. New York: Perigee.
- Stern, Mark J. & Susan C. Siefert. 1998. Community Revitalization and the Arts in Philadelphia. Working Paper #8, Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAP/wp8txt.pdf>