Connections to the World: Visual Art in Urban Schools

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Concerns

Joy is not a word we often use in conversations about education reform, particularly when we speak of reform in our urban schools. Nor do we often link reform with the synergistic relationship between excellence in academic skills and the ability to think creatively, critically, or to problem solve. The fact that the two preceding notions remain mutually exclusive in the minds of some educators has a direct impact on the teaching of visual arts in urban schools.

Research has proven some links between academic achievement and the arts and speculated about others (Winner & Hetland, 2000). Linkage is difficult to quantify because we are dealing with the idiosyncratic nature of artistic and cognitive behavior. There is evidence, albeit mostly qualitative, that there is reason to train students to use their minds holistically by having them study subjects that exercise and develop both sides of the brain. The left side, as we know, deals with logic and language. These are the areas of development that are given most attention in school via the work done in math, language arts, and, of course, in preparation for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The interpretive, discovery, and exploration modes of learning, addressed in right-brain activities and most frequently used in the arts, helps that development. We know instinctively that our society needs people who can think independently and creatively. We know joy is becoming less and less of a common condition among our school children. And we also know, certainly within the discipline, that students involved in the arts find joy, experience the opportunity to think and interpret, gain the ability to express and communicate ideas, and often find success not
achieved in other academic areas such as mathematics and science, although both of those disciplines require problem-solving skills that are used in art-making. Art also helps students to connect to the world uniquely and personally, paving the way for open-mindedness and understanding of others.

In many large cities the arts have remained marginalized despite their position in the *Core of the Goals 2000 Reform Act* and the subsequent *Legislative Support for Arts Education*. Classrooms remain focused on the acquisition of basic skills and the memorization of information. Resources—space, time, money—are consistently allocated to the academic areas that feed the high-stakes testing frenzy. Yet, in the few urban schools where the arts are intact, and may be flourishing, students are learning and testing well.

The Best Practice High School, in Chicago, the subject of the book *Rethinking High School* (Daniels et al., 2001), is an example of a school where the arts are an integrated piece of the curriculum and where students thrive. In their curriculum, museums are used as places to learn and to think, not just for the art class but for other disciplines as well. For example, in visual art classes students use computer skills to access databases and to find an artist's work with whom they identified or found curious. Using artists with whom the students identified as exemplars for their own work caused them to find connections between themselves and the recognized achievement of others (p. 197). Art history was also incorporated into personal research and art-making rather than being passively taught to the students. Visits to the museum provoked further computer research and sharpened both the students' computer and investigative skills. Students also went “public” by creating a video of their and the artist's work and prepared pages for the school's website.

The Visual Arts are a clear resource for such connections and achievements. Visual art has reflected human concerns in every culture and established an historical reference of them through objects, artifacts, and images throughout time. Art is a vehicle for self-expression, understanding others, and identifying with historical references,
as well as providing a glimpse into the future. Students from mixed socio-economic, racial, and bilingual backgrounds need help in connecting to the world they are in, and what better way for students of all ethnicities and achievement levels to understand common concerns that to work with and explore the visual arts.

Looking at humanity across cultures reveals similarities among us all. For example, we have a record of early man's survival on the walls of caves and ancient ruins. We know that spiritual matters have caused people to worship, to fear, to create objects that protect from and revile evil and provide offerings to the gods. Reflected in the art of all times is the most basic human instinct to survive. Much of the negative behavior in contemporary children and adolescents is provoked by that basic need. The visual arts provide a vehicle for creating statements grounded in concerns about well-being and survival, and allow students to explore and express what might otherwise be inaccessible or lost to all.

**Aesthetic Behavior**

We have evidence that humans have always desired to “make special” (Dissanayake, 1988). Our need for beauty and serenity is manifested in the artifacts, buildings, and adornments that are present in all societies. The most recent art education paradigm, the study of Visual Culture, predicated on the study of objects and visual media's impact on today's society, can be historically traced through architecture, fashion, and ordinary objects giving reference to an otherwise commercial view of the everyday world. The Visual Culture nomenclature is indicative of a shift toward less art history, less artistic production, and more about critical thought about the materialistic world. It has a root in the visual literacy notions of the 1970s and has currency when thought of as an area that art educators should consider in their curriculum. Students should understand that visual arts are a window to the ills and excesses as well as the beauty in the world. An examination of what a culture values through its products, advertisements,
commercials, television, and films is telling. To some extent, however, that investigation should be coupled with history and the social sciences and not thought of as the foundation of visual art education. In such cases, the arts both support and deepen students' understanding of other subject matter in a most concrete way.

One's aesthetic response to the world is predicated on experience, education, and feelings. It is both cognitive and affective. It has been some time since the term art appreciation has been used but what it implies is still valid. Students, in order to make sense of the world of images, must first understand its purposes. In order for understanding to take place, art must be talked about in terms of beauty, meaning-making, and the contexts in which each of those terms are determined or occur. Personal connections occur most strongly in the making. When students are clearly involved in personal responses to subject matter, they are more likely to pair information in a logical way. Facts link together to provide understanding. An example of helping students to “pair information” may be found in a walk in the city to view public artwork that is derived from an incident or personage being studied in history. Seeing a concrete image produced in a specific time period often helps a child recall an otherwise obscure date and place in time because the right side of the brain responds to imagery and the left side to words. The synergistic relationship that takes place when both sides record information is likely to enhance or even create learning.

**EMPOWERMENT**

Visual arts give power to our ideas. Ideas provide children with the bases to develop and build their own thoughts. Urban schools may be failing not just because they may have financial problems and test mandates. The lack of success in some school districts is directly correlated with the inability to implement curriculum that accurately addresses student educational needs. Especially in urban settings where communication, due to multiple primary native languages
being spoken and instruction being delivered in English can be a problem, students need to have access to alternative symbol systems to the written and spoken word to understand concepts and to articulate thoughts. Visual language is the primal human language. We first recognize what we are seeing, then assign a word to it. We first make marks then learn to write. Visual arts, in fact, could be seen as a missing link in the academic chain, a critical step in the process of learning that while fundamental for us, has been removed. None-the-less, most schools follow a traditional curriculum that appears to de-value the visual arts place within it, possibly removing a viable learning tool for many students.

**Observations in the field**

Spending time in urban schools has concretized many of the above concerns for me. I have found that the emphasis is on the acquisition of basic skills through one symbol system only. Students without facile verbal skills lose their places easily and become frustrated, bored, and defeated. In the extreme, students with disabilities are required to perform the same endless drills. Laws that through testing reinforce homogeneity have become constraints rather than a means of enhancing an individual’s potential to succeed in school. Evidence that the visual arts can restore joy, productive challenges, and learning in urban schools operating under budgetary and curricular constraints is described in the following observations.

**A school for hearing impaired and children with mental and physical challenges**

Watching hearing-impaired children and others with various physical and mental challenges come alive, sustain interest, and be thoroughly engaged in building the city of Boston out of cardboard boxes, I witnessed the power of a well thought-out unit of study that led to this culminating project. In their Visual Art classes, the students had been involved in defining neighborhoods, talking about and drawing what
is in them from imagination and observation, discussing what makes buildings different from one another, and what shapes and colors and spaces may interact to convey the useful purpose of a building. They experienced teacher-guided discussions about their lives in the city, made prints of buildings and places familiar to them, and then set about creating authentically planned Hancock, Prudential, and Custom House towers as well as other structures that define Boston. Working in groups or pairs, they solved problems about details, size relationships, colors to paint the buildings, and the creation of patterns that looked like bricks or reflecting surfaces. Together they crafted the buildings as accurately as possible.

What did these children gain from the experience? A hearing-impaired student-teacher who designed the unit (Silvestri, 2001) knew the students and knew they were more than capable of making the city. She showed them that she believed in their ideas and abilities, and had the patience and self-analysis skills to use proper instructional methods to assure student success. When the knowledge to achieve the images they discussed wasn’t complete, she used well-crafted questions to jog their visual memories and showed them many pictures and artists’ works. She sequenced her lessons to build toward the final installation product. Romare Bearden and Faith Ringgold’s city scenes created in paint, paper, and fabric motivated the creation of collages, using student neighborhood drawings as the essential idea behind them. Each day the teacher demonstrated artistic techniques and provided simple charts of what the students should accomplish. The charts were benchmarks for achievement and referred to often. The children had pride in their daily accomplishments. Their behavior reflected a sense of excitement about their work. They worked well collaboratively and were complimented by their own and other teachers who they invited into the art room to see their city.

What academic content did the students learn or was reinforced? They read, organized their activities, and wrote descriptions of their neighborhoods and their building preferences. They measured the height of buildings, learned about skeletal structures that support
what one sees on the outside, and talked about the connections between façades and what goes on inside spaces. In addition, they learned that their ideas matter, that their thoughts and actions were valued, (and often needed to solve a particular problem within their group). The reward was the joy of seeing their work assembled as an installation outside the principal’s office and later displayed at Boston University in the College of Fine Arts.

**AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL**

Another observation of students in an urban alternative high school reiterates and supports many of the same points stated in the preceding example. In this case, student-teachers designed and taught a thematic unit over five sessions, working with students who elected to be part of what they called “Boston University Art.” Students in the alternative school worked on project-based problems that required them to develop basic literacy and numeric skills, as well as knowledge and application of social studies and science content. Most of the students were bilingual, had dropped out of traditional school and re-entered the alternative diploma program. Many were parents; many were self-supporting and worked a full-time job in addition to attending daily classes from 2 to 9 P.M.

The program was a practicum developed as part of the secondary methods in art education class at the School of Visual Arts at Boston University. For five weeks of the semester, students in the art education program taught in the alternative high school.

Before planning the unit and lessons to be taught, the Boston University class met with the high school group early in the semester. The purpose of the visit was to introduce the concept of the art program and to find out what the high school group was interested in gaining from it. The meeting also helped to familiarize the student-teachers with their prospective students.

Following the site visit, art education students discussed possible themes and techniques that would be appropriate to develop into a
unit. Part of the planning was to include an independent homework assignment that incorporated some research and writing to supplement the image(s) produced during the program. Students who needed credits had to complete all parts of the assignment in order to receive them.

When the five-week sessions began, student-teachers presented the class with an overview of artists’ works that reflected ideas previously discussed. Students chose a social concern they felt strongly about, researched it visually and verbally, wrote about it, and created a visual 2- or 3D work that reflected the concern. The Boston University students did the same research, wrote about it, and created a piece of their own to share with their students in addition to sharing the work of well-known artists who also expressed their own chosen concerns. Boston University students taught artistic processes used in their own pieces by sharing not only how but also why they were chosen. For example, they demonstrated why painting rather than a collage technique was more effective to express a specific idea.

What did the student teachers and their students experience? Over the five years I observed these classes, I watched my students grow to understand the nature of urban learners, but more specifically, the role art can play in helping them to understand and express ideas. The first steps were small and tentative. As the high school people became convinced that their new teachers were not judgmental, they were more willing to take a risk and to become more authentically involved in decision-making about their work. On occasion, one of the teachers would converse with a student in Spanish or French, igniting a spark of mutual excitement that fostered the beginning of a different kind of trust. Working side-by-side, often one-on-one, the teachers and students shared problems and solutions that occur during the process of making art.

What did the high school students learn? The high school students learned another symbol system through which to express their ideas. Many times I have observed that children and students of all ages who are ESL (English as a Second Language) have learned to
draw quite capably. Other times, they are developmentally delayed artistically because there has been little opportunity to learn. A mixture of these phenomena was generally observed in the alternative school classes. Art had been either a refuge or a frustration for the students. In the latter case, it became clear to both the teachers and students that this could be corrected. While there was no quick fix, there were ways of achieving results that were satisfying to both the teacher and student. In the process of completing their projects, the high school students read, interpreted, wrote about, drew, painted, measured, constructed, and exhibited their social concern artworks for the community to see. Classmates and their teachers critiqued, congratulated, and encouraged one another. Parents, town officials, and the school board attended their opening. They all learned that art could make a difference.

My students also learned that preconceived notions and assumptions about learners and their level of knowledge do not contribute to success in the classroom. They learned that in order to teach well they must listen and be prepared to research solutions to student problems in order to help solve them. They had the joy of teaching students who were truly grateful for the opportunity to have an art class. For most art education students, it was their first and only time entering a school with a security guard posted at the door. When we left for the last time, the fear that accompanied them on our first visit was gone. Several of the students asked to be placed in urban schools for their secondary practicum. Those who did practice in city schools became convinced that the arts can make a difference in the urban students' attitudes toward themselves as achievers and toward school in general.

**A TRADITIONAL SCHOOL**

While schools in the city often vary from setting to setting, the situation to be described here is too often the norm: One new teacher staffed the art program in the secondary school. There were few art supplies and on the first day of the quarter, 30 to 40 students appeared
each period to take their places in a room with 25 chairs. The teacher had a difficult time gaining control of the class, even long enough to call the roll. Students were loud, disengaged, disinterested, and generally unwilling to listen or to discuss the purpose of the class.

A teacher visit to the principal and to the guidance department was not successful in altering the numbers of students assigned to each class. The teacher knew that as long there was no place to require students to sit, there would be no order in the room. The best he could hope for is that some students would voluntarily drop the class.

When the chaos of the first week settled a bit, the teacher asked the students why they were enrolled in his classes. The answers were not what any teacher of any subject wants to hear. For the most part, the students said they “need another class.” He told them he was there to teach art and would not tolerate students doing homework from other subjects during the class. “This is all we ever do in here, man,” he was told. A few students really liked art, wanted to learn, and were discouraged by the conditions surrounding them.

It was clear that there was no respect for the subject of visual art from many students or from the administration and that supplies were not forthcoming since the money allocated for them had been spent on “more important things.” The teacher began to buy supplies from his paycheck in an attempt to survive and to teach those who really wanted to learn something about art. Over the course of the year, the new teacher found out that in that school the attitude about art education had historical precedence. Others told him that it would probably never be any better at this school. Art is and always has been the “dumping ground” they said. Meanwhile, the students being assigned to classes because they had no desire to select them themselves were failing in all their classes, not just art. They were remedial learners who could not read but were asked to spend more time each day reading, even though there was no concern that there may be a better way to teach them how. Disrespect for school and everything in it had been inculcated into students who literally had no proficiency in any symbol system. Rather than provide an opportunity to explore
ways to exploit the synthesis between verbal and visual modes of knowing, it was ignored—even eschewed.

Unfortunately, even though the novice teacher sought help from his former professors and tried many ways to correct what had begun poorly, including tutoring some of the art students in reading after school, he never received support from the administration. The students who began to become interested in the art class and who began to be allies of the teacher pleaded with him to stay in their school. However, the budget was cut the following year and the art program was cut as well. The teacher moved into a suburban middle school, still wondering whether he ever could have made a difference.

**Speculations**

For over two decades I have been in urban schools either in the capacity of researcher, teacher of art educators, or simply as an observer. In schools where the arts are valued and an integral part of the curriculum, I have seen fewer classroom management problems, better attendance, in some cases higher SAT scores, and often a more joyful learning environment. An article in the Boston Globe (Tench, 2001) included testimonies from students at the Boston Arts Academy, an urban high school. The school was founded in 1998 as a pilot school focused on the arts. Although many students’ test scores were still low, personal commitment toward education had risen dramatically among the attendees. “This school saved me,” said one student, “emotionally and mentally I’ve prospered” (p. B15). Another stated, “This school gave me confidence and assurance . . . now I have to polish my craft . . .” And yet another, who will go on to college to major in theater and minor in computer science, said “Acting is part of me. It just gratifies you in a way you can’t explain . . . but I want to be able to support myself financially” (p. B15). According to the headmaster, 97 percent of the graduating seniors attend college. She states, “For kids who were not considered college-bound, this is unbelievable” (p. B15). The arts cannot be the panacea for success for every student,
but I speculate that removing them from a meaningful status in every child's education is folly. My observations have been that in schools where the arts are de-emphasized, problems are rampant, and anger and hostility among students has strong presence.

I would speculate that urban learners, especially immigrant students, grow up and loosely partake in worlds they have had no say in creating. It often begins with transience, impermanence, and sometimes, bewilderment on the part of their parents as to what they must do to stay and survive in a new country. Parents who are undereducated often do not have literate command of their native languages, nor do they recognize the importance of literacy, of the educational system in the United States, and of how to help their children find success. Frequently, because of their own feelings of insecurity, parents remain powerless and voiceless about their children's education. The emphasis, therefore, is not placed on discovery, creativity, cultural enrichment, and other attributes of the arts, but rather on the "basics." But we know that just having command of the "basics" is not enough. An essential part of a child's development is a sense of joy about himself or herself and his or her existence in the world. Denial of experiences that show children that learning is not just digesting information breeds anger, hostility, and frustration among our urban learners in traditional settings. Including and valuing the arts in education fosters joy and understanding about one's cultural roots and the ways of the world. Concurrently, despite incomplete substantiation, I would speculate that learning in all academic areas can become connected and understanding can be increased through strong participation in the arts.

To new teachers, I would say become familiar with your "artist within" (London, 1989). Even though in the state of Massachusetts one can become a teacher without ever taking a college-level art class, it behooves those who believe that we have multiple ways of learning as well as multiple forms of expression to elect at least one studio art class in their college careers. Many of us are convinced at a very young age that making art requires a special talent and therefore view it as
peculiar to the few who clearly possess it. All children are born with the power of visual expression and all use it joyfully until it is replaced by written language. Teachers who learn that making art is not only a form of expression but is a thought process as well can successfully employ visual strategies that engage students actively in learning. There are many ways to teach and many ways to learn because we are not homogeneous, as standardized tests may imply. We succeed when our uniqueness, our idiosyncratic natures, our imaginations are active in knowledge acquisition. Visual arts are but one of the neglected ways to wake up the right brain in all of us. Students deserve the experience of synergistic responses to problem solving, and it does not occur through artificial means, such as coloring in the circles. It occurs, much like what takes place in the science lab, when students see something through their own lens clearly that was never there before. If new teachers—especially new teachers in urban settings—want to partake in excellence, if they want to help students to learn and succeed in school, then I would go so far as to say they must partake in the arts as well, first as a student for even one course, and then as teachers who understand the benefits for their students.

References


