

Using the Visual Arts for Learning: The Case of One Urban Charter School

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Introduction and Purpose

The value of the arts in children's learning is widely recognized (Buchelli, Goldberg, & Philips, 1991; Eisner, 2002 & 2003; Gallas, 1991; Greene, 1991). Art provides children opportunities to express themselves, communicate with others, and display their understandings and relationships with the world. Art allows children to construct and interpret ideas more freely than when using other symbolic systems, such as the alphabet or numbers systems. Coles (1995) explains the following:

"...with a few crayons or a paintbrush they can indicate what they see, what they consider important, and silently crosses their minds...willing to draw and sketch their sense of themselves, their hopes and fears; and just as important, willing and able afterwards to use their own artistic productions (or those of others, be they fellow students or distinguished artists) as a means of having a discussion, using words which otherwise would not have been forthcoming" (p. xii).

There are many pedagogical reasons to look closely at the arts as a means for stimulating and enhancing children's learning. The arts easily fit easily within Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences. According to Gardner the visual and performing arts are legitimate ways of learning and sharing one's knowledge about the world. Use of one intelligence, such as drawing, will open windows for other ways of thinking as well (Armstrong, 2000; Gardner, 1983). Methods of teaching art are characteristically student-centered and interactive. The notion of an artist's workshop has been widely and effectively applied to literacy (Atwell, 1998) and the other subject areas. Student centered classrooms, which workshops embody, are at the heart of Dewey's model of learning by doing. Workshop models of teaching are progressive and child-centered, and they are ones that educators have advocated for many years.

There is much anecdotal evidence of how the arts stimulate children's intellectual development and curiosity to learn. Contemporary film has celebrated the relationship between the performing arts and children's enthusiasm for learning as seen in *Fame* (1980), the story of a New York City High School specializing in the performing arts, *Mr. Holland's Opus* the narrative of a life-long high school music teacher in a rural school (1996), and *Music of the Heart* (1999) the compelling story of how an inner-city teacher challenges her elementary students to learn violin well enough to perform a concert at Carnegie Hall.

Yet, regardless of how positively art is viewed in the eyes of educators, it is usually one of the first subject areas to be eliminated from school curricula when school budgets are tightened. Eisner (2003) says that the arts have been "marginalized" to make room for core curricula, "...thus we legitimize inattention to the arts and imagination by putting them on the rim of education rather than at its core" (p.341).

In 1998 New York passed its charter school legislation. That legislation specified that schools receiving charters would serve students at risk, encourage innovation, create new professional opportunities for educators, and provide school choice for families (State University of New York, 1998). Since then New York has granted forty-five charters. These charters allow groups to operate schools with public funds but have fewer governmental regulations than regular public schools. The idea is that these schools will be able to experiment with innovative educational ideas because they have fewer regulations to follow.

In this paper I share findings from my study of one urban charter school that focuses on the academic achievement of low-income African American and Latino children. Although not a school for the arts, art has a prominent role in its curriculum. The school employs two full-time art teachers, and children participate in art for at least two hours a week. This study was guided by one specific question: How do the visual arts contribute to children's learning?

Method

This study took place over two years. Data collection strategies included participant observation, interviews with teachers, children, and parents, written questionnaires of teachers, and specimen records from the school's special events, its website, and classrooms. In the first year I collected data during fifty school visits. In the second year I collected data from observing in the art room for an additional ten times and supplemented the field notes with digital photographs of children and their work. Data gathering represented 60 hours of observation. After each observation I filled-in the hand-written field notes with contextual information, and the notes were typed. I categorized the field notes into behavioral observations and interpretative notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and developed an index of topics and issues from the data. This index proved invaluable in navigating through the 120 pages of typed notes written during the study.

The Charter School

This charter school is located in a small city in the northeastern United States. It serves 96 children from grades K-5 and uses multiage classroom groupings. All of the children are from high poverty, urban families, and ninety-five percent of the children are African American and Latino. There are two art and six classroom teachers, a full-time bilingual social worker and part-time reading, music, and Aikido teachers.

The school is technology rich, and the art teachers often used it in their lessons. All of the classrooms have four computers that are wired directly to the school's server and Internet. There are ten additional computers with Internet access in each of the 4/5 classrooms. The art room has eight laptop computers (iBooks) which the teachers frequently use for digital photography, movies, drawing programs, and animated video.

This charter school differs from the local school district's buildings in many ways: The charter school's classrooms are multiage with sixteen children to a room. Each classroom has one teacher and one teacher assistant. All of the teacher assistants are bilingual (Spanish/English). There are interns and practica students from local colleges in every

classroom. All children receive two hours of Spanish per week. Children study and practice Aikido (a martial art) and dance twice a week. The school day is nearly one hour longer than the regular public schools. All staff, including teachers and their teacher assistants, attend weekly after-school meeting to participate in collaborative decision-making.

Results

In this section I first compare and contrast children's classroom behaviors when in their regular classrooms and the artroom. That data illustrates how children can become fully engaged in art activities for extensive periods of time, even when they were often off-task and uninvolved in the regular academic subjects. Second, I describe how art requires children to think critically and use problem-solving skills. Art is not typically thought about in this way, but the data from this study illustrate how the teacher successfully involved children in critical thinking through art. Finally I share examples of how art integrates the subject areas. Several episodes from various lessons illustrate how content knowledge is used in children's artistic expression. All of this data is shared to support my argument that art is not simply supplemental to children's learning, but it is an integral part of children's thinking and learning about the world.

Comparing Children's Behaviors in Art and Other Subjects

There were many challenges during the school's first year of operation, and none of them was more difficult than teaching children self-discipline. By the end of September the children's behaviors improved in art but remained challenging through most of the year in the other classrooms.

All of the classroom teachers found the children, even the kindergarten and first graders, difficult to manage. Their attention was desultory, and most of their teachers' time during this first year was spent on classroom management and discipline. One of the classroom teachers wrote the following about the magnitude of this problem:

"My greatest challenge began on the first day of school and continued for several months. My plan book was full of wonderful plans, but they were useless at the time. My class was out of control and unable to concentrate on academic learning.

I had to switch gears and focus on encouraging classroom behaviors that would help the children become ready to learn. It was not an easy task, but with time, consistency, and patience it did happen. This was my greatest accomplishment!” (Marion’s response to written survey, 6-2-02).

There were many reasons for the problems the teachers encountered with children's behaviors. Families who sent their children to this school were dissatisfied with the traditional public schools. Many of their children also experienced difficulties in regular school settings. Some of the children acquired classroom behavioral difficulties, and many were labeled as special education. Almost all of the children had difficulty with learning to read and do mathematics.

Faculty and administration of the charter school were learning on their feet. The charter school’s administration was new to school management. Although they had extensive experience in after-school urban programs, they quickly learned that a full-time school operation is quite different and presented challenges that they had never encountered in part time programs. Most of the teachers very experienced teaching inner-city children, but they found that working with children in after-school programs, where most of the children are volunteers and the curriculum is none-threatening, is far different than teaching in a full-time compulsory education program.

The 4th and 5th graders presented great challenges for the teachers. These students had already acquired negative attitudes and perceptions about schooling and their own capabilities to learn. Their behaviors were so difficult that one of the 4/5 teachers resigned after the first month of school. The 4th and 5th graders presented the younger children in the school with a poor model of conduct, and they may have contributed to the nearly yearlong effort to improve children's behaviors so learning could take place throughout the school.

Initially, children were inattentive and disruptive in art, too. When discussing children’s self-portraits that were completed in September of the first year and displayed in the first

floor hallway, Sally revealed her exasperation, “There were painful to do” (October 2, 2002 observational notes). She said the self-portraits were the first art projects of the year, and she thought that maybe this project was “too reflective” for them to do in September. Sally wondered why the children “disliked art so much” because she said children usually like art.

In early October there were noticeable differences in children’s classroom behaviors in art than in the other subject areas. In art the children were actively doing things. They were painting, drawing, working with clay, drawing on the IBooks, and interacting with one another. Children sensed that there was no one way to draw, paint, or mold clay – all of their artistic efforts would be valued by the art teachers. But in the regular classrooms the same children displayed behaviors of avoidance and resistance, and most of their teachers' time was spent on managing rather than teaching. No matter how much the classroom teachers encouraged the children to give something a try and not worry about being right or wrong, children refused to take risks at learning. They wanted to spell conventionally and not inventively; they wanted the “right“ answer in math and not an approximation. Consequently, throughout the first half of the year and well into the spring, children’s behaviors remained the major challenge for the classroom.

There were practical reasons why children’s behaviors improved so quickly in art and not in their regular classrooms. Its class size was only half of that in the regular classroom. By the third week of the school year the teachers realized that 16 children in art were too many for the small space, varied equipment, and hands-on activities that would be taking place (September 24, 2002 observational notes). So the classroom teachers agreed to send only half of their children to art and keep the other half in the classroom with them. Although this meant the loss of their preparation time, the classroom teachers felt it was well worth it because they were having so many management problems that having half of the children made it much easier for them to accomplish what they wanted to teach. At the same time the art teacher liked the small class size because this allowed her to better manage children during art activities that included many varied supplies and materials.

Technology was widely used in art, and children were as likely to use a computer when in art as a drawing pencil or paintbrush. They used digital cameras, IBooks, digital movies, scanners, and a variety of computerized programs such as MacDraw and MS Word. All of this technology fit naturally with the art projects, and children treated the equipment carefully, eagerly using it whenever the teacher asked. A lesson from March 2002 is a good illustration of children's willingness to use technology:

Sally had taken digital photos of the 4-5 children's art projects of making paper from raw materials. She installed photographs of the children onto the desktops of the Ibooks, and she told the children that they needed to insert the photograph into their Word documents. The children were to double-click on each of the photos on their desktop and decide which one they were to use in their document. They easily opened each of the photos, but some had trouble inserting the ones they wanted into their word file. The other art teacher and the teacher assistant all helped the children complete the task. Instead of becoming frustrated with it, they stayed with the task until it was successfully completed. One boy, Kamari, wrote the following text about a photo of children smashing ingredients:

“Hi, my name is Kamari and I will be telling you how our class made paper. First my class smashed pulp and made the kind of die. After we made the die we put the pulp into the die. Sally gave us a certain kind of paper. We put paper in the die and kept it. Then we pullet it out and we had real paper.” (Observational notes March 19, 2002).

The children quickly learned to become engaged in learning art. They learned by doing, and teacher presentation was usually at a minimum. The art activities allowed for a wide range of performance, and children realized that they could not be wrong in art. After all, who can say what made something beautiful or appealing? But the children felt vulnerable in their other subjects, and they chose to avoid taking risks at learning and thereby exposing what they had not learned.

Art Stimulates Critical Thinking

Art lessons required children to use high level thinking skills which has been found to be an important quality of effective instruction in other urban schools serving high poverty children (Knapp, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, & Peterson, 2002). Art offered children opportunities to express themselves freely, experiment with ideas, and have choice in their learning and forms of expression. The art teachers placed children in hands-on learning activities the moment they entered the room. Most of the art lessons, regardless of whether they involved painting, clay, or technology, consisted of children learning by doing. The art projects represented authentic learning experiences because children shared their work with one another and often with outside guests such as their families, visitors to the school, and displays at the city's museum.

The art teachers integrated technology throughout their lessons. In one lesson, for example, the art teacher, Sally, asked children to draw a map of their lives. Eight of the 4-5 children sat attentively at one of the art tables as Sally explained the assignment (March 21, 2002). She asked them to draw, "The past, present, and future." "I want you to show the direction of your life, because each of you have a wonderful life." Then hugging one boy sitting near her, she said, "We all have some things that are bad, and some things that are good - I know you are having some bad things right now." She told the children to open the cover of their lap top computers and double-click the icon for the drawing program that appeared on their screens. The children were comfortable with the task, and they immediately began experimenting with the drawing program by using with the colors and drawing instruments that appeared on the toolbar. Children enjoyed changing the background colors of their file, and they worked quietly and attentively on this project.

Most art lessons began with a mini-lesson, and during each children were often asked to problem solve, brainstorm, compare and contrast artwork. In the lesson that follows (Observational notes: March 12, 2003) Sally begins by asking children about a Van Gogh painting: "What kind of weather does this (painting on wall) look like?" One of the children says, "Windy day!" Then Sally asks the children to look at a painting that she

had taped to the wall. “Now take a look at this painting and what do you see?” One boy asks, “A tornado might be coming?” Jose says, “It is getting dark.” Sally then pointed to a third painting she had on the wall. “There is another kind of natural disaster, and it is called a draught.” I thought this might be a good draught picture.” “How does the sky look in this picture?” she asked. One boy says, “It looks hot!” Sally responded, “Yes, it does look like a hot, hot day.” She asked India, “What kind of day is this?” as Sally pointed to the earlier picture. India replied, “It is a rainy day!” Nigeria, what do you think?” Nigeria said, “It is rainy.” Sally then took a book with storm photographs and showed it to the children. She asked them to compare photographs, “Which picture is a bigger storm? ...This could be a hurricane picture,” Sally told the children. Then she explained today’s activities:

So this is what we will do today. We will do a storm painting...I’m looking for important things in this assignment. I don’t want to see a nice blue sky...I want you to mix colors today, and I don’t want to see nice blue skies. A lot of you have trees (in your pictures). How are they going to look?

One boy says, “They will be bent!” “Yes” Sally says, “From the wind.” Sally said she would grade them on one feature of their drawing, “The sky in these paintings goes right down to the ground,” as she pointed to each of the pictures on the board. “It is a horizontal line.” “Who can tell me that word?” Sally asked her children.

So in the lesson about storms Sally asked the children to think critically about art. She had pointed out features in other people's work, and reminded them what she wanted to see in their work. The lesson illustrated that art is much more than basic enjoyment and response. Art involves critical thinking, and the teachers made extensive use of it throughout their lessons. The final part of her lesson required the children to draw their own storm. Figure I illustrates one of child's work from this lesson.

Art Helps Children Learn the Content Areas

Sally integrated the content areas into her art lessons. A lesson that illustrates this took place in the following way (April 16, 2003). Sally wrote the word, "Gardens" on chart

paper so all the children could see it. "We are going to make collages of gardens today...I don't like to draw when I do collages, I like to rip and crumple!" she explained. Then she said, "I want you to think of the whole garden." She asked them what they thought about when they thought of gardens, and the children brainstormed a variety of words: "roots, seeds, worms, snakes." As they brainstormed the words, Pam drew a daffodil onto the chart paper. "Has anyone seen those yellow flowers that are coming-out right now?" And several children said they had. Pam continued, "I want you to think of what is below the ground...What else is in the garden?" One girl said, "Ladybugs," and Pam said, "Yes, that's very important." What else is really important that flies around your garden?" Children said "bees," and "butterflies." Then she broke-off a red flower from a cactus plant in the room and showed it to the children. She identified its parts and named each, "The pollen see, pistol, and aphids on it." Then she placed a collage onto the chart paper that she had made. "You will all have scissors, glue, blue paper, and torn brown paper" to make your own. And the children began working on their own flower collages.

The art lesson resembled a science lesson in which the teacher activates the children's prior knowledge about flowers. She pulled information from them, integrates vocabulary, and modeled what she would like them to do. Most of the lesson time was spent with children actively constructing their own flower collages. By participating in this art lesson children learned vocabulary about flowers, and they displayed their knowledge by constructing a collage.

In spring of the first year the entire school participated in a thematic folktale unit, "Mi Casa es Su Casa." This unit required children to learn cultural knowledge about Puerto Rico. The art teacher planned a variety appropriate for the children's ages: Selena taught the K-1 children how to make paper mache masks that were modeled from a rural Puerto Rican art tradition. After the paper mache masks were constructed, the children painted them in bright primary colors. Small designs were added to them. Children from grades 2-3 constructed dioramas from Caribbean folktales that Sally read to them. One of the books containing Caribbean folktales was by Nicolasa Mohr, a well-known Latina author of children's literature. Another book was about the native Taino people of the Caribbean.

Each diorama was made of cardboard and triangular in shape. Its walls were two feet high and were painted in bright primary colors. The dioramas contained various shapes and designs pertaining to the folktale. Children from grades 4-5 children made clay “coil pots” that they shaped, baked; and glazed. These coil pots followed a tradition of clay pot making that is only found in Puerto Rico. All three of these projects (masks, dioramas, and clay pots) illustrated how the teachers used art to help children learn about the culture and life of Puerto Rico.

The art lessons sometimes related to the language arts. Story structure is a well-known and frequently used strategy for retelling and writing stories (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). In this less lesson (Observational notes, March 20, 2003) Sally required the children to use their knowledge of story structure to construct a story about storms. The lesson began with Sally showing the children a storyboard that she had previously drawn. The storyboard had six sectional squares that she had made by folding a large piece of white construction paper. Her storyboard was missing a drawing for the last frame. She asked the children to predict what might go into it and asked them many questions about it. Then she told the children that their project would be to select any natural disaster and tell a story about it. The children needed to use a storyboard and begin with a “nice day.” She told the children that hurricanes usually happen in the fall and floods often take place in the spring. “I want you to pick a natural disaster...you need to show me the story... what happens first, second, and third,” she explained.

Another lesson illustrates the content knowledge children acquire from art lessons. On this day the children would be constructing a collage of a garden by using various materials she had provided for them. “I don’t like to draw when I do collages, I like to rip and crumple!” she said as she demonstrated how they were to select items and form them into shapes for their work. She asked the children what came to their minds when they thought about gardens. The children then brainstormed the words “roots, seeds, worms, and snakes.” As they predicted, Sally drew a flower onto chart paper. She asked, “Has anyone seen these yellow flowers that are coming out right now?” “Yes?...they’re daffodils.” “I want you to think about what is below the ground?” she said. One girl asks,

“Ladybugs?” Sally responded, “Yes, they’re very important...they eat aphids.” “What else is really important that flies around the garden?” One child answered, “bees,” and another said, “butterflies.” Then Sally pulled a red flower from the classroom cactus plant. She discussed its parts and used the words pollen, seed, and pistil. Finally, she said, “You will all have scissors, glue, blue paper, and torn brown paper...you will go shopping (to the other side of the room) to get paper you would like to use.”

Discussion

Forty-five years ago when I attended parish school in New Jersey I had art every week. Although my classes were large, sometimes with 48 children in a single classroom, I always looked forward to it. I still remember one of my art lessons: The teacher distributed white drawing paper to all of us. Then standing at the chalkboard she drew a horizontal line about 1/3 up from the bottom of the page. She checked to make sure we had all drawn the same line in same place on our papers. Next she drew the outline of a tree, and again checked that we also drew the same tree on the same spot on our papers. Then she drew a fence that ran across the page. She drew a pumpkin alongside the tree and monitored whether we all had also drawn ours. Finally, she told us to color our pumpkins orange, the tree green, the fence brown, the grass green, and the sky blue. Of course, my art experiences were quite different from the art lessons described in this paper. The children in the charter school were not required to copy or imitate the teacher, instead they used art to think critically and problem solve issues related to shape, texture, and color.

This study examined how the visual arts contributed to children's learning. The teacher in this study used art so that children could express themselves, communicate with others, and think critical thinking about the world. The elementary subject areas and technology were integrated throughout their art lessons. A remarkable part of the learning that took place in art was that these were the same children who were unsuccessful in regular public schools and who were also displaying so many difficulties when in their classrooms. Art activities did not make them feel vulnerable but provided them with countless ways for thinking about and expressing their ideas. The art lessons in these

classes encouraged children to learn by doing. The art lessons naturally integrated the elementary content areas so that children used their knowledge about science, culture, and narrative in their artwork.

My findings indicate that art should not be viewed as supplemental to children's learning. It can be used to introduce new concepts and vocabulary. It can reinforce and extend what children have learned in the other subject areas. Art may provide learning opportunities for children who have only faced academic challenges in curricula that emphasize the alphabetic and numeric symbol systems.

Art instruction in this study relates to the arguments of Ladson-Billings' (1994) and Gay's (2000) concepts of culturally responsive teaching. Art offered children opportunities to freely express themselves as they drew, painted, and shaped figures in real life, paper, and computer screens. Teachers viewed knowledge as changeable and interpretative, allowing children to use their own cultural lenses to construct and share their knowledge of the world. Teachers encouraged children to learn collaboratively, and they celebrated children's efforts, regardless of performance level.

The educational context of this study was that of a charter school serving children from high poverty urban areas. My data demonstrates that children become engaged in their learning when they can express themselves and do so without fear of being wrong. The art activities in this study required high level thinking skills, and this is precisely the same argument that Knapp (1995), Taylor, Pearson, and Paterson (2002) and others (Levin, 1987) have made about teaching in urban areas - challenging learning activities foster learning far more than low-level skill instruction. That is, instead of reducing the curricula to literal understandings, the reverse should happen - involve children in problem-solving and critical thinking activities. Such lessons are more likely to be compelling invitations for learning than those that emphasize literal and basic skills that are so often found in inner-city classrooms.

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