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## Generative Tensions: Arts-Based Thinking in Education

### Abstract

Curriculum theory in arts education raises significant questions regarding our expectations of excellence in general education. Using an arts-based research methodology of portraiture, Davis identifies four tensions within arts education that generate new approaches to curricula. The book advocates that children should have multiple opportunities to experience varied arts learning approaches both in and out of school. The curricular discussion also provides a framework for the evaluation of arts programs. The review author suggests that Davis's multiple tensions can be subsumed as part of one overarching tension between nonsymbolic qualitative thinking (organizing relationships of sensory qualities into coherent felt meaning) and symbolic thinking (ordering visual, linguistic, and mathematical symbols into reasoned expression), which together form the basis for arts-based thinking. Two additional curricular tensions that Davis mentions are also further explored. Davis's argument reveals problems with contemporary standards-driven arts education. The review author suggests that this points to arts-based thinking as an important aim for arts education.

Books and articles that make the case for the value of the arts in education are often framed in the authority of scholarly language. The literature, from the monographs produced by the Getty Education Institute for the Arts (e.g. Broudy, 1987) to the recent publications by the Arts Education Partnership (e.g. Fiske, 1999), all convey gravitas. The arts are not playtime; they are part of the serious business of schools.

Jessica Hoffman Davis's new book, *Framing Education as Art: The Octopus Has a Good Day*, approaches the issue from a different tack. Certainly, as the former director of Harvard's Arts in Education Program, a noted researcher at Project Zero, and the co-author of a major methodology book on arts-based research, Davis brings considerable background knowledge to her text. However, she is careful in how she impresses the reader with her intellectual capital. Starting with the disarming subtitle to her book and continuing with her unfolding argument through the sequence of chapters, Davis is striving to put the reader at ease. After all, what she is arguing for in the text is maintaining the spirit of the child in education. For Davis, that spirit is inherently inquisitive and ready to see the world as a place of wonder. That our children do not behave this way in schools is an indication of how successfully our educational system strips these qualities from their lives. Davis contends that sustaining and nurturing this spirit is a critical function of the arts in education and ultimately in helping all children understand that education is not a series of hurdles to be completed, but a life-long journey of discovery.

While she is an unabashed supporter of arts education, Davis structures her book around four enduring problems—which she calls generative tensions—that, over time, have proven contentious in how arts education is taught both in and out of schools. These four tensions center on concepts of (1) the artistic process, the tension between thinking and feeling; (2) the child as artist, the tension between the romantic view of childhood as intuitive versus the hard work of schools to develop skills in symbol processing; (3) the arts in education in school, the tension between nonjudgmental celebration of creativity and accountability for learning outcomes; and (4) arts in education in the community, the tension between powerful cultural institutions, which demand culturally sophisticated appreciative audiences, and community arts organizations that offer creative opportunities as a positive channeling of leisure time. As one may quickly infer, these four tensions are interwoven. Arguably, they are reiterative of the tension between qualitative, somatic reasoning and symbolic thinking (Eisner, 2002). More simply, they represent the tension between nonsymbolic thinking (organizing relationships of sensory qualities into coherent felt meaning) and symbolic thinking (ordering visual, linguistic, and mathematical symbols into reasoned expression), which together form the basis for arts-based thinking. Thus, one could suggest that Davis's book is an exploration of arts-based thinking and is making the case that it is not simply a form of thought to be taught alongside other types of symbol processing, but that it is an essential form of thinking in which symbol processing is embedded. To suggest that all of education should be reframed as art infers that the development of profound symbol processing skills needs to take place within the context of arts-based thinking.

Tension is an important concept for Davis—one worth pausing to examine. In a different context, Eisner (2005) has reflected on tensions in educational research. He associates the term with Dewey's concept of "disequilibrium": an attraction to two incompatible values stirred by the vague sense that neither pole is entirely right, which creates a need for further inquiry. Davis uses the word tension in this same sense. She calls a generative tension the pull of two competing poles that makes one aware of the merits of both sides, thereby engendering a type of turmoil that does not need to be resolved.

According to Davis, a generative tension is a kind of continuing mystery that keeps us on our toes and doesn't allow us to slide into complacency. A generative tension continually pulls us forward into inquiry because the questions that it raises are never ultimately resolved; the inquiry simply generates more sophisticated questions. There are never answers, just better questions (Eisner, 1991).

Appropriately, *Framing Education as Art* raises more questions than it answers. It doesn't accept the status quo. It doesn't settle for easy, formulaic solutions. Davis's overarching premise is that the multifaceted problems surrounding the teaching of the arts pertain to all of education. Just as we acknowledge complex forms of instruction in the arts, we should also expect complex modes of instruction in general education.

At a time when politicians profess to know what works educationally and scientific research is claimed to provide clear evidence of best practices (National Research Council, 2002), Davis intelligently uses the arts as a lens through which to scrutinize what constitutes quality teaching and learning. While current educational policy may provide sophisticated methods for scoring student performance, she asks if these scores can be equated with learning. Is training children to perform well on standardized tests the same as teaching? To demonstrate the difference, she uses a child's performance in a variety of arts experiences as examples of authentic learning and teaching.

As her subtitle suggests, this is not going to be a stuffy academic tome.<sup>1</sup> She writes with the intimate voice of a concerned parent speaking to peers, who are seeking the best for their child. She does not presuppose an extensive body of artistic knowledge on the part of the reader. Instead, her tone is reminiscent of a thoughtful chat one might have with a friend over coffee. Throughout, her voice is an appealing aspect of the text. Her writing tries to communicate successfully with her audience and does so admirably.

Utilizing an arts-based research methodology, she weaves fiction and narratives together with psychological and ethnographic evidence to carry the reader into classrooms and the creative processes of children. Her methodology allows her to look at intrinsic satisfactions a child may have through arts experience, as well as the opportunities these experiences provide for further intellectual growth. As is the case with her subtitle, she frames these experiences through the eyes of a child. Toward the end, you can sense her gently asking the reader, "Isn't that the kind of learning we want for our children?" Her examples are so compelling that the answer to this question is, of course, yes.

The book traverses educational alternatives that parents might explore to guide their child through arts experiences. That parents need to be so active to secure these creative opportunities for their children leads to the question, why have we constructed our educational systems so that experiences of intrinsic satisfaction and meaningful personal growth have been relegated to the arts alone? Why are the arts marginalized in our schools and increasingly seen as an after school activity? Do we not want these values infused into all of education? Accordingly, this book becomes a useful tool for concerned parents heading off to a school board meeting or a conference with a principal about the educational opportunities available for their child. It also serves as a practical guide for evaluating the art programs offered in local schools or through other community resources.

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<sup>1</sup> The subtitle was suggested by her four year-old grandson who told her that "generative tensions" was not an interesting title for a book about children's experiences in the arts—he suggested something catchy like the octopus has a good day. This is an example of the spirit of invention that Davis prizes in education.

However, the book is not about how the arts should be taught. It is concerned with the enduring outcomes we envision for curriculum in general. It does so by challenging facile assumptions as to what constitutes educational excellence (like performance on standardized test scores). In short, it addresses the issue, as Eisner (1998b) phrases it, of the kinds of schools we need.

Thus, Davis offers an introduction to curriculum theory (a keyword that does not show up on the Library of Congress entry for the book). If the book were to be used as a text in preservice teacher training, it would be a better fit for a foundation of education than a methods class. Even so, it is important to note that Davis's vision of education encompasses more than just what goes on in school. Like Dewey, Davis equates education with personal growth, and opportunities for growth exist in all facets of life. Therefore, she sees education as the sum of all the opportunities that occur in school, at home, and throughout the community.

Taking this broad view of education, Davis's purpose is to change the debate about the role of the arts in education to a discussion of how the arts serve as a template for all of education. She wants to bypass discussions of how the arts contribute to mastery of academic skills (Deasy, 2002). Instead, she argues we should be talking about how the arts model methods of engaging students in complex problem solving and how we can emulate these throughout education. This makes *Framing Education as Art* a subversive work.

However, Davis is a gentle subversive. Even though she believes the arts are powerful educational tools, she does not advocate any particular curricular approach to arts education. Different approaches to arts curriculum are valuable as each offers a different resolution to the generative tensions of the field. She doesn't want to argue for the superiority of one approach over the other. Rather, she advocates that if our vision is broad enough to appreciate the full array of practice in teaching the arts, we can achieve a better understanding of the distinctive learning opportunities each curriculum approach offers. If the practitioners within particular curriculum structures were not so hermetic and became aware of alternative learning outcomes offered through other models, new and effective forms of practice built on cross-pollination might emerge. In this way, permutations of curriculum within the field of arts education are infinite. Davis is skeptical of approaches to arts education in which advocates become so convinced of a single best way that arts curriculum becomes cloistered and stultified.

Throughout the book, Davis tackles weighty philosophical, psychological, aesthetic, and curricular issues. She demonstrates an agile command of the recent literature surrounding the arts in education and does a formidable job of explaining the intellectual traditions that have shaped Harvard's Project Zero, with which she has been associated. Her short walk through the philosophy of Project Zero's founder, Nelson Goodman, is impressively lucid. She contextualizes the work of Howard Gardner, showing how Gardner's ideas about education in the arts parallel and differ from Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) and the state content standards in the fine arts that have been fostered by DBAE.

Within these discussions, however, other tensions are present. Davis touches on at least two that deserve greater attention: 1) the tension in meanings inscribed by the artist and the audience and 2) the tension in who is ideally qualified to teach the arts—the credentialed arts educator or the professional artist. Both of these tensions more fully illuminate the central tension that I suggest runs throughout *Framing Education as Art*, the tension between nonsymbolic and symbolic thinking.

## Tensions within forms of inscription

For Davis, inscription—investing a work with meaning—is always an act of interpretation. Within the philosophical tradition that Davis uses, meaning is conveyed through the manipulation of symbol systems. Obviously, artists do not generally write outlines or construct diagrams of symbolic coded meaning before they start to work; meaning is something that emerges during the creation of the form or after its making is done. There may be preliminary sketches from which a work is launched, but these do not replace the direct experiential discoveries that occur during the physical production of the form.

Therefore, Davis wants to claim an area of artistic engagement, of direct feelingful involvement, that is separate from the production of meaning. She uses terms like expressive and aesthetic to refer to this realm. To support this claim she cites comments by Keith Haring and Pablo Picasso, both of whom professed to have no idea about what a work meant until after they were finished with it. If we take these artists at their word, they were not consciously expressing a meaning while engaged in making the work—they were working in a pure realm of intuition and expression. The meaning was inscribed after the work was completed. The vast majority of artists, working in all media, would probably attest to such an explanation of the creative process.

If one accepts the construct that art is made in uncritical direct response to sensory impression, then children, as Picasso infers, are closest to authentic art making—and inscription is an adult activity. Therefore, Davis sees the developmental growth of children, and the predictable abandonment of the early expressionist styles, as a repudiation of natural artistry that can only be counterbalanced through art education that aims to restore artistry (feeling) after the acquisition of inscription skills (thinking).

But the theoretical argument, which distinguishes feeling and thinking, is based on the philosophical proposition that thinking only occurs through the manipulation of symbols. It follows, from this proposition, if artists cannot articulate how they are manipulating symbols as they work, then artists are not thinking. According to Davis, this is evidence of working in a non-thinking, feelingful realm of direct experience. That artists support this construct is simply an indication of how pervasively our culture has dichotomized thinking and mindful attention to sensory qualities. But while this is a dominant cultural view, it is by no means a settled issue.

Both contemporary philosophers (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) and neuroscientists (Damasio, 2003) contest equating thinking to symbol manipulation (although cognition *is* defined as the manipulation of symbols [Gove, 1993]). Furthermore, this is a longstanding dispute. Immanuel Kant's 18th century treatise on reason (1781/1929) argued the feelingful experience of a moment was a conscious presymbolic construction of meaning. Heidegger (1936/1971) attributed the origins of this idea to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. The point here is, that for a very long time, we have debated reducing thinking to symbol processing. Dewey (1934/1989) called the nonsymbolic construction of meaning as thinking in the relationship of qualities. Eisner (2002) refers to somatic knowledge, which is achieved through qualitative reasoning.

In brief, nonsymbolic thinking is achieved through the purposeful ordering and rearranging of sensory and emotional qualities (Eisner, 1994). The recognition of these felt relationships is what Dewey (1934/1989) meant as the *experience* of the work of art. Cognitive philosophy and science (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Damasio, 2003) validates emotional

understanding—knowing in the bones, the sensory recognition of relationships within a specific context, or somatic knowledge. The new scientific construction of thinking is not limited to the abstract manipulation of symbols—whether they are words, numbers, or images. The scientific evidence suggests nonsymbolic thinking envelops and contextualizes symbolic processing.

Arguably, nonsymbolic, qualitative thinking is present in all works of art. One could contend that what makes a work successful—be it a late Titian or a prized family quilt—is the symbiotic relationship, within the work, between nonsymbolic and symbolic thinking. This could be recognized in the nonsymbolic, scumbled layering of paint that supports an allegory within a Titian or the precision of stitchery in a quilt that supports a pieced geometric pattern. However, it is often easier to first recognize nonsymbolic thinking in art styles where relationships of qualities are the focus of the composition and attention to symbolic thinking is diminished (e.g. Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism).

Artists working in nonsymbolic, nonobjective styles (as distinguished from symbolic, abstract styles) consciously manipulate relationships of qualities to construct meanings (albeit the artist probably does not have the symbolic skills in processing language to interpret what he or she is doing). Even if the artist cannot articulate an interpretation in words, meaning is nevertheless inscribed, and it is not open to an interpretive free-for-all (Siegesmund, 2004). Children's art is often a manipulation of nonsymbolic visual qualities. However, unlike nonobjective artists, children lack the concentration to sustain a disciplined course of inquiry. The difference here is more than simple skills acquisition. It takes more than *techné* to conduct visual research (although technical skills certainly facilitate such a task). Thus, our exclusion of children's (and adolescents') work from museums is not a prejudice against the abilities of young people. It is recognition that visual inquiry is a rigorous enterprise—the melding of nonsymbolic and symbolic thinking—that human beings do not seem to be able to master, until at least their early twenties<sup>2</sup>. This is a higher order thinking skill distinct from the mastery of craft.

### **The tension of social and individual inscription**

By moving easily between arts in schools and arts in the community, between Sunday painters at the beach and the highest forms of Western cultural achievement, Davis weaves the conversation of arts education in new patterns. She links separate worlds of arts education, which are often isolated and self-absorbed (educators working in public schools or museums, professional artists offering private lessons in their homes or in recreational community centers) and helps us to see them as a whole—even if that whole is somewhat dysfunctional. In doing so, she maps out curricular issues within a robust, comprehensive vision of arts education. In particular, Davis demonstrates that through study in the arts students engage in a highly individualized type of learning. The knotty question that lies underneath this point is: What makes artistic activity educationally compelling? Culturally,

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<sup>2</sup> It appears that children are capable of articulating accomplished levels of nonsymbolic thinking through music, dance, and drama. However, these artistic forms accept intense one-on-one adult-student guidance—a form of pedagogy normally not associated with institutional instruction in the visual arts. The deep adult involvement with the child's performance can make it difficult to distinguish the child's achievement from the influence of the coach.

what is invested in our concepts of the products and processes of the arts that make their study educationally significant? Beyond the fact that the arts are of interest to the individual child, what social significance do we attach to their study that would persuade us that they belong in institutional curricula?

From a cultural viewpoint, the arts embody values. While artworks may initially be the product of a single individual, they take on social importance when they are perceived as resonating with moral, ethical, and philosophic meaning. These values may be imbedded through the symbolic or nonsymbolic consciousness of the artist. Or, viewers may project (inscribe) their own values onto the work. Between these two methods of inscription, the viewer's role is clearer. The viewer sees a work of art, says this is how it makes me feel, this is what I think it means.

However, once the door opens to the possibility that the artist has inscribed work with meanings that he/she intended but could not articulate in words, then the task of interpretation becomes a thornier proposition. There are meanings that are both inherent in the work and in how it functions in society. It is not uncommon for these two kinds of interpretations to diverge. Why that should be so is an indication of the multiple social and psychological functions that can be served by a single work of art.

Teaching the arts within an institutional (i.e. cultural) setting inherently means teaching values—either the values that the artist intended or the values that society has now inscribed in the works. Teaching always requires decisions about what values will be explicitly or implicitly taught and what values will be neglected. Through a variety of means (membership, patronage, government support, favorable or unfavorable press coverage), institutions are rewarded or penalized for the values they teach. Thereby, teaching, and especially teaching in the arts, becomes a political process. Cultural institutions can be attentive to a wide variety of cultural phenomena as they select objects around which educational curricula might be constructed. Thus, the meanings that an artist has inscribed in his/her work may be the least important factor in determining a pedagogical strategy.

For example, works of art become commodities, and, as such, they are given financial valuations. These valuations can rise and fall. Like the market, valuations can also be subject to manipulation. In a capitalist society, an object that maintains a high monetary valuation over time is greatly esteemed. There is no inherent worth in a high valuation, just as there is no inherent worth in being a celebrity. It is simply a social phenomenon.

Museums record social phenomena. Being an object of societal esteem, an artifact of a social phenomenon, is reason enough for including an object into a museum. By simply commanding a high rate of monetary exchange, it is now an artifact of society's values. There are numerous reasons, aside from the *artistry* of the work itself (as Davis uses the term), for why an object takes on values worthy of art museum status.

Consider a work like *Dream* (Gilbert and George, 1984), which belongs to the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The museum's web page describes this work as appropriating Christian iconography to "synthesize religious, popular-culture, and high-art motifs" (Avgikos, n.d.). The work also happens to be about Gilbert and George's personal obsession with pedophilia. Here is a case where the meaning inscribed in the work by the artist is not publicly acknowledged (although visually it's difficult to miss). It is a bit like the wizard's admonition to Dorothy: "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939). In this case, the Guggenheim is the wizard that wants us to attend to other meanings, which it finds significant. Listen to what you are told, the Guggenheim wizard intones, do not believe what you see.

Gilbert and George exemplify the ironic turn in artistry that has been central (although not unique) to artmaking over the past forty years. This double-sided irony (for example, the gorgeous adulation of underage sex in the Gilbert and George) renders problematic Davis's main assumption regarding artistry: that a canonized work of art—for example, anything produced at Lincoln Center or collected by the Guggenheim Museum—has transparent educational value.

### **The tension of artistry**

In the simplest terms, artistry is what an individual might do that prompts us to give this person the title of artist. Artistry is not a prescribed set of technical competencies, but it is the recognition of a gestalt that transforms a performance into something more than the sum of its parts. That performance could happen on a public stage during a concert or in the private space of a home kitchen in the preparation of a meal. Educationally, the issue of artistry divides on whether one should teach technique (which only a small portion of the population may master) or teach the appreciation of the technique, an approach open to more people. More people can learn to appreciate a Bach violin concerto than can play one; more people can appreciate a well-crafted meal than can prepare one. Maxine Greene (2001) is perhaps the leading advocate of aesthetic education, which focuses on the personal experience that is had in the presence of great art as opposed to the *techné* focus of arts education. Greene goes so far as to advocate that pedagogy and curriculum in arts education get in the way of the pure experience of art (Matthews & Uhrmacher, 2005). In her view, the educational value of the arts is to allow the child to be exposed to artistry of the highest order. Greene wants children to see unadulterated artistry. By simply seeing the art form, the child will nonlinguistically be able to feel the nonsymbolic meaning inscribed in the work.

So where does an educator turn to find artistry? Adherents to the cultural exemplar model of arts education would point to work that is mounted in the temples of culture such as the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, or the Museum of Modern Art. In *Framing Education as Art*, Davis uses the work of Andy Warhol as a model of artistry. In this example, she relates an incident at a major retrospective of Warhol's work at the Museum of Modern Art as emblematic of the lack of appreciation for artistry in the general public. She overhears viewers of Warhol's soup can paintings questioning why such things should be considered art. They are poor replicas of what one can find in a supermarket—the store display looks better than the paintings. Davis expresses astonishment that these viewers can be so numb to the artistry in Warhol's work and fail to understand his inspirational message that art is everywhere around us. Anything can be transformed into art.

But is Warhol's soup can a work of artistry—at least in the way that Davis or Greene may use the term? After all, Warhol is famous because he defied conventions of artistry. Artistry as it is popularly conceived is a process through which value is added. However, Warhol's ambition was to create an artistic null, a naught (Danto, 1997). He was interested in a subtractive process that would take value away. Warhol wanted to create nothing. He succeeded; that's why he is famous.

If visitors to the Museum of Modern Art, confronting a Warhol, declare the painting to be nothing, perhaps this demonstrates they recognize the absence of artistry in Warhol's work. They can viscerally feel Warhol's subtractive achievement. The bewilderment is more a question of why an esteemed institution like the Museum of Modern Art would exhibit such a work. This is not a failure of the visual recognition of artistry as much as it is a failure to understand postmodern literary theory. Why would a contemporary museum celebrate nothingness?



However, more troubling is Davis's assertion that the artistry in Warhol's works shows us that art can be anything. This is a meaning that Davis and others are inscribing into the work that is in opposition to Warhol's intent to demonstrate art is nothing. Moreover, Warhol sought to reveal that what we *wanted* was nothing. We desire the *horror vacui*. This is an insidious, oxymoronic nihilism. In fact, the organizing museums of this particular Warhol exhibition were criticized for attempting to tone down the ferociousness of Warhol's decadence (Cotter, 2002). The artist's inscribed meaning did not fit museum desires to package Andy Warhol as cultural superstar.

This reinscription is also evident in a children's book written by Warhol's nephew on his memories of visiting Warhol's studio in New York City (Warhola, 2003). The message of the book is art can be anything. Furthermore, being an artist means doing funny things like wearing wigs. This approach fits within Davis's contention that children are inquisitive and see the world as a place of wonder. This may be so, but it's a potentially miseducative use of Warhol. To attempt to mediate this problem by claiming that children will not see the dark side of Warhol if we do not tell them about it, denies the nonsymbolic, somatic meaning that Warhol inscribed in his images. To suggest that children won't see and feel the nihilism of this work, unless we give them the words to articulate it, belittles the intelligence that arts education claims to foster. These paintings are iconic because they communicate. The kids are going to get it.

Children demonstrate skill in visual nonsymbolic intelligence. As an example, when I served as deputy director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I would sometimes trail the docent tours of fourth graders through the permanent collection galleries. One of the regular stops was Jeff Koons's *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988). The docent would invariably begin by talking about how beautiful the piece was, pointing out the rich tones of white porcelain and gold leaf—the largest porcelain sculpture in the world. The sculpture depicts the "king of pop," the beloved rock star lounging with his darling pet monkey Bubbles in his lap. They are dressed in matching suits with brocaded vests. Creating the piece required meticulous attention to detail and the work of many highly trained craftspeople. About this time in the tour, there would be some restlessness on the fringes of the group. Students would be whispering, "this is weird," or "this is sick." I was thrilled at the students' perception. Koons's work is decadent. They were able to figure this out by looking despite the verbal interpretation being foisted on them by a docent, who was trying to convince them of some kind of positive artistry in the piece. The piece is an exquisite extension of Warhol's desire of nothing. The children were not allowing the positive symbolic interpretation to supersede their nonsymbolic constructions of disturbing meaning. Like Dorothy, they were not going to listen to what they were being told; they were beginning to search for the man behind the curtain.

Navigating the tension between cultural and personal inscription of meaning is critical to understanding artistry. Both forms of inscription are important. However, to develop skills in personal inscription will require teachers who can go beyond the symbolic interpretations that society has created and help students to engage in dialogues between symbolic and nonsymbolic thinking to see objects with their own eyes. Students need to pay attention to visual details in a work and feel the relationships they create. In short, teachers need to develop in their students' skills in arts-based thinking. To do this, art teachers must have a nuanced conception of the intellectual readiness of the children they teach that is far beyond the strictures of our current "developmentally appropriate" curriculum (Walsh, 2002). Children are far more sophisticated than we often acknowledge. Duncum (2002)

maintains that our vision of childhood, and our shaping of curriculum, is often driven by a romantic mythos of what we want childhood to be. It fails to recognize the realities of children's lives and the emotional sensitivity they possess.

### **The tension of who should teach the arts: The problem of qualifications**

How are artists like Warhol, Gilbert and George, and Koons whose works celebrate nihilism, emotional detachment, and ennui incorporated into education? It's not easy because these artists and others like them challenge what might be called positive values. They are working the subtractive side of artistry, exploring the naught. Denying that there is a tension here is myopic. Claiming that we can spin the interpretations of this work so that it fits a different socially constructive ideal is disingenuous. You can't blithely turn Warhol's radical nihilistic nothingness to a cheery social vision of inclusiveness.

This is not to say that this work has no place in education, but it requires that we recognize the troubling and complex issues embedded in it. For example, if encountering a work like *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, rather than emphasizing the surface finish and technical execution of the work, an educator could encourage students to look carefully at the piece and describe what they see. A student might observe that both Jackson and Bubbles' faces are a stark, unnatural white (a visual effect of porcelain). Another may comment on the massive amount of shiny precious gold that makes the sculpture look valuable. A third may observe how Jackson's reclining pose is relaxed and restful. There are flowers strewn all around, suggesting this is a peaceful scene. Following this visual inspection, the educator could ask the students how the sculpture makes them feel. Some students would find it beautiful. Others would find it troubling. The educator could then ask the students to identify the specific visual details in the piece that support their feelings, encouraging students to move between the symbolic and the nonsymbolic, and thereby foster arts-based thinking. Out of these conversations, specific issues will emerge. If a student finds the work beautiful, the educator might push the student to consider how the pristine porcelain contributes to this feeling. Does the white porcelain make the figures more beautiful? If so, what meanings do we attach to shiny whiteness and glistening gold? Why, in this case, has the artist chosen unnatural colors over natural? Does this have anything to do with how we see something as important? In the television shows we watch, in the forms of entertainment we seek out, do we want to try to understand the world as it is or do we want to pretend it is something else? Is the unnatural, the artificial, and distorted more important than the natural? Why is this sculpture here in the museum? Does the museum believe the natural or the unnatural is more important?

Toward the end of the discussion, the teacher may consider sharing what Koons has to say about this work. Koons claims that Michael Jackson is the greatest artist of our time for his unrelenting quest to transform himself into what his fans want him to be (Tschinkel, 1990). Is becoming what others want you to be a good thing? Should students strive to transform themselves into what their parents, teachers, or peers want them to be?

The issues provoked by a work like *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* are extraordinarily complex; however, they are issues—identity, self-worth, and personal versus cultural values—that fourth-graders will engage in. Moreover, these topics are raised when children simply see the sculpture, whether we like it or not. Most important, these types of issues are difficult, possibly even hurtful. The ideas unleashed by art are not always wondrous, restorative, or healing. They may also be unsettling and troubling. It is quite possible that the octopus could have a very bad day in an art lesson. These potential outcomes of arts

instruction give added meaning to Davis's description of the need for arts learning environments to be "safe havens."

We extend our own mythologized conceptions of childhood by refusing to acknowledge issues in children's lives. If confronted by a Koons-like work, children will not need an introductory language loop provided by an adult to start thinking about challenging, possibly disturbing, issues. These ideas cannot be denied by simply deciding not to talk about them or creating new inscriptions to avoid more difficult topics (in the case of the Koons, an exercise in avoidance would be to ask the children to respond to the work by drawing a picture of someone who they admire). Therefore, such a work requires sophisticated pedagogy. This task is not easily mastered.

The problem of reading the inscribed meanings that artists have placed within works is a daunting task for arts educators. They must deal with nuanced distinctions and face difficult decisions as how meaning in works of art is mediated. Using the arts to open pathways to learning for a child (and not allowing preordained meanings in the arts to crush the inquisitive spirit of the child) is sophisticated work. Arguably, we do not have a sufficient cadre of arts educators who are adequately trained in the art and culture of our time to undertake this task. The reasons why are worth examining.

### **The schism in K-12 art education**

Education is simple when it is understood as a process of etching content on blank slates of young people's minds. In such a view, the memorization and recall of content are the twin pillars of learning in whatever subject one wishes to master. However, learning in the arts has traditionally challenged this paradigm by advocating for distinctive qualities of experience students must undergo in order to learn. It is argued that the arts allow for two categories of such experiences: experiences that come from the direct manipulation of artistic materials (Pestalozzi, 1801/1977, Lowenfeld, 1947), and experiences that occur in aesthetic encounters (Schiller, 1801/1967, Greene, 2001). These two approaches have led to two concepts of how the arts should be taught in schools: the professional art specialist, who is trained in education and child development theory, and the professional artist, who is skilled in the highest levels of aesthetic mastery.

For the last forty years, these two approaches have created a schism in how K-12 arts education is taught within American schools. The schism originated in 1965: the date of the Seminar in Art Education for Research and Curriculum Development held at the Pennsylvania State University as well as the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts. These two events provided intellectual platforms that were to mold the shape of arts education for decades to come.

In 1965, American education was caught up in a curriculum reform movement based on Bruner's (1960) call for authentic learning within specific disciplines of knowledge (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The Penn State Conference and the National Endowment for the Arts proposed two different approaches for the way arts education could deal with this challenge.

The attendees of the Penn State Conference suggested that art education should abandon the quasi-Freudian foundation that had dominated the field for the previous twenty years—exemplified in the work of Viktor Lowenfeld (1947)—and move to a model where art education was seen as composed of three disciplines: studio production, art history, and criticism (Mattil, 1966). Later, aesthetics would be added as a fourth discipline. Over time, this curriculum concept would become Discipline-Based Art Education (Clark, Day & Greer, 1987). The Getty Center for Education in the Arts (later known as the Getty

Education Institute for the Arts) championed this reform movement and over a span of fifteen years poured millions of dollars into programs that would advance change following these principles (Eisner, 1998a). As Davis acknowledges, the work of Project Zero at Harvard University also draws deeply from this same impetus.

The most visible outcome of this effort are the voluntary National Standards for Arts Education (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994), state standards and frameworks adopted throughout the nation (for an example see California State Board of Education, 2001), and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Certification of art teachers at the elementary and secondary level (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1996). The focus of all of these efforts was on improving the quality of teaching by art specialists in schools. However, these efforts emphasize the art specialist's role as a professional educator. They did little to develop the specialist's personal artistic vision.

As Davis observes, these curricular efforts were strongly based on historic models of excellence. By emphasizing a broad acquisition of content, the centrality of expressive production was diminished and contemporary art currents were often neglected.

With her interest in the practice of the arts, Davis's attention is focused more on the model emphasized by the National Endowment for the Arts: opportunities to work with highly trained practicing artists. In this model, professional artists visit schools for short-term residencies and students take field trips to culturally significant institutions (Arts Education and Americans Panel, 1977). The model also supports artists working with youth in atelier-style after school programs. These efforts are seen as providing access to the finest exemplars of artistic achievement offered by our culture. Only by seeing the highest forms of cultural achievement could the magic, wonder, and transformative powers of the arts penetrate the lives of children. Only the professional artists, who are masters of their crafts, and cultural institutions, which are keepers of cultural tradition, are capable of fulfilling this demanding task—certainly not certified art teachers, who may only possess a bachelors degree (McCarthy, 2004; Matthews & Uhrmacher, 2005). However, these practitioners often lacked academic contextual understanding of their own work, or the ability to explain it in ways that could bring students into arts-based thinking.

Educationally, it is sensible to argue that children benefit from the best of both experiences. These would include art specialists in their school to teach a breadth of content and exposure to visiting artists, who are accomplished practitioners of a specific art form. These opportunities for instruction would be enhanced by self-directed exploration of media through school arts materials and trips to cultural institutions to discover how artists, within professional settings, manipulate materials to express meaning. However, schools lack the time to do both. The reality is that states, school districts, and individual schools choose—if they elect to have arts education at all—between these two models. With a shortage of funds, the two models often see themselves as competing against each other.

### **Nonsymbolic thinking as an aim of arts education**

The power of arts education to serve as a model for all of education lies in its complexity. Unfortunately, it seems that many arts educators who enter the field are unprepared for the task they must master. Rather than addressing complexity, curriculum is often constructed around narrow specific areas of expertise that a particular teacher possesses. The curriculum reform efforts of the past 40 years have not done a great deal to change this. There are new federal and state mandates for the content that should be taught in schools. But the content exceeds the amount of class time the art specialist has to teach or

what an artist-in-residence is competent to cover. The present system is producing cynical practitioners who go about teaching their individual skills but then fill out checklists of the comprehensive content standards their lesson supposedly addresses.

Davis's book points to a more important solution to the problems of curriculum in arts education. Rather than thinking about the content of what a child should know, we should be thinking about the performance we want the child to exhibit. We should be thinking about the forms of inquiry that we want a child to engage in. In the simplest terms, this is the theme—the tension—that runs throughout her book: a child should be able to exhibit facility in moving between nonsymbolic and symbolic thinking. By navigating through the two poles of this generative tension, students would demonstrate skills in arts-based thinking. This is the essential objective for education in the arts. Everything else is just arrows in our educational quiver; the tools in our toolkit that help us engage the student to utilize this potential of mind. This is also exactly how education should be reframed as art. Therefore, the question is: How should we be framing our preservice training programs for both credentialed art specialists and artists, who will serve as artists-in-residence, so that they are prepared to teach to this objective?

To do so, we need to seriously reexamine what we mean by content in arts education. Content should not be conflated to specific technical how-to-do-it skills; instead, it should emphasize the ability to move between the domains of nonsymbolic and symbolic thinking. A judicious amount of technique is necessary to make the movement between these realms fluid and sophisticated. However, the skills in themselves are not the focus of curriculum. Performance skills such as the ability to build inferences and interpretations from visual evidence are important, not the mastery of endless minutia (such as the identification of complementary colors). Today, arts curricula, as set forth in national and state standards, are wildly overweighted to skills acquisition. Establishing arts-based thinking rather than technique as an aim of arts education would radically change the way preservice methods courses are currently taught.

### **A final tension: the artistic and the scientific**

There is yet another tension within Davis's book, although she does not directly allude to it. This is the tension between artistic and scientific forms of research. In the now famous pronouncement by the National Research Council (2002) as to what constitutes legitimate scientific research that could be of use to the educational community, only two research methodologies were specifically cited as clearly being nonscientific, and therefore unworthy of Federal educational research funding. Those two methodologies were Elliot Eisner's (1991) educational criticism and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis's (1997) portraiture.

As I reflect on how *Reframing Education as Art* prompts me to carefully consider issues of arts education that I have wrestled with for decades, I am struck by the irony that the professional educators, who served on the Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research, would have reached the conclusion that the arts-based methods Davis uses do not provide insight that might be helpful for conceptualizing future practice in American schools—that the fine grained distinctions teased out by the book do not have a place in the discourse of research. Yes, *Framing Education as Art* focuses on questions rather than answers; however, these questions help us see the shortcomings and limitations of neatly packaged experimental research. These questions help us imagine new possibilities for what education might become. If parents can envision a different form of education for their children, they

are more likely to rise up against the brutal system of scientific assessment that is now in place. This is important research worthy of funding.

In the quietly subversive nature of her book, Davis demonstrates how misguided the quest for "scientific research" has become. More importantly, her eloquent and lyrical text has the potential of having a more enduring impact than an impenetrable statistical analysis funded through a grant from the Department of Education. At this point, she can speak directly and persuasively to the parents who ultimately control the future of our schools, to those professional K-12 educators who are looking for change, to the academics who train our future teachers and administrators, and to the young adults who envision careers in education. This book will resonate with all these audiences. These are ideas that have traction. They have the potential to effect real change.

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