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Teaching Toward Wholeness

The Aesthetic in Education

Kathleen Kristin Ruen

Teaching toward wholeness is a commitment by the teacher to view each child as a whole person who is in the process of change and growth and to create a classroom environment that supports the many ways that children grow.

Education has been viewed over time through many different lenses. It has been looked at as a garden, a process whereby knowledge is poured into a vessel, a child left behind, and, currently, “a race to the top.” All of these lenses, or metaphors, have had an influence on the way children are seen and taught.

Over the past few decades there has been a growing acceptance of viewing education as if it were a business. At its extreme children are provided “educational services” by teachers reading from scripts (in order that each child get exactly the same service) and, in turn, the children show what they have learned by providing a test score (a “profit”) which will show their potential economic worth. Of course, if you look closely at the research that supports these curricula, and the evaluation methods themselves, it becomes apparent that they are subject to manipulation and outright error (Kohn 2007). There are many schools where children are already seeing themselves as a number between one and four, which has eerie parallels to seeing oneself as one’s salary. Whole schools are being given grades (Gootman & Medina 2007), similar to Fortune 500 corporations. The lure of this view of education is that it is simple, it is measurable, and it is easily replicated in schools. Unfortunately, it often results in the corruption of administrators and the dehumanization of children and educators.

The Aesthetic in Education

A far better metaphor for education is that teaching is an art form, like dance, theatre, music, and the visual arts. The relationship between teachers and students is similar to the painter’s relationship with his painting or the musician’s relationship with her com-



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position. There is a constant back and forth between what the teacher sees in the students and what the students reflect back to him. This is similar to what happens when the stone "calls out" to be sculpted, or when an accident in a dance becomes a major phrase. Each are constantly in relationship with the other, in a dance of sorts, making and remaking each other moment after moment and day after day.

John Dewey's (1934) seminal work, *Art as Experience* is a compelling foundation for viewing education as an art form. His aim was to define the inherent duality between what the artist creates and what the audience sees. In doing so, he introduced the idea that what is viewed as artistic and what is viewed as aesthetic are essentially the same experience coming from different directions. The artist expresses an experience through an interaction with a medium and the perceiver creates her own experience by interacting with the medium and form of the art object. Dewey (1934, 54) expands this dynamic by observing that the artist "embodies the attitude of the perceiver while at work." So, while the audience, or perceiver, can travel between the artwork and themselves and create an experience, only the artist can travel the entire spectrum, taking on the role of creator and observer at the same time.

Applying this metaphor to education, the teacher, as the artist, is alongside and interacts with the child as he develops as a person and makes his own work, or meaning, of the world. The teacher is also the perceiver of the child, often bringing the child in on what is noticed about the self or the work made. The teacher is there to support the child in making himself, and is also there to assist the child in becoming aware of the making. What is central is the child and his work, not external standards or curriculum. Once standards or curriculum are placed in the center, the aesthetic dimension is lost.

When the curriculum takes center stage, the most important aspect of education (the student) is moved over to the side, and education becomes primarily content and procedures, not people. Children and teachers are in service to the curriculum. Both the child and the teacher are interpreting the curriculum in their own ways, but each cannot truly see the other.

When one places the child and her work in the center, the view is not only unobstructed, it has a re-

fracting, reflecting, transactional, and transformative quality. As in making and viewing art, one is changed, if only minutely, by what one sees, and by seeing, one changes, if only minutely, what is there. In a similar manner, if teachers can truly see children, and if the child is allowed to truly see the teacher, both will be changed in the process. As Karen Gallas (1998, 140), a first grade teacher, eloquently states,

Who I am, and who an individual child I teach is and will become, is always a continuing piece of work, constructed in relation to the other, in conversation with the other, in the best of possible worlds, in communion with the other.

The Role of Curriculum and Subject Matter

So what about the curriculum? Where does subject matter fit in this picture? I suggest that the subject matter and "wonderful ideas" (Duckworth 2008) are inherently inside and connected to both teacher and child. There is an odd notion that subject matter, like math, reading, sciences and even the arts are outside of us, and that we must be brought to the subject matter by studying each as a separate piece. The role of the teacher is not to bring subject matter to children, but instead to *bring it out of them*.

In a painting, for example, an artist uses paint and color to work out an idea. She is also using forms of literacy (story and communication), mathematical thinking (perspective, balance, and symmetry) and perhaps a host of other ideas (biology, current events, other forms of art) to inspire and inform her work. When the artist is in the act of creating she is not aware of all the complex elements she is drawing upon to achieve a final work. However, in looking back at the painting, as an artist or as the viewer, it is possible, through an aesthetic interaction (Eisner 2002), to explore and make these connections to the other disciplines.

Like the artist, the teacher draws on *all* of her own experiences and knowledge of the subject matter when working with an individual child or a group of children. But ideally the child and his work are the centerpiece. When subject matter becomes central, there is an immediate cutting off of connection and possibility. Keeping the child central while intuitively knowing when to introduce appropriate

skills, questions, and ideas is the work of an artist. The teacher then can look at the child's work and help him see connections to other subjects and ideas. This interaction has a potential for great change and growth for all involved. As artists through their artwork have changed the way cultures see themselves, so teachers have the potential of transforming the world by supporting children in their growth as thinkers and makers.

Upending and Re-thinking Education

We need to both rethink and revisit schooling, and create a vision of it that connects to what really happens when children learn and change and grow. This means working with the child as a whole person, and looking at schools as a collective of respected adults responsible for the care and growth of each individual child. Re-envisioning needs to begin from the relationship between the child and the teacher, then move on to organizational structures, supports, and community involvement. Instead of a top-down organization, schools need to have a bottom-up structure.

This implies an organic structure that will be constantly changing to meet the needs of children, teachers, administrators, and school districts. How might it look? First, there is the child and his work in relationship with the teacher. The teacher is in relationship with many children, and the children in turn are in relationship with each other. The teacher is responsible for the growth of each child and the growth of the whole group. Second, teachers are in relationship with a principal, who supports each individual teacher and the group of teachers as a community that ideally learn from one another. Lastly, there is the district level, where principals meet together with a experienced mentor who can support the needs of each school.

What is aesthetic about this model for education? It places the child in the front and center of the conversation. Also, instead of asking children to constantly adapt to the methods of teachers, teachers are asked to adapt themselves to the needs and interests of their students. In turn, principals are asked to adapt themselves to the needs of their teachers and district leaders are asked to adapt to the needs of each school. This does not mean that teachers, principals, and district leaders lose their voice and ideas

and visions, it just means that these visions need to be tempered by the reality that education ultimately centers on students and their needs. This model holds the potential of keeping children, teachers, and administrators visible to each other. And with visibility comes valuing and care.

When districts and states mandate a curriculum from the top, without a constant dialogue with children, teachers, and administrators, everyone underneath in effect becomes invisible. And when people are invisible, when they become mere numbers and grades and statistics, society does not even notice when they are mistreated.

Schools may be asked to produce high quality students for the future marketplace, but they will not succeed in this by forcing children to fit into one standard. This is where economics has it wrong. Children and people cannot be educated without attention being paid to who they are as persons, how they learn, and what they are interested in. As in art, education needs to value visibility and clarity and diversity, not sameness and loss of self. If teachers can make human connections with their students and artfully support their learning and ideas, there are no limits to a child's growth.

Teaching Toward Wholeness

When an artist is using paint, she does not only work with the colors on her palette. She also works with the texture, weight, and transparency of her media, and how that media reacts with the surface she is painting on. She is working with time as well, for watercolors and acrylics dry quite quickly, while oils give the ability to work into the painting more.

A director working with actors is sensitive not only to the timing of the words spoken by them, but also to their body language, tone of voice, positioning on the stage, and psychological state. The director knows that all these help connect the audience to the story of the play. Likewise, a choreographer not only looks at a physical body moving through space, she is working with timing, color, emotional content, and the limits of bodily movement.

The point here is that all artists are both conscious of and working on multiple aspects of their craft at the same time. Dewey (1934, 191) refers to this as attention to form. By form, he means a common pro-

cess in which a work of art is made. Forming, like experiencing, also has a rhythm of reflection. The artist often stops and reflects on what has happened so far within the context of the whole work that she intends to make. In this shaping, the artist finds a way to make a whole out of parts, an undefined characteristic which Maxine Greene (2001, 158) alludes to as "a certain mystery associated with the arts."

Of course, the child, like a completed painting, is not simply an assemblage of parts. She is a whole, and in respecting this wholeness, the teacher knows that she will never be able to truly define her, put her into a category, or give her any label but her own name. Art is mysterious in this way as well. A critic may pigeonhole a playwright's body of work into a particular genre, and then the playwright writes a play in a completely different one. A song often has strains and themes that connect to music beyond its typical style.

While it is important to consider the child as a whole, it is also important to accept that she is in the process of growth and change. She is, in a way, her own work in progress. Indeed, many adults still feel this way about themselves. If one is to teach toward wholeness, it follows that one must be attentive to all the aspects of the child throughout their schooling. It is odd that schools have this notion that one needs to only teach academic subjects that engage the brain, mouth, and hands, when there is a whole body there that has the ability to move, to sing and clap, to paint with large brushstrokes, and to express feelings. To tell a work in progress that they can only develop their math and reading skills is like asking a musician to write a score without attending to volume or meter.

Teaching toward wholeness is a commitment by the teacher to view each child as a whole and to create a classroom environment that supports the many ways that children grow. It is a determination to have a relationship with each child, and a trust that this relationship will inform curriculum and pedagogy. It is a decision to allow children to make and create things, whether it is a painting, a story, a dance, a block building, a song, a construction, a play, a drawing, or a creation we cannot yet envision. Children are essentially makers, and even artists themselves. In fact, if one broadens the definition of

artist to one who makes things, I think we would all fall into that category in one way or another. Breaking through the notion that art is only for an elite, gifted group opens up the possibility that making things is a way for all children to learn, and teachers, administrators, and politicians can artfully create environments for this to occur. As educators, we need to acknowledge the living medium that we interact with daily, our students, and fight for schools that teach toward wholeness.

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