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“Hey, Art Lady!”

by

Sandra Campbell

This experience began in September of 1994 at a large elementary school in Chicago located on the northwest side of the city. Most of the public schools in Chicago have a similar feeling that falls somewhere between fortress, jail, and factory. They are monolithic structures that have housed students and teachers for almost 100 years. Unfortunately, some of the ideas and teaching practices also feel that old.

I began on this journey into the public schools as an artist-in-residence. I worked for a not-for-profit arts organization that donates art programs to schools in Chicago. The public schools had long ago eliminated most art programs from their curriculum, and our organization’s aim was to expose as many children as possible to the visual arts.

I was assigned to six schools in the fall of 1994, and I visited them weekly for six weeks; then I would receive a new list of schools. This continued for two years. What this meant was that I saw about 960 children before Christmas. The programs I presented varied, but we looked at slides of art work and did hands-on projects relating to the concepts the art work exemplified. The variety of ethnic groups I met provided the opportunity to expand my own art horizons and choose work that would “fit” the neighborhood. In Little Village we looked at the work of Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco and paintings by Frida Kahlo. When I was in Lawndale we studied the Harlem Renaissance artist, Romare Bearden, and viewed the Great Migration Series by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence. We still viewed works by Leonardo da Vinci, Picasso, and Rembrandt, but I wanted to make closer connections to my students’ own lives. We would then engage in what Herb Kohl calls “*sprache*” another way of saying “thoughtful speech” (Kohl, 1984, p. 112). Looking at paintings together prompted many discussions far from the topic at hand, but the students were engaged and enjoyed this opportunity for open discussion. We might be looking at Georges Seurat’s *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte* and they would inevitably ask about the ladies with the “big butts.” This would lead to a discussion on clothing and what a “bustle” was. We would decide it must have been uncomfortable and consider why they would wear it. Soon we would be on to other current fashions that are uncomfortable and why women wear them, who designs these fashions, and why we buy them. This was not a small topic and could be expanded on, but I was there to provide an art lesson, so we would move on.

The students had so much to say and ask. I would try to get back to the slides and our project, but I was so happy that we could deviate onto subjects and issues which demonstrate that art is part of their lives. It was vital to me that my time spent with students was not a monologue and that we could produce meaningful dialogue. As Paolo Freire writes in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality” (1970, p. 47). It may be surprising that I refer to students as the “oppressed,” but it has become, for me, an important consideration in looking at teaching. Freire writes of the oppressed peasants of Brazil, and although this may seem remote to us in the United States, a closer look at large, urban schools reveals conditions much like those Freire refers to: “Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building” (p. 47). I came to believe in my students and to trust their ability to reason (Freire, 1970).

It is at this large, three-story school, where weeds poke through a cement playground, that I began to view schools, teachers, and students. It is something I found the need to study and record, and I continue to consider those events. I observed through my own lens as well as the lenses of several authors and educators.

My first class was the fourth grade. Lunch money was being collected by the teacher/cashier and students were turning in their homework to the designated location. The students called their teacher, affectionately, "Mr. D," as his long Polish name was too difficult for most. The students were excited to have me visit, and they were talkative. The morning business came to an end, and we began to talk about why I was here and that I would come to their class six times to talk about art and help them make their own art projects. I was instantly popular, with the promise of paints, pastels, and collage. Some students told me that their uncle was an artist, someone's grandma had the Last Supper on velvet, and they'd heard of Grandma Moses. A dark haired, quiet boy arrived late. He sat at his place, and the surrounding students all screamed. A large cockroach crawled up the front of his shirt. He looked embarrassed and yet remained calm. So this is how it began. It seemed that every day thereafter would hold something equally exciting in store.

This school, with the very shiny brown floors, had an art teacher, but she had no art room. Her supplies were in the hall in a corner, and she traveled from room to room. The school was very overcrowded and some students had reading in the teachers' bathroom. The third grade had a young teacher who the students seemed to love. The class was very polite, and one girl stood when I called on her, pushed in her chair, and then answered. They had so much to say about the paintings. The next time I came, the young teacher had been "bumped," or in other words, someone with seniority in the system had taken her place. It is incredible to me that the relationship she had developed with her class was taken so lightly.

Nevertheless, the students at this school had wonderful enthusiasm. A dark-eyed little boy raised his hand before I would even ask a question. He loved to interpret the paintings we were looking at. He told me he was from Romania and his name was Elvis. What a serious little face he had. I will remember him for a long time.

The eighth grade class was very lethargic. I often found myself doing a monologue. I questioned, joked, and did anything to begin a dialogue, but they were happy to look at me, expressionless. It might have been better if they were misbehaving, but this was as if they were anesthetized. As John Taylor Gatto so poignantly writes in his book, *Dumbing Us Down*, "I began to realize that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the age segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addictive and dependent behavior" (1992, p. XII). A breakthrough occurred when I showed one of my favorite paintings entitled *The Deposition* by Rogier Van der Weyden. The painting depicts the crucifixion, and the figures reflect an immense sorrow. An African-American student posed a question: "Why is Jesus a white man?" I was so startled at any response from this class, but I was elated at the participation and prospect of discussion. We looked at the painting by African-American artist William Johnson, who paints Jesus as a black man. I vowed to find more diverse paintings in order to spark more questions. When I did bring the Johnson painting, *The Three Marys*, the students didn't recognize the man on the cross as Jesus and mistook his long muscular legs for those of a basketball player.

The ceiling fell in on one classroom I visited. Luckily, the room had been empty, but that meant that we were then squeezed into the back of the Polish bilingual classroom. We were back-to-back with one teacher at each end of the room. In order to show slides, the Polish class worked in the dark for half-an-hour. It was all very confusing, but we moved on.

In beautiful fall weather I arrived at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. I immediately felt as if I'd entered a prison, with the caged staircase and students dressed in uniforms. These were uniforms in the loosest sense of the word, baggy blue work pants and a white undershirt would qualify. This "uniform" would prevent students from wearing gang clothing. The school was working hard at creating a "Middle School" atmosphere and I saw many positive aspects to focusing on a smaller age range, but the lack of freedom allowed for the students amazed me. They could only get a drink of water or use the bathroom in long supervised lines. It was a huge operation to wash hands after our charcoal drawing. I led a line to the bathroom to supervise hand-washing and was taken aback by their willingness to follow me and to allow me to distribute paper towels. If we read Michel Foucault we find the history of this system, "Where one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals or when a task or a particular form of behaviors must be imposed the panoptic schema may be used" (Foucault, 1979, p. 205). Foucault is talking about prison and the panoptic schema, where all the inmates can easily be observed at all times. Foucault goes on to say, "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (p. 173). Why should schools look like prisons? I had this sensation in more than one school, and I can't help but wonder if education needs to happen in this setting. It became frightening to me that all across the city children spend their day performing many routines that allow for virtually no freedom or choice. Groups of seventh and eighth graders would march listlessly down the hall and often repeat the trip because some offender had gotten out of line. The words of Foucault echo, "This discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies' " (p. 136). Books have been written for the army, schools, and hospitals that specifically describe sets of regulations for controlling or correcting the operations of the body (Foucault, 1979). Is that our aim as educators, to create "docile bodies"?

I arrived early at my new school, Booker T. Washington School, on the city's west side. It was a cinder-block style of school, built in the early '60s, with Plexiglas windows that were so scratched you could not see outside. I observed the class across the hall, when all of a sudden the teacher smacked her ruler so hard on her desk that students pulled in arms and legs almost like turtles retreating into their shells. I ducked back into my room. The eighth grade teacher was a man who cared deeply about his students. He would correct their manners and apologized to me for his "meanness." I didn't find him mean, but very firm and loving. He told me of the students in his class who would care for drug-addicted parents. This was one responsibility these children didn't need, yet we would line up to get a drink of water.

John Quincy Adams School was nearby. It looked so much like Washington School that I'd on occasion gone to the wrong school. But the children were unique and special, so I would recognize the difference when I saw them. I had two gifted classes; they were so bright and questioning. They were thrilled with the images of art on the screen. They especially loved the work of Frida Kahlo. We had talked about her husband Diego Rivera and how Frida and Diego had gotten divorced and remarried. One student raised her hand to tell me "that the reason Frida and Diego got divorced was that he must have been lying on the couch, drinking beer, and watching sports, and that he wouldn't go out with her." I was speechless. This true-to-life comment was so touching. We all had a good laugh and talked about the exploits of Diego and Frida, yet the reality haunts me now. An opportunity to talk about life and feelings does not often come up in school.

I'll never forget one student at this school, a bright fourth grader, who wore a beret for all my visits. He wanted to know more about Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. I brought books and articles for the class, which they devoured. As we looked at paintings by Monet, we talked about color. This group decided to chart the colors I wore each week. We looked forward to each other. Our still-life drawing project included some pussy willow branches I had brought from home, and rather than carry them back, I offered them to the class. It was as if I'd given them gold. In the city, in the ghetto, there were bright spots. Ms. Prescott's fourth grade was one of those.

A refrain I came to know was, "Hi, art lady!" It was a welcome sound because I didn't really get to know anyone at these schools. Students were more welcoming and friendly than most teachers, so I considered them my allies. Were we not on the same side?

Some of the south side's most beautiful architecture surrounded Preston School. Most of the buildings were vacant or boarded up, though. Yet here they sat, testimony to different times. Those buildings rested like abandoned farm houses, huge graystone buildings that were only several blocks from the shores of Lake Michigan, prime real estate. My first class was a special education class, most likely a BD class, educational lingo for behavioral disorder class. They had two separate classes in one room divided by some file cabinets. I arrived to children hitting, punching, and yelling. Somehow I managed to set up slides and screen. They were ready for something new. They didn't really seem to know what I was talking about, but they were not stupid. They were big eighth graders and they would shout out erratic answers. The other teacher did not want his class to participate, but pretty soon they were all facing me and watching "the movie." They liked the images and made comments. They would hit each other for getting too close. I looked out at the class of big teenagers all squashed into this tiny room, and I was in disbelief. They were in a "holding tank." The walls were bare. The two teachers in this room did not speak to each other, yet they were "team-teaching" the class. I was in a bad education dream. A fight erupted as one little guy walked too near someone, a huge pile of kids yelling, arms flailing, while the two teachers looked on as if this occurred often. Should I have continued our discussion on color relationships? Did red and blue really make purple? Everything seemed very surreal at this school. The fight subsided, and the kids drifted back to their desks.

I packed up my projector and moved on to the next class. No one would believe this unless they saw it. John Taylor Gatto writes, "It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people of exactly the same age and social class" (1992, p. 27). These students seemed to have accepted the fate of being considered ignorant. "They are like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, ... but unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p. 53). As people, we can reflect not only on our actions but on ourselves. This ability separates us from animals, whose actions are an extension of themselves. Are these children like the animal that Freire writes of when he says they do not "take on life because they cannot construct it, and if they do not construct it, they cannot transform its configuration" (p. 79). More than anyone, these children need opportunities to engage in what Viera Pinto calls "limit-acts." These are acts that help the oppressed overcome and negate, rather than accept the "given" (Freire, 1970, p. 80). What will be the limit-situation that will prompt these students toward a decisive attitude about their world? The boundary of this classroom, school, and neighborhood can be viewed in a hopeful way, not as "impassable," but as the "frontier which separates being from mere being" (Freire, 1970, p. 80). Can this situation become for these children the frontier between being and being more human, rather than the frontier between being and nothingness (Freire, 1970)? This was my hope for the children at Prescott School. Our six weeks were over and the students said, "When will you be back?" It was in their asking that I realized they had enjoyed our time together. I'm usually too sad to answer their question ... that our paths have crossed just briefly.

Waller School was my next assignment and was so far south I felt as if I was starting off on a vacation. It was a small school with remnants of a playground. Kids were using the monkey bars to shoot a ball through. The students were smart and very interested in the art work. In the fourth grade class we began with the self-portrait of Vincent Van Gogh. I asked, "What do we call a picture that an artist paints of himself?" A wildly waving hand went up, and I could hardly ignore the enthusiasm. The answer: "An auto-picture!," the respondent said confidently. I paused and it struck me: of course, like an autobiography. I was impressed. This class was clever and responsive. I mentioned this to their teacher, and she said, "Don't be fooled by them. I had someone bring a loaded gun to school this year," and she walked away. I was shattered. This little group of faces all looked with me at paintings by Grant Wood, and we talked about those images of the farm and a time so much simpler than these. I'm saddened by what I guess I already knew.

The eighth grade students looked at the work of collage artist, Romare Bearden. In order to draw them into the idea of collage, I'd prepared a tape of rap music to help them make the connection between the bits and pieces of paper that make up collage and the snippets of sound, words, and music that are part of the very familiar rap music. What was just a moment ago a languid class, came alive with the jagged sound of Public Enemy. They immediately saw the similarity of the music to the visual images. This was an opportunity for me to become a student myself as I researched the music I wanted to use. "Teachers need to stretch out and touch the world, to forget their authority and allow themselves to be curious children every once in a while" (Kohl, 1984, p. 104).

This class saw me in a whole new light, and we became fast friends. In those last hot days in June, before the summer vacation, they began construction at Waller. The sound of the jackhammer drowned out most of our conversations and I had to run around the classroom to hear each child. I went to close the door in one room, wondering why I hadn't thought of this sooner, only to find the pane of glass in the door was gone. These were long, loud days. My lunch time was spent in the lobby of the school on a bench rather than in the smoky, windowless teachers' lounge. One day as the kindergarten passed, two cute girls giggled and pointed at me. They said, "There is a white lady. Hi, white lady!" It never occurred to me that I was an oddity.

The beautiful facade of Morton School was disguised by the overwhelming amount of pigeon droppings, so this became my first impression of the school. It was a metaphor for Morton School, that underneath was hidden something beautiful, but it was hard to see past that first impression. Morton housed 1,700 elementary children, and to move from one end of the school to the other you needed rollerblades. The day seemed to revolve around the logistics of feeding 1,700 children daily. The school took pride in this accomplishment. I ventured to the lunchroom to see this production and found myself stepping over squashed fruit and sandwiches, as if everyone had missed their "slam-dunk" into the huge garbage cans. My classes were going well until two big seventh grade boys decided to poke at each other playfully during our discussion. They heeded my warning to stop, but this playfulness changed and soon chairs were being swung and all the kids were diving for cover. I stepped back out of range, and the boy who was running my projector had the presence of mind to grab the projector and head for safety. The teacher pushed the intercom and called for security, which came in the form of two "bouncer-type" men who hauled off the offenders. The class moved back to their seats and the teacher suggested we call it quits, but I somehow felt we should carry on and so we did.

The students at Morton loved the art projects, and teachers were pleased to see responses from students who rarely spoke in class. This type of discussion allowed the "visual" students an opportunity to participate. Classroom teachers could see their own class in a whole new light. "The framework for the almighty lesson plan–that daily classroom reminder of the whole approach–neatly embodies the deficit approach. It is linear, one directional, incremental, and entirely outside the student" (Ayers, 1993, p. 32). As William Ayers points out so well in his book, *To Teach*, so many children must yearn to say, "Teacher, see me in a new way, I'm good at this, I enjoy this, can we build on my strengths?" (p. 32). Philosopher Martin Buber describes this act of seeing our students as "It," which allows teachers to categorize and coordinate them. "The 'thou' knows no system of coordination" (Buber, 1958, p. 31). In other words, things might not always be so neat and tidy. The label or notion we have of a student needs a chance to be disconcerted, shaken-up, or tossed out. The students have so much within them, and if given the right opportunity, it will appear and grow. This provides a potential avenue of communication between teacher and student, if only it would be traveled.

I saw this communication in a classroom in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. I was apprehensive about this situation, as I was assigned to a class of thirteen "at-risk" boys, but upon meeting them my worries were gone. The cold winter days I spent with them provided me with some of my warmest memories. They all loved the book *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein, and their teacher had given them each a copy for Christmas, so we decided to make our own tree in the classroom. This way, as they read, they could act out the story. We began by making papier mâché apples and tie-dyed leaves. The finished apples were as different as the boys, and one boy loved the soothing, gushy feeling of the wheat paste and never made an apple. They adored the paint and the construction of tree limbs that were made out of industrial cardboard tubes. The limbs would fit into a large cardboard barrel, making them removable, to illustrate that part of the story. The boys worked so hard and told me stories as we painted. Clean-up was our only difficulty, as the bathroom was miles away and a freezing drizzle of water came out of the faucet. We took turns washing paint brushes until our hands were numb. When we assembled the tree, this group of tough Humboldt Park at-risk boys sat underneath the shade of their own giving tree and gave to me the gift of joy. Their teacher encouraged and praised them. As they read the story to me, he picked out passages that he knew each child could master to provide for this moment of success. Mr. Van Dyke gave his students that chance, ... "to pursue their own passions and projects, to develop some part of the class as their own" (Ayers, 1993, p. 93). They acted out the story for me before I left, and it was a tearful good-bye.

I visited nearly 20 schools in two years, and these anecdotes and glimpses flash just like the slides on my screen. They are provocative views of schools in Chicago, as seen through my view-finder. I found it an incredible learning experience as well as exhausting. The greatest reward was seeing one of my students over the summer who asked, "Will you come back, art lady?"

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