Chapter 8
The Heart of the Arts:

Fostering Young Children's Ways of Knowing

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Abstract The education of young learners has become a casualty of *No Child Left Behind* (2001). While the mandates of this law have led to an intensively structured, narrow, teacher-driven academic curriculum accompanied by high stakes testing for all children, its exclusion of the arts has been particularly calamitous for children who do not come from White, middle-class homes. Literacy has been defined as acquisition of text through a limited number of programs reliant on printed symbols. Yet, children come to know in a multitude of ways and those whose roots lie in oral, visual, or kinesthetic cultures are placed at a disadvantage when their first experiences with schooling are bereft of joy and individual expression related to their cultural roots. This chapter will address children's meaning making in culturally responsive settings.

Keywords No Child Left Behind Act, apartheid curriculum, creativity killers, mulisensory learning, culture

"I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way – things I had no words for" (O'Keeffe, as cited in Drokojowska-Philp, 2004, pp. 214-215). With these words, Georgia O'Keeffe, one of America's best-known artists gave poignant voice to a significant way of knowing. Unfortunately, America's young children are currently being deprived access to such multimodal ways of knowing through the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* and was signed into law on January 8th, 2002. Though its title signals concern for all children, the harsh reality of its implementation is its almost total abandonment of the arts as an integral part of the curriculum for young learners. *NCLB* has engendered curriculum that overlooks the importance of providing opportunities for children to explore the world through their many intelligences -- especially those intelligences that enable them to negotiate between and among symbol systems as they learn to read and write. Although the

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arts are considered a core subject under *NCLB* there is “no quest for balance among studies in the arts, sciences, and humanities” (Chapman, 2005, p. 7) and it tends to “impose a discipline-based model on schools, with clear disdain for social studies and other interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning” (Chapman, 2007, p. 25). The effects of this imbalance may be harmful to children who are from culturally diverse backgrounds or whose families who have yet to achieve middle class status in the United States by limiting children’s access to alternate ways of understanding that may be more relevant in their lives. Curricula driven by *NCLB* often perpetuate deficit views of children whose strength may be in the arts rather than the areas most heavily targeted by the act and it works to deprive teachers of autonomy in responding to diverse children’s learning needs. Further, it removes from young children the spontaneity and joy they bring to learning that is particularly brought about through the arts.

Under *NCLB*, literacy learning, a key educational accomplishment of the early school years, has been reduced to an emphasis on direct instruction and repetitive systematic phonics. Further, learning to read has been decontextualized, (i. e. removed from a relevant context and taught in isolation). Such an approach to the teaching of reading is “especially harmful to those children coming from homes that may be viewed as ‘literacy deprived’ ” (Whitfield, 2005, p. 44). Although culturally diverse and bilingual homes are often rich with literacy opportunities, when there is a disconnect between the home and the school, it is more difficult for those who do not belong to the dominant culture to become literate (Blackledge, 2000) in the way schools define literacy.

In an interview with Nagel and Guest (2007), Jonathan Kozol, a long-time advocate for the children of poverty, made the following statement in regard to the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act:

> In the so-called ‘low performing’ inner-city schools …it has introduced a reign of terror, a state of siege …principals tell me they’re forced to handle education in a way they personally abhor … turning their schools into virtual test-prep factories where teachers are forced to spend half the school year or more not presenting educational content with the rich cultural depth that is familiar in the suburbs, but drilling children in test-taking strategies so that their school can meet its [annual yearly progress]. …even the best teachers use a ‘drill and grill’ curriculum …Allowing children to ask interesting and discerning questions will get them in trouble with the curriculum cops’ … (p. 4)

Kozol added that a teacher can no longer teach a beloved poem if he or she can’t cite the standard it meets. He noted, “A first grade teacher recently said to me, ‘What’s beauty got to do with it?’ [concluding]…we’re not dealing with apartheid schools, but apartheid curriculum” (p. 4). John Holt (1995) made similar observations in his book, *Freedom and Beyond*. He described a system in which schools not only present obstacles to poor children but also are actually designed to keep children living in impoverished areas from being successful in school, while convincing the children that they are to blame for their own failure. Susan Ohanian

(1999) has also written prolifically and passionately about the detrimental effects of standardized testing on all children, but especially on those living in poverty. She provides evidence of an industrial, utilitarian attitude toward the arts that has been fostered by business and government and has devalued the role of the arts in American schools and society, depriving children access to meaningful arts learning. She notes that the city of Berlin provides more funding for the arts than does the entire U.S. government, and that France "devotes vast expenditures to the arts … because French politicians believe that the public needs culture" (p.127).

Offsetting these passionate concerns for underserved children in our schools are many examples of individual teachers who strive to include the arts in their work with young children. Gardner (1994) identified exemplary teachers who helped children in inner-city schools learn to "express themselves directly, imaginatively, and often lyrically… [noting that the child] should be encouraged to play, to 'be crazy', to experiment" (p. 289). Gallas (1994) worked with students who would, under other circumstances, be considered academic failures and found that they "produced powerful works of art that somehow defied mainstream assumptions about their potential as thinkers … children who could think more deeply and push the boundaries of their own learning through the arts – that the arts offered a new definition of the language of learning" (p. 112).

While *NCLB* currently targets children in third grade and up for testing, its ramifications of are now being felt in early childhood classrooms as well. In my own experiences working with teachers of young learners, I have found many to be near despair over the impact of NCLB. One kindergarten teacher recently described how popular dramatic play areas in their preschool had been removed from individual classrooms and placed in a much less accessible space in order to allow the children to concentrate more fully on their "academic" work. At an early childhood conference that I attended I listened as preschool teachers commiserated and bemoaned the fact that, instead of introducing young children to the joys of books and reading, the academic curriculum of elementary schools was being been "pushed down" into their preschool classrooms. There is a growing demand for early childhood teachers to provide increasingly "academic" lessons -- heavy on direct teaching and testing, with fewer and fewer opportunities for exploration and discovery. In fact, kindergarten teachers must now instruct learners how to "bubble in" so that they can complete answer sheets correctly when testing day arrives. A daunting task for children whose fine motor skills are still developing!

In short, NCLB has resulted in academic programs nationwide characterized by the type of learning that many believe is inappropriate for developing young children's creativity: "inflexible schedules, intense competition, reliance on extrinsic rewards, and lack of free time" (Jalongo, 2002, p. 8). The effects on young children, so eager to learn, have been deleterious and stultifying. In direct contrast to programs designed to cultivate young children's capacities for imaginative thinking and artistic self-expression these programs are the embodiment of what Amabile (1986) described as "creativity killers."

The Role of the Arts

Dewey (1934) identified the role of the arts in the human psyche and described their ability to bring humans together. He believed that art "strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from each other … Art renders [people] aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny" (p. 272). The arts comprise an important element in all cultures and provide a way to express what it means to belong to the human family and societal groups. Numerous acclaimed theorists and experienced teachers have recommended that all children, and specifically children from culturally diverse homes or low socio-economic backgrounds, should be provided opportunities to learn utilizing alternative symbol systems and a variety of intelligences (Gardner, 1994, 1999). Premier among these alternative systems and ways of knowing are the arts: music, dance, drama, and the visual arts.

Gallas (1994) presents a strong and credible rationale for according the arts a premier role in curriculum, maintaining that art experience "fills a number of roles: (1) the arts as representing a methodology for acquiring knowledge; (2) the arts as subject matter for study, in and of themselves; and (3) the arts as an array of expressive opportunities for communicating with others, or art as story" (p. 116). Jerome Bruner (1996, 1999, 2004) has written extensively about the power of narrative in learning, examining the impact of culture in establishing self-identity, and the role of narrative in the individual's construction of reality. To omit the arts from young children's learning experiences deprives them of the opportunity to transmediate, (i.e. develop a repertoire of strategies to use across symbol systems). The arts serve, then, as an essential component in children's ability to make meaning of their world.

The Role of the Teacher

Susan Ohanian (1999) has declared, "a teacher's individual curriculum choices become increasingly vital as our society devalues its children" (p. 3). In Ohanian's words, "…we teachers, particularly those of us in elementary school, teach who we are. We are the curriculum" (p. 9).

James Banks (1994) has emphasized teachers' transformational role in children's education but cautions that

> teachers are human beings who bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams to the classroom. They also bring their prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions …The teacher's values and perspectives mediate and interact with what they teach and influence the way that messages are communicated and perceived by their students. … Because the teacher mediates the messages and symbols communicated to the students through the curriculum, it is important for teachers to come to grips with their own personal and cultural values and identities in order for them to help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups … (p. 159)

For teachers to work effectively and compassionately with children, they must first respect children's cultures and acquire deep learning about them. They must do as Bernstein (1972) suggested, "If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (p. 149).

In Paley's (1986) study of fantasy in children, she emphasizes the significance of a teacher's "learning who children are…since the subject I most wish to learn about is the children, I must concentrate on this play, for they will teach me who they are by the fantasies they explore" (p. xiv).

The Role of the Visual Arts

More specifically, children make meaning in a multitude of ways as they seek to understand their worlds. Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) maintain, "young children frequently interchange the terms draw and write as they discuss their work" (p.177). Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000) explains, "children's drawings capitalize on the narrative impulse that emerges in their earliest representational drawings, on their tendency to create stories in drawings, and on the talk that surrounds and supplements drawing events" (p. 174).

Howard Gardner's (1994) theory of multiple intelligences has significant implications for children's ability to make meaning through manipulating symbol systems. He maintains the use of symbol systems is the major developmental event of the early childhood years and that "within a short period, the world of the child becomes a world of symbols" (p. 129). Of special importance to teachers of young children is Gardner's identification of the early childhood years as being a "crucial time for the "reorganization of a child's developing systems" (p. 131) as it is during this period that the child learns to "put his (sic) acts and perspectives into words or pictures" (p. 135).

The Influence of Music

We must also recognize music's importance in the curriculum, not only for its aesthetics but also for its power as a way of knowing. Research studies have suggested a correlation between music participation and improved academic performance, particularly for children from culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged schools (Catterall, 2002). Geneva Gay (2000) indicates improved academic performance in African-American students by the incorporation of music and movement into the curriculum. Perret and Fox (2004) point out that the results of a Harvard University's *Project Zero* meta-analysis of the relationship between the arts and academic learning has indicated a possible causal relationship between performing and listening to music and improved spatial-temporal reasoning. Adding further support to this potential relationship, Perret and Fox go on describe an innovative music program for elementary school students who are academically challenged that was started in the 1990s in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In this innovative program, musicians from the city's symphony visited the school several times a week for 30 minutes per visit and taught lessons designed to integrate music with subjects taught by the classroom teachers. Children were introduced to music concepts and terminology, such as rhythm, meter, and high and low pitch, as well as to the "story elements like character, setting, conflict, and resolution" in musical pieces (Perret & Fox, 2004, p.3). The program resulted in improved attentiveness of the children as well as improved test scores over a three-year period. Given that early years of schooling are devoted to acquiring written literacy, Perret and Fox are quick to point out the similarities between language and music.

> Language and music share … important characteristics in the brain. The separate parts of music … are processed in different parts of the brain and reassembled to make what we experience as music. Similarly, language is broken up into the perception and processing of phonemes and meaning and comprehension. Music and language both rely on perception and processing of assembled units with temporal and tonal features that are associated with unique symbols – notes in the case of music, letters in the case of language. Both music and language are multisensory. (p. 120)

Multisensory learning is the purview of the young learner. While schools in the United States have tended to emphasize logical-mathematical and linguistic approaches to pedagogy, entire potential repertoires of teaching and learning have languished and many otherwise bright and eager-to-learn children have been left behind.

The Role of Dramatic Play

Children at play are actually engaged in serious learning. Through play, they reenact real-life or imaginative situations, solve problems, explore and resolve relationships with others, and experiment with new roles.

Acknowledgment of the significance of play has deep roots in early childhood education. Pestalozzi (1915) viewed play as important in developing children's imaginations, a significant factor in their growth as learners. In the 1930's Susan Isaacs (as cited in Smilansky & Shefatya, 2004), reported that "dramatic play enables the child to progress in the socialization process while, at the same time, it projects him (sic) into situations where he (sic) must think, explore, and strive at a much higher level than…would be expected at his (sic) chronological age" (p.139). According to Blatner (1995), role reversal in role-playing not only develops empathy, but also promotes risk-taking, a necessary component for creativity, by encouraging comfort with making a mistake.

Vygotsky (1962) has expounded prolifically on the sociocultural importance of play in the development of higher mental functions in children. Rea (2001) comments on children's adaptive-creative thinking during play. Further, there is considerable evidence that play during early childhood can predict later facility in divergent thinking (Russ, Robins, & Christiano, 1999). Children are very aware of social situations and can reenact them with considerable accuracy in their dramatic play.

Paley (1988) found this to be true in her work with four-year olds as she observed what she called their "fantasy play." In *Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays*, Paley (1988) chronicles three themes that pervade the creative play in her preschool classroom: bad guys, birthdays, and babies. She explains her interest in children's dramatic play as her belief that it is their most significant way of making meaning.

Novelty is an intriguing and attractive aspect of play for children and, thus, highly motivational as a learning strategy in the classroom. Roskos and Christie (2002) emphasize that "much of play's delight is in the unfamiliar and unexpected …children are challenged by surprising facts and puzzling, even shocking, ideas that invite adaptation and clarification of existing knowledge" (p. 47). Again, the emphasis here is on the fostering of creative and fluid thinking or, as Roskos and Christie so eloquently described it, "Play, in other words, is a dynamic knowledge system that fluctuates at the edge of children's capabilities" (p. 47).

The Role of Movement and Dance

Anyone who has ever worked with young learners is well aware that they are not stationary figures. They move! Sitting still for extended periods of time is not only alien to children, but it might appear that it is virtually impossible. Therefore, it is evident that movement can be an age-appropriate and effective educational tool.

For instance, it has been previously noted that Gay (2000) cites several research studies showing that music and movement enhanced the academic performance of African-American students. These activities included not only dance but also clapping and other movement activities. Further, acquiring spatial reasoning assists children in the study of geometry and other aspects of higher mathematics, and as Perret and Fox (2004) note, "learning to dance improves spatial reasoning" (p. 45).

Integration of movement and dance with other subject areas has proven to be an important means of helping all children learn. Smith (2002) writes of teaching narrative writing through dance. She worked with first graders using dance integrated with lessons across the curriculum. She maintains, "every child learns by moving… In dance, children interpret ideas and feelings through the use of their bodies in an open-ended search for a unique movement vocabulary" (p. 91). Smith, among others, advocates the use of a drum to assist in children's movement activities. Klug (Klug & Whitfield, 2003), who has worked extensively with children of poverty in both urban and rural settings and is committed to culturally relevant pedagogy, has found that moving to the beat of a drum has enhanced the listening skills of Native American children. Gallas (1994), who incorporated the whole spectrum of the arts with learners, found that using movement helped children to understand science concepts, as in dramatizing the life cycle of the butterfly.

Leaving No Child Behind: Integrating the Arts for Successful Learning

The Reggio Emilia program, founded in Italy after World War II, emphasizes a variety of forms of expression and symbol systems to foster children's intellectual growth. Reggio Emilia's key concept is that of the *competent* child (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1998). This belief, emerging from the chaotic destruction accompanying World War II in Italy, saw children as the future and perceived children as equipped to construct their own knowledge of the world. Among other key concepts, the Reggio approach focuses on what children can do, rather than what they cannot. This perspective contrasts dramatically with the lingering American educational perspective of deficit attributed to children of poverty or from non-dominant cultures. Further, a significant component of any Reggio Emilia school is the belief that children and artists are discoverers of new ways of seeing the world and that learning goes beyond words. Reggio students document their learning through music, dance, and dramatic play interwoven with project learning in small groups emphasizing problem solving. The program offers a model for those populations of children who are underserved and frequently left behind in American schools.

Working with Native American Children

In this section I will focus briefly on one underserved population of students in America's schools that has been part of my research (Klug & Whitfield, 2003), Native American children. Unfortunately, in the United States, teachers tend to design teaching and learning experiences for their students with little attention to their children's communities or cultural backgrounds, and the teaching of Native American children is no exception. Like in many other cultures and communities, the arts, rather than the printed word, play a significant role in these children's lives. Music, especially the drum, which "represents Mother Earth's heartbeat and accompanies both singing and dancing in rituals" (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p.124) is a particularly important language across many Native American cultures. Visual art also is a form of expression in weaving, cradleboards, baskets, etc.

I draw upon my research (Klug &Whitfield, 2003) to relate the following experiences of two pre-service teachers who learned to integrate the arts in their teaching of Native American children. In the first example, Ben (pseudonym) worked with a mentor teacher whose classroom abounded with stuffed animals. She was using the toys to connect with the children's traditional cultural belief that animals are our brothers. Ben cites as his most memorable teaching experience reading *Hawk, I'm Your Brother* by Byrd Baylor (1976). To accompany the story, Ben had the children create their own hawks. When he had to leave for two weeks, he had the children put their hawks in cages until his return. When he returned, he asked the children to retell the story up to the point he had left and was astounded when children could do so virtually word for word. As descendants of an oral culture, their skill is not surprising, but for a teacher from another culture it was an unexpected and much appreciated feat. At the end of the story, Ben gave the children the opportunity to either set their hawks free or keep them. Most chose to set them free.

Ben found that the children in his mentor's classroom performed significantly better academically than those in another room whose teacher used more traditional methods in which the learning activities were teacher-directed and scripted. His experience both motivated him to change his own teaching methods and to work with Native American children in the future.

A second example is a pre-service teacher who strove to provide cultural experiences in her students' learning by incorporating music, art, and dance into the curriculum. She and her colleague teachers further established Friday afternoons as a time for the children to demonstrate their dancing, drumming, and flute playing for their parents and elders of the community. These times of sharing not only enhanced the students' knowledge of their own cultures, but also gave them the opportunity to share what they had learned, dressed in the regalia made for them by their elders, garments that were in themselves artworks. And, the Friday performances built a bridge between the school and the community, resulting in a respectfully shared culture, similar to the fundamental tenets of the Reggio Emilia program.

Other Programs that Make a Difference

Perret and Fox (2004) describe a how a program involving collaboration between the Winston-Salem, North Carolina Symphony and Bolton Elementary School engaged children in active participation in and understanding of music. Students at Bolton came predominantly from lower SES homes with nearly 70 percent on free or reduced lunch, living with a single parent, other relative, or in foster homes, and many were homeless or transient. More than 60 percent underperformed on statewide, standardized tests. The program consisted of the symphony's woodwind quintet visiting the school two to three times a week for half hour lessons that they coordinated with the classroom teachers. Each lesson was designed to build upon a previous lesson and before long the children attained academic benefits. The musicians understood that they themselves already used multiple intelligences

(Gardner, 1999) and incorporated those strategies into their own instruction. The musicians and teachers drew parallels between types of intelligences used in both music and academic subjects. For example, according to Perret and Fox,

> Reading music is a linguistic task … while rhythm involves logical-mathematical intelligence, Playing an instrument draws on bodily-kinesthetic ability; and ensemble playing is both a spatial and an interpersonal challenge. For these skills to add up to something pleasing and meaningful requires musical intelligence. (p. 43)

A further example of programs that are attempting to meet the needs of all children through the arts is one initiated by Tucson (Arizona) Unified School District. The district has developed a successful program called Opening Minds to the Arts (OMA). Inspired by a presentation at the National Symphony Association in 1994 about the Winston-Salem music integration program, the then-Tucson symphony president led the initiative to bring a similar program to Tucson. In collaboration with the University of Arizona School of Music and Dance and the Tucson Symphony, the program now serves nearly 2000 students, 700 teachers, and 44 schools in the Tucson Unified School District (2008). This exemplary program has been recognized by the Arts Education Project in Washington D.C. as a national model. From 2001-2004, the research group WestEd conducted a comparison study between six Tucson elementary schools with high percentages of children who were living in poverty, second language learners, and/or moved frequently. Three schools participated in the OMA curriculum, which incorporated music, opera, dance, theater, and visual arts into reading, writing, math, and science, while the other three schools used "standard" teaching methodology. The study found that OMA significantly improved students' test scores in reading, writing, and math as well as improving teachers' effectiveness.

These large-scale examples must also be supported by the work of individual teachers who are committed to ensuring that all children learn and who recognize the role of the arts in facilitating that learning. For instance, Klug, mentioned previously, has incorporated a variety of arts into her work with Native American elementary school children on a reservation in the West. Strongly committed to culturally relevant pedagogy, she encourages students to express their understandings of literacy materials through their drawings. Because Native American children often come from cultures that value oral tradition, storytelling, drama, and dance, each of these approaches is consonant with the culture from which these children come and honors that which they bring to the learning experience.

Conclusion

Young children about to enter the portals of academe generally look forward to going to school. It signifies a rite of passage, a way to be more "grown up," a giant step into the world at large. They bring to this experience energy, eagerness, hope, and enthusiasm for the rich world of learning that awaits them.

Yet, a one-size-fits-all curriculum driven by standards, “drill and grill”, and testing, and often unrelated to anything relevant to the children, is a recipe for failing a substantial number of them. Rather than serving as a “boost up”, education can become a step down, particularly for those children from homes that lack many of the resources identified as essential for school success - abundant literacy materials, caregivers with both the skill and time to read to them, fluency in the English language, as well as adequate resources in the areas of nutrition, housing, and medical care.

What all children need most in educational contexts is culturally sensitive teaching that respects and includes their unique and individual ways of making meaning. Do we really want our children to experience the loss of creativity described in Harry Chapin’s (1978) song, *Flowers Are Red that* is based on his son’s experience at school? The disheartening tale told in its lyrics about a child who uses original colors and shapes to draw flowers and who is compelled by a teacher to draw flowers that are “real”, i.e. flowers that are red and leaves that are green. When the child changes schools, he no longer creates his unique floral expressions, instead repeating his previous teacher’s admonition that “flowers are red and green leaves are green.” The song is all the more poignant in that it describes the process of depriving young children of the freshness of expression they bring to schooling as they confront rigidity and disrespect for the creativity they bring to learning.

Arizona’s 2008 Teacher of the Year, Robert Kerr, a primary grade teacher, believes in the role of teachers as change agents for their students. He maintains

> It is a teacher’s responsibility to ensure curriculum meets the needs of students, advances them academically, and empowers them as thinkers. … Cultural relevancy is not only empowering to students, it also recognizes students for who they are and pushes them to think and act with their realities (Arizona Republic, 2007).

Empowers! Should not the role of education be, from children’s earliest years, to empower them? Empower them to think great thoughts, to dream great dreams, to do great things? It is within the purview of the arts, as dynamic components of education, to develop creativity and fluidity of thinking, to develop parts of the brain neglected in a one-size-fits-all curriculum. And, more importantly, provide children with a broad repertoire of intellectual and social tools for success, both in the present and in the future. Let the arts be, as Gandini (2005) declared, “a reaction against the concept of the education of young children based mainly on words and simple-minded rituals” (p. 7). Let the arts enable each child to become, as Vygotsky (1978) put it, “a head taller” (p. 102).

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