

Arts-based Teaching: A Pedagogy of Imagination and a
Conduit to a Socially Just Education

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Abstract

This article describes a study in which 53 teachers participating in arts-based professional development courses and workshops gained a profound understanding of the role of the arts in education and an appreciation for the powerful role the arts can play in pedagogy and social justice. The findings of study demonstrate how arts-based instructional approaches contributed to the teachers' perceptions about the importance of students' active engagement in the learning process (i.e., the importance of student voice) and the role of higher-order thinking in providing all children the possibility of success in learning. We discuss how the described study was based on action research and how the participants' perspectives were discerned from their writings using document analysis.

Introduction

This paper presents findings from the impact of arts-based, in-service, professional development training on participating teachers' readiness and ability to adopt pedagogy of social justice. We begin by examining the underlying political and personal responsibilities teachers assume when they decide to work as educators and to be part of a community dedicated to the education of our children. Many educational researchers and theorists have described teachers' and systemic responsibilities to children, and we find it useful to draw from their theories to engage in a meaningful discussion of pedagogy emphasizing social justice. Next, we examine the current state of the field of education related to arts-based instruction. Finally, we analyze how the intersection of these two fields can affect teachers' beliefs, attitudes, skills, and behavior. Using document analysis and action research, we cull examples from the writings of 53 teachers. The teachers participated in three arts-based professional development six-week summer courses entitled "Arts-Based Teaching" in addition to a one-day professional development workshop. We also draw upon data from concurrent student in-class residencies involving approximately 200 students. From our findings, we conclude the following: the arts have a powerful and important role in the ongoing development of a progressive, democratic, educational pedagogy.

Foundations of a Pedagogy of Social Justice in Education

Social justice is a common philosophical perspective in many fields including politics, religion, and economics. For those in education, concepts of social justice are particularly poignant, prompted by the systemic failure to provide equitable educational opportunities to students who are economically or socially disadvantaged both in terms of access to quality

education and because of poverty. The need for a more socially just curriculum has long been recognized and described by many theorists.

Paulo Freire (1993) described how educational concepts and practices can be analyzed in the context of a pedagogy of social justice. Two major concepts in Freire's writings inform the theoretical basis of his paper. First and foremost, Freire asserted dialog must be a central instrument of education. Gottlieb and LaBelle (1990,p. 3) described Freire's "rehumanizing" discourses having significant value to a teacher's decision making. A teacher can both create opportunities for expression and also use expression as modes of understanding. Freire described children as "unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" giving the teacher an opportunity to create experiences which allow for completing the being. As described by Rafi (2005), Freire sought the liberation of the oppressed by asking teachers to avoid authoritarianism through establishing dialog with their students. In this model, the teacher and the student both contribute to their cognition on the subject being studied through classroom discourse (p. 3908). This leads to a second important concept -- the idea of shared knowledge creation. Freire challenged teachers not to attempt to import educational practices, but rather, to re-invent the curriculum through shared action (Ronald and Roskelly, 2001). In this way, what is learned is not a static set of information but rather a process of thinking, and, therefore, liberation of those who are oppressed.

John Dewey (1938) posited that the responsibility of a democratic society is to develop children's ability to question the status quo in order to move that society forward. Dewey's work is important to understand the state-of-the-art pedagogies concerning social justice. An example of these practices is seen in Edelsky's (2006) description of bilingual classrooms in which the teacher and student can engage in historically- and culturally-shared social activities and together

discover psychological and linguistic practices (p. xi). In her study of classrooms situated in a migrant community in Duncan, Arizona, she found teachers and students struggling with a state-mandated curriculum and their own understandings of functional language (p. 58). Dewey's writings provide a foundation upon which we can build a set of perspectives and practices related to progressive, democratic goals of education. A progressive, democratic education proposes that schools do not merely serve the purpose of translating to children a finite pool of already existing knowledge. We engage in educating children so that our own society can ultimately progress beyond what we already know. Today, Dewey's work challenges educators to consider the role of experience in the child's interaction with the "real world" as a vehicle of opportunity by which we can move toward the goal of education. In his book, *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey stated a democratic society is intentionally progressive, ever widens its interests, and constantly encourages its members to act continuously as guardians of the democracy. It is, therefore, the responsibility of a democratic society to develop children's ability to question the status quo, to create better processes within the society, and to progress toward a more just society. The concept of using discourse as a pedagogical tool, not only for educating but also as the main policy instrument for conceptualizing education, is posited by Henry Giroux (1981). Discourse relates to an understanding of how the school creates and recreates forms of consciousness through the language we use to describe its goals. Since 1976, Giroux has written about teaching and learning and how children should be given the opportunity to "negotiate their own shifting environments," as they often do in the arts. Giroux built on the work of Freire by arguing schools need to construct conditions of empowerment for the majority of students so that discourse becomes a defining feature of education. On the particular subject of discourse, Giroux stated educators should "critically analyze modern forms of discourse which disguise

power relationships and can bring to a specific site the ability to inform and educate” (Giroux, 1981, p. 87). For example, Ladson Billings (1992) contrasted the concepts of international efforts toward literacy to the “literacy campaign” in the United States (p. 381) and suggested literacy skills are technical, social, political and cultural. The current conceptions of literacy in the U.S. are primarily likely linked to a job attainment and must be challenged in order to create opportunities for empowerment (Ladson Billings, 1992). Similarly, Boler (1997) suggested the need for discourse has been prompted by the sudden emergence of the "emotional literacy" curriculum. She suggested without discourse and attention to emotion, teachers focus too heavily on rationality, biology, and pathology and, therefore, limit the possibilities of emotion and relationships. Discourse is a concept that embodies the process of linking knowledge and power.

The call for a socially-just curriculum is profound and is prominent in the literature of the educational field. Boutte (2008) described the transfer from theory to practice. For example, Dewey’s broad principles and theories relating to social justice provide high ideals, but these principles and theories provide few practical approaches to achieve those ideals [in the classroom] (McDonald, 2008). Apple (2000) suggested the beliefs teachers hold and bring to the classroom about students and their in-class capabilities are significant indicators of how socially just their pedagogy will be in the classroom. When teachers give credence to the concept that some students are not able to learn, it creates a significant deterrent to democratic education. However, there are significant questions as to whether or not teachers are able to do take on the challenge of focusing on social justice in schools that are focused on teaching to the test. For example, Ellsworth (1992) suggested when discourse is a popular practice in classrooms, the results of discourse often become vehicles of repression (p. 298). Perhaps, as we suggest, the

arts, particularly the performing arts, give the opportunity to challenge the status quo instead of reinforcing it as do traditional forms of discourse. This study examines arts-integration as a means to empower teachers to translate theory into action in the classroom and to view the classroom as an arena for social justice.

Arts-based Teaching

To consider the impact of student voice (i.e., students' active and personalized participation in what and how they learn) and a progressive education (as described by Dewey) on the learning experience of all children, the role of arts-based teaching in education should be considered. Arts-based teaching furthers the functional understanding and practical application of current cognitive and affective learning theories. It is an instructional approach strongly aligned with brain research. This research posits that while the learning process takes place in each student's mind, learning is enhanced when the teaching environment gives students opportunities to think out loud, exchange ideas with their peers, and produce collaborative work. For example, Wolfe found "concrete experience is one of the best ways to make strong, long-lasting neural connections" (2001, p. 188). Arts-based teaching provides opportunities for these concrete experiences. Further, recent findings compiled by seven cognitive neuroscientists and presented in the Dana Consortium Report, *Learning, Arts and the Brain: A Report on Arts and Cognition* describes the interaction between art-based experiences and training and the "ability of the brain to learn in other cognitive domains" (2008, p. v). Additionally, arts-based teaching engages students in authentic learning through delivering classroom practices that develop student capacity to function within our culture while incorporating elements of their own culture.

Support for the use of the arts as a means by which children can achieve academic success and strength of self-esteem comes from many sources. In an in-depth study conducted by

Anita Page (1983), first, second, and third-grade students were tested for comprehension using dramatization or listening. Page's 1983 study found children were more engaged and scored higher on comprehension tests when the story was dramatized than when students were only listening to the story. The study also clearly demonstrated the drama "had more effect on the younger (grade one) students than older students (grades two and three)" (Page, 1983). To support Page's findings, a study evaluating Shakespeare & Company's National Shakespeare Institute (1998) found dramatically enacting Shakespeare's works allowed students to gain rich understanding of difficult texts. The study by the National Shakespeare Institute also "provides a model of how arts-based, project-based learning can assist students in developing higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills" (Catterall, 2006, p. 49).

In a study of fifth-grade students in remedial reading classes using three methods of instruction, results suggested, "creative drama assists students to develop 'mental images' of stories, which in turn helps with comprehension" (Catterall, 2006, p. 23). Stevenson and Deasy (2005) described this arts-rich environment as a "third space" where young people and adults can create in an environment free of barriers imposed by themselves or by others. Activities engaging students in this manner not only have the promise of increasing student achievement, but also have the potential of contributing to a socially-just curriculum (Zyngier, 2008). In a National Endowment for the Arts document, "Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement", it is noted "the benefits associated with study of the arts are inclusive of all students, although they can be greatest for those who are educationally or economically disadvantaged. And, an arts-rich learning environment can have far-reaching effects that extend to the entire school and surrounding community" (Rupert, 2006, p. 15).

Methodology

Arts-Based Study: From Theory to Practice

This study describes how teachers' concepts of social justice in education were enhanced through art-based professional development courses and workshops. One of the authors, Gail Humphries Mardirosian, designed the arts-based Imagination Quest (*IQ*) professional development course and workshop and was involved as team leader in the action research project. Her contributions generated a “community of practice” in a reflective process throughout the professional development experiences. Participants in the extensive workshops included K - 12 teachers from Washington, D.C., from all subject areas including special education. Teachers in the field workshop included students and teachers from grades two through five. Teachers' development of instructional strategies were designed to address a pedagogy of social justice, which included giving students voice, developing a problem-solving and social equity perspective, and helping students develop their own understanding of cultural capital through an examination of their own culture and its impact on their learning. . Document analysis of teachers' writing was used as a tool to understand the themes of social justice in teachers' pedagogical approaches and the degree to which those approaches were impacted by their participation in the arts-integrated professional development programs.

The professional development courses and workshop in this study were based on an arts-integrated teaching and learning model, Imagination Quest (*IQ*). In *IQ*, the arts are used as a pathway to understanding and as tools for learning and have the goal of realizing potential in each individual student. To that end, a particular target of the *IQ* program are Title I schools often serving at-risk students, who because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, and/or economic disadvantage, face a greater risk of low educational

achievement and/or reduced academic expectations. *IQ* is based on the premise that arts-based teaching can help generate a fair system of education through the accommodation of different ways of learning and acknowledgement of and respect for the different cultures and backgrounds that exist in today's classrooms. Its primary goal is to engender teacher effectiveness in the classroom inhering to greater student achievement; fostering creative, analytical, and social skills; and, providing ALL students with the opportunity to succeed in learning.

Drawing upon Hammond, the workshops aimed to manifest a democratic pedagogy that “supports freedom of expression, inclusion of multiple perspectives, opportunities to evaluate ideas and make choices, and opportunities to take on responsibility and contribute to the greater good” (1996, p. 144). They furthered, as Gutman (1987) posited, teaching and learning involving knowing, doing, and analyzing; developing student capacity to function within a community of learners; and, attempting to realize democratic education. By fostering learning through the arts, the workshops also provided teachers and students with opportunities for ownership, invention, and self-actualization, creating a space for both the teacher and the student to “find their voice.”

These professional development courses and workshops were designed to facilitate teachers' effectiveness in the classroom through the development of experiences linked to the participating teachers' core curriculum and to their school systems' standards of learning for both content and the arts. Through modeling, guided practice, coaching, and co-teaching, teachers were provided both a theoretical and practical foundation for applying arts-based teaching and learning strategies. The experiential approach used in *IQ* involves the teacher participant in a 4-Rs sequence of activities: (1) reading selections informing the theoretical framework of arts-based teaching; (2) reacting through and to the theories in authentic learning

experiences and discussion; (3) responding to the theories through the arts-based mechanisms (body, voice, mind, and imagination); (4) reflecting on the full scope of the learning process through analyzing the practical experiences as they connect to the theoretical framework. The teachers were also provided with multiple possibilities for lesson plan development articulating the studied learning theories into instructional practices.

This model highlighted links between the techniques of arts-based activities and cognition and memory via processes such as:

- Dual coding—enhancing memory by presenting material in both verbal and non-verbal representations, i.e., images, sign language.
- Hot cognition—enhancing memory by arousal of emotions and furthering personal connection to the content, i.e., relating the learning to the students’ own experiences.
- Making meaning/comprehension—furthering associations using multiple symbol systems, i.e., music, dance, visual arts...

The following categories of activities helped teachers construct knowledge that relies on the arts:

Arts-Based Games	Drama/Music/Movement/Play	Scripted Performance
Using movement, body language, and visual symbols to connect language to meaning with body analogies,	Using role-play, visual theatre, improvisations, songs and dances that develop analogous thinking but in more extended scenarios and with more complex or expansive concepts.	Semi-formal or formal presentation developed over time and shared with an audience and integrating elements of theatre, music, dance, sign language, and the visual arts.

While many of the teachers who participated in this study appeared eager to embrace new pedagogy, elements of apprehension, skepticism, and even fear were evident in their writings. Many teachers expressed concerns about “not being artistic enough to use this approach.” Others feared “not having the energy or the time for lesson plan development using the arts.” And others had exemplified defiant attitudes of “OK, I’m a math teacher, show me how this is relevant to me.” But as was evidenced through their concluding written and oral responses and ownership of the pedagogy via the transfer from training to classroom practice, the teachers’ initial outlooks changed to a positive stage. By the end of the workshops, the teachers were enthusiastically ready to adopt the arts-based instructional innovation. One teacher, who initially believed the course to be “intimidating,” arrived for her final (required) portfolio presentation in complete scuba diving outfit as she presented her self-developed lessons on *The Rainbow Fish*. An excerpt from another teacher’s poem presented on the last day of the class also demonstrates the teachers’ readiness to adopt arts-based instructional practices into the classroom:

I’ve learned to make a Juuuuuuuuuuuicy word
 And p-p-p-p-pronounce all my s-s-s-s-sounds
 There was a lot of standing up
 And activities done on the ground
 Poetry and sound
 Even beating on a drum
 Using scarves to create a scene
 Can bring a page alive to anyone
 Acting and applying
 Creating, singing, drawing too
 If it can be fun for me
 There’s no limit to what my kids could do

Based on the teachers’ output, it appeared the initial outlooks had changed to an acceptance that arts-based pedagogy is transformative. One teacher noted, the approach is “an

oasis for today's dehydrated classrooms...bringing back the joy of learning and self-discovery to all our learners.”

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

The data in this study were collected from two sources: (1) writings from participants in three six-week Imagination Quest (*IQ*) *Teach to Reach* professional development courses; and, (2) data collected from a one-day *IQ* professional development workshop followed by a *Learning to Read, Reading to Learn* consisting of seven sessions, in-class student residency, co-conducted by an *IQ*-trained classroom teacher and *IQ* Artist/Educators specializing in visual theatre/sign language and visual arts, along with music and dance, to present a core reading book story content with the use of multiple symbol systems.

Data from the courses were derived from the writings of the participants; data from the workshop were derived from teacher evaluations using a K-W-L qualitative data collection design that included pre- and post-workshop questionnaires. The qualitative data collection included specific prompts in three categories: What I Know (K); What I Want to Learn (W); What I Learned (L). The student residency data were derived from pre- and post-tests for the students involving: picture matching; vocabulary; and, sentence completion. A “Storyboard” assessment was also administered as a way of measuring the students’ understanding of the sequencing of the story and their ability to explain the key plot elements of the story.

Data Analysis

The primary tool of research in this study is document analysis. The use of document analysis engenders a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions. In this study, the document analysis yields teachers’ knowledge and practice of a pedagogy of social justice. Strauss and

Corbin (1990) stated methods of qualitative research can be used to better understand any phenomenon through gaining in-depth information that may be impossible to convey quantitatively. The use of document analysis has been of particular benefit in teacher education. Hansen (1995), for example, used a variety of documents from journal entries and memos written by participants to university policy documents to understand new teacher development.

In this study, teachers' writings before and after participation were transcribed and then imported into a qualitative research analysis program--*Hyperresearch software*. Themes related to social justice were identified using this code-and-retrieve data analysis program. Theories were constructed through an examination of the themes that emerged through the analysis. The data were coded according to predetermined categories and additional emerging subcategories related to social justice. The coding schemes included statements from both the teachers and the residency students garnered through individual student and focus group interviews. The emerging subcategories were identified, discussed, and defined during the coding process. The most appropriate choice for unit of analysis focused on phrases that rationalize the teachers' decision-making process.

Findings

This study focused on the reactions/writings of the 45 teachers who participated in three intensive, arts-based, six-week professional development summer courses in 2005, 2006, and 2007. It also focused on the reactions/writings of nine teachers who participated in a one-day, arts-based professional development workshop and culminating seven-session, in-class student residency. Six of the teachers were assessed—pre- and post—regarding their knowledge and

beliefs about the *IQ* arts-integrated instructional pedagogy and its impact on a pedagogy of social justice.

Using document analysis, certain themes emerged. A prominent theme seen throughout the document analysis is that teachers gained a broader understanding and appreciation of students' talents and skills. The document analysis also revealed teachers more greatly appreciated their own talents and skills as well. Throughout the lessons, teachers focused on how skills related to the arts were potentially linked to their students' increased success in learning. By the end of the study, the teachers developed a common conception that children who might otherwise be unsuccessful in the classroom may be better able to comprehend abstract content elements through the arts. As the teachers incorporated elements of the theory of the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), they acknowledged there are varying abilities and talents possessed by the children in their classrooms that are frequently underappreciated. The teachers attributed this growth in discernment of the children's abilities to their personal experiences in the courses and workshop. The experience of the teachers to participate in arts-based activities encouraged them to comprehend what their students would gain in the classroom from an arts-integrated pedagogy. One teacher who "took a risk" commented:

What I saw in the rest of the group were people who were confident, creative, uninhibited, and imaginative. What I saw in myself was a person who was inhibited, who felt uncreative and unimaginative, and who lacked confidence. I felt that I did not measure up against all of the others.

In the end of this session, this teacher commented, "If I can do it, they [my students] can do it."

To demonstrate the understanding gained by teachers relating to their students' skills and abilities, it is useful to include some comments derived from the participating teachers' writings. One teacher noted, "This workshop has added so much color to my life. I have a more positive attitude towards teaching, lesson planning, and student involvement." Furthering this

theme, another teacher observed, “By incorporating arts into my lessons, I can achieve a higher level learning from my students.” In addition to the understanding of the importance of arts-based skills in the classroom, teachers developed a commitment to diverse instructional approaches across classroom settings. The participating teachers’ writings included discussions of a broad set of concerns related to what was described as “traditional” approaches to teaching and a focus on basic knowledge instead of a focus on higher-level thinking. This focus on basic knowledge was particularly noted in schools and classrooms where the majority of children came from communities of low socioeconomic standing or were second-language learners. Teachers expressing these concerns perceived the arts could be more beneficial to children as arts-based instruction may create more opportunity to learn. Examples of teachers’ statements around this theme included the following:

“I now find the use of the arts appears to be extremely beneficial for the students in Title I schools. Arts integration, that is, arts-based teaching and learning, gives every student a chance to experience the subject matter and turns the abstract into something more concrete.”

Further evidence of the importance of arts-based instruction in enhancing socially just pedagogy is the increase in resistance and risk-taking in teachers’ vocabulary seen through the document analysis. Teachers regularly discussed ways in which children should be exposed to different ways of knowing and a different set of concepts related to children’s roles in the classroom. They demonstrated a commitment to meet with school principals to discuss the need for more time for student-based performances; the need to allow students to assume a role in the organization and construction of the school calendar to include more time for their own interests and, the need to find ways to bring parents/caregivers and community members onto the school grounds for positive, student-centered activities. One teacher said, “This class has opened my mind to a world of possibilities with the school system.” Another said, “I have already asked for

a teachers' back-to-school workshop on arts-integration." Another stated: "Every Principal and teacher should be a part of this approach!" Teachers also related statements from parents/caretakers who had been provided the opportunity to see their children respond to arts-integrated instructions. These statements included:

"I learned that there is more than one way of looking at things. By asking my child questions, we are able to work problems out together."

"The transfer of knowledge comes in many different forms. Sometimes the transfer provides for learning that was unintended. My child now understands the importance of repetition. He sees how important it is to memorize lines. And now, he applies that same understanding and patience to other areas, such as multiplication tables."

Another important theme of a socially just pedagogy revealed in the document analysis is the importance of students' voices in the curriculum. Analysis of teachers' writings revealed an ongoing discussion of the importance of engendering students' engagement in the classroom, both literally and theoretically. Teachers described the desire to challenge students to act out the books they were reading or the ideas they had about society. They also discussed the need for students to spend time in the classroom discussing works and ideas, such as segregation and racism, relevant to their lives. One teacher remarked, "I have learned how to make learning applicable to my students' culture." An illustrative example of this theme comes from another teacher:

"Before, I would have never imagined having my students really study something more written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., other than the "I have a Dream" speech. Now I know my students need to read and perform more of his works to better understand exactly what that dream was."

Many teachers commented on their own new abilities and the development of their own "voice," On teacher noted, "I am now able to use innovative ways to reach children and teach them to think on a higher level—to help them in the process of critical thinking." Another

teacher reacted to the use of arts in the classroom in saying, “The arts can inspire, stretch, and increase every student’s ability to learn and ability to live.

Conclusions

The authors conclude the arts play a key role in generating pedagogy of social justice and can engender democracy in the classroom. The arts offer an opportunity for meaningful, unfettered creation. The arts allow one, through the act of making, to actively engage in one’s own development. The generation or making of art builds one’s understanding about relationships to others and to the environment. Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, the Lincoln Associate Professor of Ethics at Arizona State University’s College of Education, stated making art is a meaningful social action since the maker, in order to both make and comprehend the art-piece, comes in contact with both her/his personal and social being. Blumenfeld-Jones suggested that:

The arts may be educationally justified, not because of the ways we can understand ourselves through the examination and appreciation of art but, rather, because of the ways we can understand ourselves and live in a particular way through the making of our own art works (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1997).

Much of the extant research on the use of the arts in education focuses on students, yet the arts can also assist teachers in constructing a vocabulary related to a more progressive, socially-just curriculum. This study expands the use of the arts in the classroom beyond students creating and producing scripted plays to the retelling and dramatization of literature as an instructional strategy for the teachers. In furthering their understanding of the use of drama in engaging students in their own education teachers assist students in constructing and developing their own voice. The results of this study indicate the participating teachers increasingly saw students as important contributors within the school culture. The study also supports other research that suggests that policy makers should consider how to advocate for teachers in their quest to attend

to students' individual needs while developing a critical stance toward understanding how those needs are constituted and experienced (McDonald, 2008). Teachers and educational leaders-- if committed to the types of schools envisioned by Freire, Dewey, or Giroux-- should embrace and endorse the arts as a means by which teachers help children to develop the tools of dialog. These tools may be gained through the body, the voice, the mind, or the imagination. Specifically, teachers must act as the conduits by which students are given the opportunity to do something much greater than simply appreciating art, as students must be allowed to become involved in the arts in a critical and generative fashion. This deep experience with the arts provides students with the opportunities to examine the world and their role in it. As suggested by Rafi (2003), through these arts-constructive experiences, students and teachers can come together to study curriculum and meaningful issues in depth.

This study begins to describe the ways in which the arts might enable teachers to engage in pedagogies of social justice and develop sophisticated forms of emotional literacy and awareness in their students and themselves (Boler, 1997). A deeper question of how teachers can enable students to utilize the arts and other extra-curricular outlets such as debate and student government to develop their own voice should be undertaken. The analysis of teachers' writings in this study leads to the idea that this approach may have contributed to a change in instructional methods for the study participants, but a powerful questions remains-- how do teachers in the global educational system bridge the intersection between student voice, perspective, and resistance with student learning and the test-driven nature of the school environment?

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