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COMMENTARY - The Case for Humanistic Curriculum: A Discussion of Curriculum Theory Applied to Art Education

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A recent personal event, as well as frequent media reports of school violence, bullying, and public outbursts of vitriol, have given me cause to reconsider curricular approaches to K-12 art education. The personal event involved my eight-year-old daughter, Mackenzie, when she came home from school to relay a story to her mother and I about a troubling lunchroom occurrence. A classmate had singled her out for her cultural background and made efforts to exclude her from group interaction. I had long ago braced myself for the moment when my children might experience prejudice of one kind or another, as my wife's religion is Judaism and her nation-of-origin is Mexico. It was the former factor that eventually caught the attention of Mackenzie's classmate, who asked a group of students at their large lunch table to raise their hands if they believed in Jesus. Afterward, he turned to Mackenzie and announced that he only wanted to sit with those who shared his beliefs. He then made his wishes more clear and direct: "Mackenzie, I don't want you to sit with us because you are Jewish."

This incident resulted in immediate long discussions with our daughter about her own feelings and reactions, the behavior and the actions of others, and also private discussions between my wife and I about our own responsibilities as parents. After the fact, this event gave me further cause to reflect more deeply on the application and implementation of curricular approaches and theories in art education. Like many others before me, I wondered what role art education could play in fostering caring and sensitive relationships and experiences for children, in some small way paving a path for a more harmonious society. In this commentary, I share my musings on this topic by first examining the major curricular theories that have dominated trends in art education over the last six or seven decades, and then state my argument for a renewed emphasis on updated versions of humanistic curricula in art education. A concluding section includes a brief personal reflection connecting humanistic approaches to another strand of my

research agenda, multi-age art education, and offers a synthesis of the ideas presented throughout the article.

Background: Curricular Theory Applied to Art Education

McNeil (2009) categorizes overarching curricular purposes into four conceptual paradigms: the systemic curriculum, the academic curriculum, social reconstructionism, and the humanistic curriculum. These curricular theories offer frameworks related to the intentions of those who create and implement curriculum, and a brief discussion of the manifestation of each theory in the field of art education is in order to frame the arguments presented in this commentary.

Systemic Curriculum

Systemic curricular frameworks emphasize the measuring of student learning through structured assessment and the consistent alignment of classroom objectives and activities with predetermined measurable benchmarks or standards (McNeil, 2009). Curriculum developers begin with these standards in mind, and the quality of teaching and learning is largely determined by the documentation of how well students have met such benchmarks, often through the process of standardized test scores. These forms of systemic accountability are featured prominently in today's U.S. schools and can be traced back to government initiatives such as the federally mandated *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (Chapman, 2005) and more recently, the *Common Core Standards* initiated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012; Kendall, 2011). With standards-based instruction mandated for nearly all public schools in the U.S., one would be hard-pressed to find a contemporary domestic approach to K-12 art education that has not been impacted by systemic curricular frameworks in some way. In this context, art teachers have been routinely

asked to document student achievement of state and national standards throughout the past several decades. The systemic curriculum has been criticized for its overemphasis on individual student competition over collaboration, its lack of attention to creativity, problem-solving, and higher order thinking, and also for the disadvantages presented to diverse and special populations in a system that is so strictly standardized (McNeil, 2009).

Academic Curriculum

Curricula guided by academic frameworks focus on presenting and organizing content in ways that feature established methods and questions central to specific subject areas and academic disciplines (McNeil, 2009). The roots of this approach stem from ideas proposed by Jerome Bruner (1960) involving the introduction of methods of inquiry that resemble those used by professionals working in the subject area under investigation. These strategies served as the supporting framework for the creation of discipline based art education (DBAE), an academic model of art instruction focused on approaches used by artworld professionals, not just in studio production, but also as art historians, art critics, and as aestheticians (Greer, 1984). DBAE dominated K-12 art education during the late 1980s and most of the 1990s, and many art teachers became oriented to writing rigid sequential lesson plans that featured objectives in art production, criticism, history and aesthetics. However, a paradigm shift has since occurred in the field (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010) with DBAE falling out of favor among many for its lack of attention to multicultural issues, visual culture, and an overreliance on Western views of art historical superiority.

Social Reconstructionism

Social reconstructionist curricula centers on aims to enact social reform, often in critical examination of existing power structures and with the intent of creating positive societal change

through direct action and student participation (McNeil, 2009). For some, the roots of social reconstructionist pedagogy come from the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2002) and his efforts to liberate oppressed and illiterate populations in Brazil through educational programs. His work was influential to educators addressing illiteracy in other poverty-stricken areas, as well as issues related to feminism, multiculturalism, and community-specific concerns. Social reconstructionism has received increased attention in art education during the new millennium from those concerned with a variety of social justice issues (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, & Paul, 2010; Quinn, Ploof, & Hochritt, 2012) and also those who advocate for the study of visual culture as a way to critically examine the power and influence of popular media (Tavin, 2003). Critics of social reconstructionism identify shortcomings related to difficulties in assessing student work and the long-term impact of such efforts. They also find fault when the approach becomes dogmatic in the hands of teachers who push their own political agendas, rather than allowing community issues to emerge democratically from local viewpoints, revealing a contradiction in the overall intent of the approach by supporting the power of instructors' persuasive convictions over that of students (McNeil, 2009).

Humanistic Curriculum

A basic premise of humanistic pedagogical frameworks is that curricula focused solely on academics is incomplete, and that it is the responsibility of teachers to address the needs of the whole child, including social and emotional learning (Aloni, 2011; Hewitt, 2006; McNeil, 2009). Such a stance lies in opposition to standardized frameworks that emphasize uniform approaches meant to fit all students and instead emphasizes the belief that each child is unique and that diversity, rather than uniformity, is a key ingredient to good pedagogy (Eisner, 2002). Believing that standardization leads to depersonalized experiences in schooling, humanistically orientated

educators often provide opportunities for students to explore relevant interests through units that relate to real life or by giving students choices in selecting topics for study (Hewitt, 2006; Huitt, 2009; McNeil, 2009). Such units often feature projects that emphasize creative problem solving, in the belief that there can be multiple solutions to educational and social issues, rather than one correct standard answer.

Many aspects of the humanistic curriculum were prominently featured during the heights of the creative self-expression era in art education during the 1960s and 1970s (Zimmerman, 2010), and were inspired by the ideas of Viktor Lowenfeld (1964) who stressed the importance of fostering creativity and individuality in student artwork. Although individuality is a point of emphasis in humanistic curricula, cooperative learning and group work are also featured as ways to nurture social and emotional needs and to teach students the importance of working together while accepting differences of opinion, background, and experiences (Huitt, 2009; McNeil, 2009). With this emphasis on peer collaboration and on establishing multidimensional classrooms that provide students with high levels of choice in exploring interests, the humanistic curriculum shares much in common with constructivist learning theories (Shunk, 2004) that assume that people actively build knowledge through their interactions with others and through direct experience (DeVries, Edmiaston, Zan, & Hildebrandt, 2002).

Proponents of systemic and academic frameworks often criticize humanistic approaches for placing a greater emphasis on idealistic teaching methods over the importance of assessment and determining whether or not such methods are truly beneficial to student learning and achievement (McNeil, 2009). Social reconstructionists urge supporters of humanistic curricula to go beyond the empathetic exploration of student social and emotional needs, to actually taking action on social justice issues.

A Need for Renewed Emphasis on Humanistic Approaches

It is unlikely that the strict classification of various versions of art education into different curricular frameworks accurately describes the eclectic approaches embraced by most K-12 practitioners as “there is likely to be a mix of these visions in any school or classroom” (Eisner, 2002, p. 25). I think that this is how it should be. An eclectic approach that borrows the best from existing methods has its merits, as has been shown by the establishment of comprehensive programs that include the various disciplines of DBAE along with visual culture studies and opportunities for creative self-expression within a socially reconstructive framework (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). As a colleague once put it to me, there is no need to throw the Bauhaus out with bathwater, provided that the methods of the Bauhaus still have relevance. Art teachers working in public schools are required to deal with systemic standards, and having such standards can provide a positive guiding focus, as long as these benchmarks are not overtly prescriptive or close-ended. Using academic examples from various disciplines of the professional artworld can be used to great effect, provided that teachers are mindful in selecting diverse examples and cases. Finally, it is hard to argue against the virtues of addressing social reconstructionist issues, unless those issues are dogmatically dictated by authority figures teaching students what to think, instead of how to think critically.

I support all of these approaches in a blended comprehensive fashion, but have concerns regarding the under-emphasis of humanistic approaches in art education during recent decades. Other than specific attention paid to creativity and holistic art education from some scholars (Campbell, 2006; London, 2006; Zimmerman, 2010), the humanistic curriculum has, since the days of Lowenfeld, taken successive backseat status first to DBAE, and later to visual culture art education and standards-driven models. With increased reports of bullying and school violence

situated within an educational system that emphasizes individual competition through the strict guise of standardization (Chapman, 2005), I have become concerned that schools and art education are not doing enough to balance academic concerns with the social and emotional needs of children. I advocate a renewed emphasis on humanistic curriculum, blended with salient aspects of other approaches, that draws greater attention to nurturing humane and respectful relationships with one another through such strategies as carefully selected thematic units, cooperative group assignments, and the development of caring teaching personas and activities that encourage students to respond critically and expressively in their work.

Thematic Instruction

Connecting art curricula to themes of interest in students' lives is not a new idea (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Stewart & Walker, 2005; Walker, 2001). The use of such themes or enduring ideas is often promoted as a way to make art instruction more meaningful to all students, even those who will not go on to study art later as adults, partially because such an approach can illustrate art's relevance in addressing concepts that have concerned humankind throughout time. I also advocate the use of thematic instruction, but more specifically urge art teachers to consider the selection of big ideas related to compassion, empathy, identity, respect for differences, and other topics that may tap into opportunities for social and emotional learning.

Other scholars have argued for the exploration of humanistic themes in other subject areas, including Noddings' (2004) proposal to study the topic of war as a way to enhance student compassion and critical thinking, as well as Gardner's (2000) recommendation to study the holocaust as part of a curriculum addressing principles of morality, truth, and goodness. I believe that the subject of visual art can be just as useful in studying these themes, as artists have dealt with similar issues in their work (Campbell, 2006). Humanistic themes can be introduced

through the exploration of selected individual works of art (such as Judy Chicago's *Rainbow Shabbat*), a group of art works from various artists on a common theme (perhaps, respect for diversity), or artworks centered around personal and historical events (such as Miné Okubu's or Henry Sugimoto's depictions of their experiences in Japanese American Internment Camps, or work from children's art classes led by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis at the Terezín concentration camp during World War II).

In introducing these works of art and related themes, art teachers should facilitate authentic class dialogue (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) allowing students to express their viewpoints through class discussions and in resulting projects. Teaching studio technique would still be necessary, but as a way to allow students to effectively communicate their feelings and perspectives on the theme, not as an end to itself. The resulting artworks would be tied together by a common humanistic thread, yet individual pieces may look very different from one another since they would be guided by open-ended themes intended to foster creative responses and individuality.

Cooperative and Collaborative Work

A central tenet of humanistic curricular strategies involves the nurturing of respectful relationships between students while encouraging the acceptance of differences in opinion, approaches, and background (Aloni, 2011; McNeil, 2009). While these tenets can be explored at a certain level through thematic discussion, collaborative and cooperative activities may lead to more direct opportunities for students to experience diverse perspectives. When carefully facilitated by adept teachers, students working on collaborative assignments are presented with opportunities to share responsibilities, hear alternative solutions to problems, and learn the benefits of compromise and teamwork (Hurwitz, 1993). Learning theories also posit that

carefully organized and scaffolded group work may allow participants to reach new levels of knowledge that they may not have been able to reach on their own (Vygotsky, 1934/2012; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

In consideration of the potential benefits of group work as well as the recent emphasis placed on student collaboration within the Framework for 21st Century Learning (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2012), I encourage art educators to incorporate such cooperative opportunities into their repertoire on a more frequent basis. For art teachers seeking resources on structuring these types of activities, Bobick (2009) has made practical recommendations for implementing cooperative learning in art classrooms, and Hurwitz (1993) has detailed a number of suggested projects, including murals, earthworks, mosaics, installations, community planning, multi-media events, and environmental improvement. While lack of time and budget may be potential obstacles in implementing multiple collaborative projects during the course of a school year, I encourage art teachers to consider such assignments annually and remind them that cooperative activities can involve the investigation and discussion of aesthetic and critical issues as well (Bobick, 2009). With a number of art educators noting positive social, emotional, and moral results for students participating in collaborative art-making experiences (Hurwitz, 1993; Hutzel, Russell, & Gross, 2010; Kelehear & Heid, 2002), I believe that even occasional efforts to implement such activities are worthwhile.

Caring Role of the Teacher

The role of humanistic teachers has been described as one where educators adopt a warm and caring presence (Aloni, 2011), facilitate experiences where students are encouraged to explore their own interests and ideas (Hewitt, 2006; Huitt, 2009), and imaginatively present challenging learning situations with more than one answer (McNeil, 2009). I find that all of the

above characteristics can easily be incorporated into the practices of art educators interested in humanistic teaching strategies. Since caring relationships take time to develop, Noddings (2005) recommended that students and teachers stay together for a period of years in order to foster deeper levels of understanding and caring for one another. Such long-term ongoing relationships may be difficult to develop for classroom generalists since the traditional structure of schooling dictates that students progress from one grade level to another, typically abandoning the previous year's homeroom teacher in the process. In contrast, many elementary art teachers may instruct the same students continuously from kindergarten to fifth grade, and some secondary art teachers have the opportunity to build ongoing relationships with students particularly interested in visual art as they re-enroll in elective courses from semester to semester. Regardless of whether or not art teachers see students for consecutive years, it is important that instructors take the time to get to know their students' concerns and interests, as merely spending additional time with one another is not enough to guarantee caring relationships.

Additionally, a humanistic and caring approach to facilitating thematic instruction involves encouraging students to respond to such themes in an open-ended fashion that allows for variability and the representation of diverse opinions and approaches. At times, students can participate in the selection of themes for the year (Kuntz, 2005), and certain contexts may even allow students to select media best suited for responding to given topics. Similar choice-based practices, along with many other learner-directed strategies, have been suggested as effective ways to encourage artistic behaviors and creative thinking in children (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009).

The additional use of student journals, including written or visual responses to teacher-directed prompts, can provide students with another venue for comfortably expressing their thoughts, research, plans, and opinions on engaging classroom themes (Anderson & Milbrandt,

2005; Ruopp, 2004). Art teachers should openly review these journal entries as a way to get to know their students better, constantly staying attuned to individual interests and concerns, and also to encourage students in developing these ideas further in their artwork. Finally, while I encourage art teachers to develop caring personas with their students, I also remind them that they are not licensed therapists, and that deeply troubling personal issues that may arise in journal entries should be referred to the appropriate school or health-care professionals.

Personal Reflections and Conclusions

While the unfortunate incident with my daughter served as an impetus for thinking about instructional approaches in art education more deeply, further reflection has led me to realize that my interest in humanistic curricular frameworks has been present in my own research agenda for some time, as illustrated by my investigations into multi-age art education (Broome, 2009a, 2009b; Broome, Heid, Johnston, & Serig, in press). In brief, multi-age learning classrooms are characterized by the purposeful grouping of students from adjacent grade levels with the intention of building a classroom climate similar to those of caring communities and nurturing families (Nishida, 2009). On more than one occasion, I've been asked why I would build a major portion of my research agenda around a topic that would seemingly offer only pragmatic interest to a small percentage of art teachers. While I've responded differently to these inquiries at different times, I can now offer a more definitive response guided by my concern for the current state of schools and society. My interest in multi-age art education stems from my belief that such models offer real-life exemplars that effectively represent the ideals of humanistic curricula through its use of thematic units, differentiated instruction guided by student interests, cooperative learning (Kuntz, 2005), and the nurturing of sustained caring relationships (Ball, Grant, & Johnson, 2006). While I'm not suggesting that all humanistically orientated classrooms

need to be reorganized into mixed-age groups, art teachers interested in humanistic approaches may wish to investigate these existing examples further as I believe they can learn much from multi-age instructional strategies regardless of whether they teach to mixed-age groups or not.

Overall, the humanistic approaches exemplified by multi-age education have played a supporting role in art education throughout the past four decades, while systemic, academic, and socially reconstructionist curricula have played more-recent starring roles in the form of standards-based instruction, DBAE, and visual culture art education. As I've noted above, I am not calling for the abandonment of these other approaches as I feel each offers elements that can contribute to a renewed emphasis on humanism in art education. In fact, it could be argued that much of what I have called for in this commentary is as much socially reconstructive as it is humanistic, since the central crux of my concerns revolve around emphasizing art education's potential role in bettering personal relationships and society. While I acknowledge the socially reconstructive aspects of my proposal, my intentions are more closely aligned with humanism, as I believe that we must first heal ourselves and our relationships with others before we can ever hope to heal the world.

In consideration of the competitive framework established by high stakes accountability measures in public schools (Chapman, 2005), and increasingly frequent reports of bullying, outbursts of public vitriol, and school violence, I find it reasonable and necessary to return to humanistic sensibilities in creating and implementing art education curriculum. I hope others who share my concerns will consider adopting some of the approaches outlined in this article, including the use of humanistic themes to guide art teaching and learning, the use of cooperative projects and activities in the art room, and the development of caring personas and related approaches by the art teachers who implement such strategies. While I'm not naïve enough to

think that such strategies alone will cause a seismic shift in how humans relate to one another, I do believe that making an effort is imperative and that the potential for art to address such concerns is considerable. Furthermore, I am hopeful that these suggestions offer adequate starting points for other teachers and students to build-on in their future practices, decision-making, and interaction with others. Whatever course art educators decide to take, remaining completely passive will certainly do nothing to improve current situations in which bullying experiences like my daughter's, or exchanges even more troubling, may become increasingly commonplace.

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