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Three Orientations to *Arts* in the Primary Grades: Implications for Curriculum Reform

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SYMPOSIUM Arts Education in Early Childhood

The importance of *arts* activities in the formative years of early childhood and the primary grades is acknowledged both by educators in the *arts* and by general early childhood educators. Researchers have complained about the status quo in the arts. Policymakers have been trying to change content and instructional practices. State officials have been promoting substantial changes in instruction that are designed to deepen students' understanding of the *arts*, enhance their appreciation of the *arts*, and improve their capacity to engage in artistic activities.[1] Nevertheless, the *arts* scene in our schools does not match what is being advocated.

Perhaps one of the problems lies in the way in which the changes in *arts* instruction have been made. The new *arts policies* reflect a general trend toward greater control and specification of school work as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the service that schools provide.[2] However, as Robert Murray pointed out, the current reform proposals fail, as have past proposals, because they attempt to reform *education* simply by telling teachers (and everyone else) what to do, rather than by empowering them to do what must be done.[3] In this article, I offer a description and an interpretation of *arts* curricula in the primary grades that can serve as the basis for reflection on policymaking for curriculum and instruction.

The literature often refers to "the *arts* curriculum" as if the term stands for one entity. *Arts* curricula in the primary grades, however, take many forms. Differences among the *arts* involve specific media and materials that shape practices, the existence and availability of materials and curricular resources, traditions from which the *arts* operate, and teachers' expertise as a function of their preservice *education* (e.g., the greater number of teacher training programs in music and *arts education* than in dance and drama).

In a three-year study of U.S. elementary schools, Robert Stake, Linda Mabry, and I have examined the operational and formal curricula in the visual *arts*, music, drama, and dance. In my case studies, data sources for the primary grade levels included observations of *arts* teaching in K-3 grades in a big city and in small, blue-collar town elementary schools; semi-structured interviews with twenty-three teachers and three principals; and analysis of textbooks, state goals

for the *arts*, and other relevant materials.[4] The use of a qualitative methodology reflects a newly emerging paradigm for *policy* analysis, one that attends to *policy* conditions and contexts, to the nature of teaching and learning, and to teachers' beliefs and commitments.

I found that even within a single art form, there are a myriad of curricula and activities. Because the *arts* are not considered to be "academic," there is more freedom in regard to required content. In general, *arts* textbooks are fewer and less canonical than those in other subject areas. Those who teach the *arts*—specialists and classroom teachers—are extraordinarily diverse in training, commitment, and aspiration. Contexts for *arts* activities also differ widely—from classrooms, studios, and school auditoriums to museums, opera, and theatre halls. With few demands to increase test scores, productivity, and cognitive skills, teachers are left to draw on their own resources, personal beliefs, and visions. At the same time, they also draw upon a small array of customs.

As I examined the operational *arts* curriculum--the actual curriculum as it is going on in the classroom in terms of contents, pedagogies, and evaluation practices--I found that *arts* instruction can be categorized into distinct types, each with its set of educational beliefs about the nature of the *arts*, and each with its distinct educational goals. In the following section, I will portray what I regard to be the three prevalent orientations to the *arts* curriculum as they are manifested in classroom practice: the little-intervention orientation, which is unique to early childhood programs and primary grades; the production orientation, which is prevalent across the elementary level and has penetrated from the upper grades into the primary grades; and the guided-exploration orientation, typically taught by *arts* specialists and classroom teachers who have extensive *arts* backgrounds.

After describing and interpreting these three types of orientation, I will then place them within the contexts of early childhood and aesthetic theories. The operational curriculum relates to the practical and experiential aspects of school, and as such it is much influenced by the goals and values of the schools. Thus, in the discussion, I will reflect on the dynamics between the general school values and *arts* curricula. The article concludes with reflections on some practical implications for *arts* curricula at the primary grade level.

Three Orientations to the Arts Curriculum The Little-Intervention Orientation

Lily Jones, a second-grade teacher, pours glitter, yarn, cotton balls, and other materials into little plastic bowls and arranges them neatly on a back table between scissors and pine cones. Laura makes green stems from yarns and cones. Christopher glues cones on a newspaper. Allison glues glitter on cardboard. Mark folds paper for a magnificent lamp. Children visit with each other and are interested in what the others are doing. Jones summons Allison to help assemble more bowls on the table. Jacob accidentally hits a box and the water colors spill out. Jones: "Just clean up, please." Jones slides from one group to another: "How beautiful...... Neat work." To a boy who seems lost: "Now what I can do is I can cut that out, and I can put glue there, and I can glue the paper; then it will be a little Christmas tree. And if I wanted, now I could glue it and it would be ornaments. Would that be an idea? Why don't you go for it?" "Do you need some help? Are you going to put some glitter on before you finish that? Why don't you paint this and wait on this for a little while?"

Jones's class is characterized by open-ended assignments, freedom to pursue and explore individual projects, pedagogical freedom, and supportive feedback. It manifests her sensitivity to children, her attitudes of respect and caring, and her attention to those who need more specific help. Jones's beliefs regarding child independence and ownership of artwork are reflected in her words as we chatted at the end of this class:

These are their own art projects. They can make anything they want. What I told them at the beginning of the week is to bring any supplies they want to, anything that they would like for art.

The little-intervention approach was featured in those classes that had less pressure for achievement and accountability: primary grades, English as a Second Language (ESL), and special *education*. Of the different *arts*, visual *arts* most commonly used this approach. Teachers of visual *arts* classes provided students with a variety of materials (depending on the school and its financial resources) and also used materials sent from students' homes. Students were expected to come up with their own projects. Teachers took pride in students' initiative, autonomy, and independent thinking. Outcomes varied, ranging all the way from schematized holiday decorations to original ideas and the skillful execution of objects like magnificent lamps and computer and junk sculpture.

Occasionally, this orientation was manifested in dance/movement classes or music activities.[5] Dance classes typically involved individual as well as team movement, reflecting the children's paces and spontaneous gestures as they were trying to follow the rhythm and mood of the music with little teacher monitoring and evaluation. A subcategory of the little-intervention orientation, more passive in terms of student conduct (as compared with the active visual *arts* and dance episodes) involved exposure to artistic stimulus-theatre, dance, and music performances and unguided listening to classical music in class. These sessions were part of the hidden rather than the formal curriculum.[6] When teachers talked about these activities, they legitimized them on the basis of "exposure," and a change of pace that allowed students to relax within a hectic day.

The Production-Oriented Curriculum: Spring Frolic

Springtime Frolic : A Spring Program
Time: 2 o'clock
Place: Sunny Meadow

1:54 p.m. Ladd is in constant motion, explaining the mefit of audience laughter in a performance (with performers, not at them), reminding her students of the text, and directing them to their respective locations. Once in place, they recite the poem, their gestures illustrating content: imitating wings (moving hands), rest (head on hands), then the climactic sentence: "Good morning, good morning, the little birds sing." Ladd examines the reciters, then suggests: "A little further apart so when you do the wings you don't get squelched." They try again, this time allowing space for the flutter. She compliments full movement that starts from the shoulder, then attempts to polish coordination: they need simultaneous, identical movements. Again, they chant happily: "Good morning, good morning, the little birds sing."

This production orientation was manifested in many other classroom episodes. Typically, they involved learning new songs for an upcoming event or rehearsing a dance or a skit. In the visual

arts, this approach was manifested in structured activities creating Thanksgiving turkeys, Valentine hearts, Easter bunnies, and roses for Mother's Day. The production orientation fitted within school expectations for entertainment and school decoration. Music, drama, and dance were a regular part of festive holiday productions and opened and concluded honor programs, with an emphasis on familiar songs ranging from "Jingle Bells" and "Feliz Navidad" to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Both rehearsals and performances reflected attention to the "basics" (e.g., rhythm, pronunciation, contour) but rarely to the aesthetics (expressivity, form).

Visual *arts* that often accompanied productions took the shape of individually painted program notes and holiday decorations of school auditoriums, gyms, corridors, principals' offices, bulletin boards, and classrooms. The "art production" sessions were highly structured and highly routinized in their activities, whether in dance or theatre, precut paper turkeys, or dittoed pumpkin pies.

The production orientation was radically different from the little-intervention approach in that it was prescribed by the teacher and aimed at imitating a "model," whether the teacher's artwork, a song, or a script. It rarely invited students' input, imagination and creativity, or experimentation with ideas or materials. As with the orchestra or ballet group, the teacher assumed the role of the conductor/director, suggested the activity, presented a tangible model, and directed and monitored it very closely. Expectations involved memorization, cohesion, dexterity, and fine motor skills. Unlike the visions and goals of the conductor/director, teachers' goals in this orientation were exclusively on the mechanics of the production, and had little expressive or interpretive sensitivity. The tasks, whether "hopping" or "coloring between the lines," did not aim to arouse an aesthetic awareness and knowledge (either for performers or for audience). In fact, the emphasis on sheer performance and schema often pulled away from the creative, or from involving the expressive self.

The Guided-Exploration Orientation: Painting Summer as Spring

9:30 A.M. on a hot summer day. Helen Brahos, a first-grade teacher, carries a thoughtfully arranged bouquet of flowers--a variety of colors, textures, and forms. Placing it in front of the blackboard, Brahos inserts blue paper as a background, then squints her eyes and adds a pink tablecloth for contrast. Standing at the side of the vase, Brahos prompts the children to look at the shapes and colors, to perceive, then to "recreate."

"This morning we're going to try and capture these flowers on paper the way they look today. Let's take one flower. Now, we've been talking about flowers before, haven't we? [She motions toward a group of pictures near the blackboard, products of a previous project.] We want the flowers to become more important than the vase. So we are going to make the vase just a little smaller. Now, I've brought two old tulips from my garden. I know they are dying, but today we want to paint a spring picture. You can make the tulip look more alive, can't you? You can use a bright red. You're an artist, so you can change your colors around. But we also like to stick as much as we can to the color and shapes of the little flowers here. Now remember, you can put in the flowers you want and leave out the flowers you don't like. It's not important that you put in every flower. You can create your arrangement of flowers."

Brahos's class used aesthetic concepts to provide lenses and guidelines with which to conceptualize and construct. The attention to aesthetic qualities was manifested in the sensitivity to dynamics, form, shape, and balance. The artist's role was central: learning to look and observe, to listen, and to communicate these sensitivities to the creation of a form of representation. The power of aesthetic construction was viewed as involving premeditation, reflection, and consideration of aesthetic qualities. In the guided exploration orientation, unlike the first two orientations, seeing was neither automatic nor given. It required intensive teaching, as well as effort, concentration, awareness, and thought on the part of the student. Equally important were techniques and skills with materials, whether in drawing, painting, singing, or moving. While there was room for improvisation, spontaneity, and personal preference, that also had to be conscious. The acquisition of skills was seen as a tool to convey aesthetic concepts: color, shape, and balance were central in the design of the painting. Teaching implied evaluation, and feedback was typical of the technical, formal, and expressive qualities.

Instances of the aesthetic occurred in all the *arts*. In music, I watched Jacky Brown as she worked with special *education* prekindergartners; singing, tapping beats on tambourines, and marching around the room with the rhythm. The music-energetic and captivating-seemed to capture these children with different learning disabilities. More often than not, teachers who practiced the guided exploration orientation were either *arts* specialists or people with extensive (and professional) backgrounds in the *arts*.

Discussion

All three orientations reflected instructors' choices concerning what was worthwhile and important for children to know, which pedagogies were the most suitable for these learning opportunities, and how best to organize learning resources and opportunities for children.

I found that the little-intervention orientation existed primarily in early childhood classes. It was characterized by open-ended assignments; little teacher modeling; encouragement to explore materials; and a noncritical, supportive ambience. These goals were reflected in my interviews with teachers, who emphasized the educational goals of creativity, self-expression, and independence. The roots of this curricular orientation can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century, with its shift toward a more child-centered pedagogy.[7] This pedagogy highlighted the child's natural interests and desires to manipulate materials; regarded development as a process of unfolding in which *education* should follow each child's nature in order to attain the beauty of the individual's mature power; and emphasized children's interaction with the environment and their need for freedom to exercise their intelligence in the environment.[8] In the field of *arts education*, Franz Cizek and Victor Lowenfeld advocated nonintervention and the freedom to explore as necessary conditions to the development of creative capacities and artistic expression.[9]

My main critique of this approach is that in order for the goals of creativity and self-expression to materialize, additional conditions are needed: an aesthetic environment, teachers who are artistically perceptive, and a cultural climate that is conducive to the production and appreciation of the *arts*. In contrast, the reality in the three schools I observed is typically characterized by an environment that is nonaesthetic, with little time allotted to *arts* activities, the pervasive

modeling of highly-routinized activities, and a scarcity of *arts* specialists. The latter means that when *arts education* is provided, it is often practiced by classroom teachers who may not have the expertise or motivation to teach the *arts*. The view of children's potential as highly dependent on their interactions with the larger cultural environment implies that in the passive waiting for readiness, teachers may deprive children of meaningful learning.[10] Thus, a fear of intervention may lead to programs with little substance.

The first two orientations were grounded in the general climate and values of school.[11] The little-intervention orientation, with its laissez-faire attitude, fitted in with the teacher's lack of expertise in the *arts* and *arts* instruction. By allowing students the full responsibility for all of their *arts* activities, teachers evaded their own responsibility to teach. The production orientation, with its emphasis on structured activities, was tied in with the school's need for accountability and its disciplinary role. Here, art imitates the much criticized practice of academic subjects that are manifested in worksheets that emphasize low-level literacy and numeracy skills. These activities called for simplistic, readymade uniform products, emphasized rules, and were part of an environment in which students seldom confronted challenging problems and were rarely expected to reason out ideas. Art lessons became procedure oriented rather than intellectually or affectively stimulating.

In the production orientation, art was viewed as a combination of craft and entertainment, embodying the inculcation of cultural symbols. Children were presented with the opportunities to perform in singing and dancing and to to gain eye/hand coordination, dexterity, and accuracy. Teacher practices reflected knowledge of classroom management and kept students engaged and "on-track."

If the little-intervention orientation viewed the *arts* as a form of expression and the production orientation viewed them as a form of entertainment, the guided-exploration orientation was centered around aesthetic principles and integrated cognitive and affective elements.[12] Here, children were believed to need guidance specific to the *arts* to progress and learn. The qualities of a given material to elicit and limit the content of a symbol were important factors in the learning process.[13] This orientation was the most compatible with the scholarly literature of *arts education*, which advocates the importance of qualitative thinking in a variety of modes of representations.[14] Perhaps the most influential in the establishment of educational goals and curriculum development in the *arts* were the Getty Center's ideas espousing the integration of conceptual development, skills development, a base of knowledge, and creativity.[15]

The diversity of the assumptions and goals of these three orientations reflect the diversity of educational goals of general early childhood theories. Historically, these goals, which extend across the curriculum and emphasize the how as opposed to the what, are still prevalent in today's classrooms. They include such diverse objectives as Americanizing children, building proper working habits, providing emotional channels for children, serving as a vestibule for the primary grades, and helping to develop learning skills.[16] While diversity can be an asset, it is also important to reflect on the differences, even incompatibilities, of the assumptions and goals of these three orientations. The differences have to do with the nature of art (self-expression, entertainment, or the creation of symbol), the source of knowledge (child, culture, or an interaction between the two), the role of the teacher (nonintervening, directing, or facilitating),

and the nature of the expected outcome (unique, imitative, or interpretive). Different choices require different curricula and evaluation procedures.

Teachers sense the tensions between these orientations. As I conversed with primary grade teachers, they expressed (much like Froebel, Lowenfeld, and Dewey) their frustration with the overall pressure and overmechanization of schooling. At the same time, they felt responsible for preparing their students to achieve in a competitive world. Finally, their frequent lack of artistic knowledge was yet another factor that shaped their *arts education* choices.

Implications for Educational Reform

Clearly, the prevalence of the first two orientations indicates that *arts education* reforms have largely not been translated into public school curricula. Current *arts education* reform advocates an emphasis on the cultivation of critical experience and thinking, from the perception of art elements (such as texture and rhythm, color and design, space and time), through the development of a vocabulary with which to articulate these perceptions, to the incorporation of activities that allow students to experience these qualities and to explore new experiences. Consequently, a reformed curriculum would place a greater emphasis on the teaching of aesthetically based skills--active and intellectually engaged movement, drawing and observing, listening and composing. Activities would include *arts* appreciation and history, using masterpieces of the past to sharpen critical engagement in the *arts*.

As desirable as such a curriculum seems to university-based *arts* educators, its implementation presents a dilemma. The dilemma, highlighted in the literature of curriculum reform (see, for example, the insightful case studies of science *education* by David Cohen and Deborah Ball[17]), has to do with the role of the teacher in curriculum reform. On the one hand, teachers are seen as the root of the problem. On the other, teachers are cast as the key agents of improvement because students will not learn the new curricula that policymakers intend unless teachers teach it. How can we address this dilemma?

The three orientations portrayed in this article represent three approaches to the *arts*. They also represent three different views of learning. These approaches can be detected in efforts toward educational reforms in the past decades. In a nonintervention orientation, teachers are left on their own, with no guidance or intellectual or emotional support. As I have observed in the Danville and Chicago schools, this approach typically results in little change. Creating curricular changes, like any other innovation, is an enormous endeavor that requires active efforts in order to be successful. Teachers cannot teach what they themselves have not learned. The pressures and demands they already face leave them with little incentive to try and cope, unaided, with yet another requirement.

The production orientation implies imposition and the expectation that students will comply with external standards with little ownership. Here, teachers are expected to follow an ideal curriculum, based on a scholarly model and typically communicated through state goals and testing requirements. Teachers are regarded as merely implementors, and are allowed little space to integrate their own ideas or to interpret, explore, and reinterpret ideas and activities. This orientation, too, results in little change and strong resentment, which, in my opinion, is quite

justified. Curriculum reforms should provide teachers with the same opportunities they require for students. Knowledge is not a static entity; it is dynamic, interactive, and contextual. The development of critical thinking and critical experience in teaching the *arts* requires experimentation and exploration in the classroom, as well as the time and the structure. The development of expertise takes more than exposure to new ideas, new contents, and pedagogies. Rather, it needs a structure in which teachers can articulate the ongoing processes and get feedback on their newly tried activities, a space for teachers to voice questions and problems, to share new insights.

Ernest House's distinction of different perspectives on innovation is relevant to this discussion.[19] The technological model that he portrays--a rational, hierarchical, consensus model--reminds us of the way current reforms are being implemented. His cultural model, on the other hand, emphasizes close interaction with the communities of individuals in school and local districts that are supposed to be affected by the change. This perspective is compatible with the guided exploration orientation and, I believe, most conducive to successful implementation.

Attention to the system's (the institution's) support of the individual (the teacher) is increasingly recognized in the evaluation literature. Institutional values act to nurture and support or to frustrate, limit, and neutralize teacher development. Teachers cannot break through and sustain new practices without support at the institutional and local advisory level. As Helen Simons pointed out, there can be no curriculum development without teacher development and, therefore, no curriculum change without institutional change.[20] Change is a professional community activity. No attempt to change is likely to be successful unless those responsible for its success have a sense of ownership of the change.

Arts curricula in primary grades is a complex, multifaceted issue, and if it is to be successfully addressed, the coordinated efforts of educators, policymakers, and researchers will be required. Educators, who are the ones given prime responsibility for improving and implementing arts curricula, should demand the conditions to develop and explore, so that they can carry out a curriculum compatible with their beliefs, experiences, and continuously growing knowledge. Researchers need to develop a better understanding of the short-term and long-term processes that lead to teachers' and principals' decisions regarding arts curricula; this requires close collaboration with practitioners. Policymakers can generate and sustain political interest in improving arts education and can also provide needed support.

Notes

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- 7. Bernard Spodek and Patricia Brown, "Curriculum Alternatives in Early Childhood *Education*: An Historical Perspective," in Handbook of Research on the *Education* of Young Children, ed. B. Spodek (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 91-104.
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- 16. Bernard Spodek, "The Kindergarten: A Retrospective and Contemporary View," in Current Topics in Early Childhood *Education* 5, ed. L. Katz (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1983).

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- 20. Simons, note 2 above, 1.

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