

THE CULTURAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARTS IN EDUCATION by Wendy Miller, Ph.D., ATR

The Creative Process of Integrating Our Diverse Attributes

Howard Gardner has greatly increased our understanding of intelligence by his elaboration of *multiple intelligences*—including “linguistic intelligence”, “spatial intelligence”, and “body-kinesthetic intelligence.” This concept has had a profound influence on the ways we educate children—on how we understand and nurture different learning styles. A practical application of Gardner’s research findings is when art is given a prominent role in the curricula of our children’s schools. Art affords an opportunity to draw upon and integrate different aspects of the multiple intelligences described by Gardner, at the same time tapping the different capacities associated with right and left brain manifestations. Art allows us to draw upon intuition and fantasy along with conceptualization and synthesis; it connects visual kinesthetics with verbal expression. Art enables an integration of these diverse elements, thereby fostering what I refer to as *integrative intelligence*.

This is certainly the case at Lowell where Abigail Wiebenson fosters, supports and encourages an aesthetic learning environment with art as a part of everyone’s day. The visual arts, music, drama, dance, poetry, and writing all enrich the educational life of our children at Lowell and enhance the strongly positive impact of the school’s overall curriculum.

The Relationship Between Art and Art Therapy

As an art psychotherapist in private practice, a working artist/sculptor, a university teacher, and a parent of a Lowell student, I have thought much about the relationship between art and art therapy in the development of children. Art therapy focuses on development as we move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood with the goal of healing and promoting health. Art in an educational setting is also approached in the context of developmental capacity at different ages, but with goal of promoting creative expression in the service of individual growth.

What might it mean that the two visual art teachers at Lowell are artists who trained in art therapy and worked as art therapists together prior to coming to Lowell? One might say, “Nothing”, as the work being done by the students is art not art therapy. Or one might say, “Everything”, because being trained in art therapy uniquely informs the way one works with others in art making. Barbara Mandel feels that being informed by art therapy is an essential part of how she teaches art and works at Lowell. It gives her great pleasure to follow the art therapy adage: *Create freedom within a framework*. It is rewarding, within this climate, to see the magic that evolves spontaneously after open guidance—to

witness the creative expression accompanied by self-esteem and new personal awareness that follow.

I am concerned with the search for the self and the restatement of the fact that certain conditions are necessary for success. These conditions are associated with what is usually called creativity.... and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.
DW Winnicott

Art Education as a Vehicle for Mobilizing Creativity

Creativity changes people. Creativity responds to the call to bring out the best of what is inside us. Art is one of the best vehicles for accessing this creativity. I recently saw a poster from the intergenerational *Liz Lerman Dance Exchange* delineating the ways dance matters. Dance, as an art form, also illustrates how art in general matters. Allow me to adapt some of what Liz Lerman (recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Award”) pointed out about dance/art:

“It matters because it makes a person fully present.”
“It matters because it can hold many meanings.”
“It matters because it gets people to step inside and outside of themselves.”
“It matters because when we put stories in our bodies we don’t forget them.”
“It matters because it rearranges images, realigns ideas, and re-ignites the courage to affect the known order of things.”
“It matters because it reminds us that details are important.”
“It matters because it’s human.”

Art matters at Lowell because as a sensory and hands-on language, it contributes to our children almost never feeling unsuccessful. It matters because it plays a major role in both children and adults having a sense of wholeness. Helping one become whole reflects the process of therapy leading to healing. Helping one become whole also reflects the goal of art education; it indeed matters. Through the process of making art, we learn compassion, understanding, beauty, communication, collaboration. We learn how to transport ourselves and others through image, sound, word and movement. We learn to move raw material into wonder and reverie. We learn to bring forth the necessary ingredients for beauty to mirror and enliven its counterparts within. We have a moral, social, and cultural responsibility to be sure that this type of learning remains valued and valuable.

Art as Creative Play that Prepares Us for Life

Apart from its fun and pleasure, play prepares children for life as adults. And adults spend too little time in play, in part because play too often has not been creatively woven into their educational process. For many children, art is like play. They can be messy, with the result that they are encouraged rather

than reprimanded—their messiness being viewed as a step in the creative process. This is not unlike the way we often create a mess in the home, getting everything piled together before we creatively rearrange our stuff as part of spring cleaning to make a more appealing environment.

When playfulness of the imagination is encouraged, delightful and remarkable results happen. This was all part of the events that lead up to and unfolded at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, where Lowell third graders put together a Modigliani exhibit, under the direction of Barbara Mandell, their art teacher. The young students painted over photographs of Modigliani images, simulating the artist's original work. They then, in a docudrama-like process, painted over pictures of themselves to reenact scenes and dramatic events from the life of the artist. Then at the Phillips, they participated in a creative dance under the direction of dance teacher Ellie Porter, a further dramatic enactment of aspects of Modigliani's life. The third graders in effect put together a combination of an exhibition of art and a theatrical drama—the latter often being referred to in the humanities world as a *play*. What a tribute to the third graders and their teachers that Lowell students were part of a Phillips Collection miracle exhibition! Miracles are really the questioning that occurs through the arts: the kids asking, "Where did that come from? How did I do that? Is that really mine?"

Through art, children are allowed to creatively play with fantasies, images, words, color, and composition—feeling good in the end about their products and themselves. In the process, they change in the direction of growth.

Sit by my side,
come as close as the air,
Share in a memory of gray;
And wander in my words,
Dream about the pictures
that I play..... of changes.

Phil Ochs

Art As A Part Of Education—A Cultural Responsibility

Art education matters because it provides a creative new pathway for our children to learn above and beyond the usual approach dominated by verbal discourse. Like us, our children are complicated, and educational curricula need to include a solid focus on art to enable children to integrate their different intelligences. Ultimately, art enables an integrative intelligence. We have a cultural responsibility to enhance the place of art in the fabric of our educational institutions and processes because this type of collaborative curriculum is the kind of intelligence necessary for a healthy future. The art of integration is based on the cultural value of making whole, making experience whole, making a sense of Self whole. Making whole is healing. Making whole is art. Making whole is therapy. Making whole is education.