

# **Visualizing the Best in Education: The Importance of the Capitol Art Exhibition<sup>1</sup>**

*Richard Siegesmund, University of Georgia*

The Georgia Art Education Association's Capitol Art Exhibition is a time to honor artistically talented students from throughout the state of Georgia. But it is more than that. It is also a time to celebrate what is best in education in our schools.

This might sound like an exaggeration. Usually when we speak of education, the arts are the last thing on our minds. We want to focus on language arts and math, and in particular, the high-stakes test scores that all students have to take every spring. Those test scores are equated with the hard proof of the excellence of our schools. The work that surrounds us here today was not made to raise test scores. How then does it represent the best in education?

Now, developing adeptness in technical skills is certainly an important part of what schools do. However, these proficiencies alone do not comprise a full and sufficient education. Mastery of multiple-choice questions or mechanical dexterity that produces a predetermined, single, right answer does not fully prepare the students of Georgia for the realities of the world they will inherit and navigate. Yes, these competencies have a certain utility, but they don't address a more significant issue: who each child is as an individual.

To be educated is a more complex achievement. Elliot Eisner, professor of education and art at Stanford University, says that education is "the process of learning to recreate ourselves" (2002). This requires teaching children to aspire, dream, and think of

---

<sup>1</sup> Remarks delivered at the opening of the Georgia Art Education Association's Capitol Art Exhibition, Atlanta, GA, February 9, 2005

a world that is new and innovative. On the most basic level, art is made to be shared in relationship with others. Art creates community. Teaching should be concerned with helping children imagine the contributions they can make to their class, school, home, or society. In this process, Eisner (2005) suggests that the arts play three critical roles in the education of young people.

First, the arts teach children to make judgments in the absence of rules. There is no formula that these children followed while creating the works of art that we see here on display. Each student considered options, made selections, employed technical skills, and fashioned an image that conveys personal expression. Most profoundly, these works were made because students were bold enough to invest something of themselves in their work. Personal expression requires that children expose their feelings in order to fashion a statement imbued with significance. This is scary, but it represents the pinnacle of learning. The highest achievement in education is to personally synthesize content into individual meaning. Yet, this happens so rarely in our schools. What would education be like if students had such opportunities for personal expression in every subject they studied?

A second lesson the arts teach children is that problems can have more than one solution. These are the kinds of problems that occur in the real world. In life, rarely are we confronted with a single right answer. We have to weigh options and consider the rightness of fit (Goodman, 1978) to come up with a solution. This life skill is an explicit part of an arts curriculum.

Third, the arts develop flexible thinking. It is true, flexible thinking is not always deemed an asset. As Eisner observes, on an assembly line surprise and innovation are the last thing you want. However, what skills do we want our students to have? We need

citizens in Georgia who can imagine the future and who will not be deterred by life's setbacks. If life deals you lemons, the ability to imagine lemonade is a form of mental resiliency. But the capacity for imaginative flexibility doesn't happen spontaneously. It is an ability that requires nurturing and development. The arts do this.

It is in the vital interests of the state of Georgia to develop a citizenry that can imagine lives as they otherwise might be (Greene, 2001). A citizenry that can dream "what if" and ask "why not." In short, a citizenry capable of envisioning a future that does not yet exist. The arts develop these capacities.

This imaginative capacity begins in the special relationship that is fostered in the arts classroom between child and teacher. The child dares to expose something of his or herself and an adult respects and guides these tenuous steps. In these moments, daring to dream is born. These are deep relationships of trust and caring. Education is not something abstract and emotionless.

This power to imagine can be found in every single work on display here this afternoon. In each of these works you can see the students have given something of themselves, they have invested time to portray something they care about, and they have put their own feelings on the line. Walk around the gallery. You will see these three qualities in every piece.

If a student doesn't see a link between what he or she is learning and their own life, if the process of schooling doesn't engage the student to care, then our education system is stifling. Our schools are nothing more than pastoral prisons (Foucault, 1977). But this is not an inevitable fate of education. We can do better.

The arts create enthusiasm and interest in learning. Research studies, some dealing with students as young as third grade, show that attendance at school increases on

days when the arts are taught (Wilson, 2001; Siegesmund, 2003). You cannot teach a child who is not present. The arts make school a place where children want to be. If this were the only function that the arts fulfilled in our schools it would be reason enough to give them a place of importance in our curriculum.

The good news for education in Georgia is that school districts, principals, and parents are coming to appreciate that the arts are not time off from academics but accelerators to learning. When children are engaged and enthusiastic they learn more. The arts help children want to learn, and the lessons they can learn within the arts are profound. Evidence for this appreciation can be seen in GAEA president Debi West's selection as Gwinnett County Teacher of the Year and her inclusion as one of ten finalists for Georgia Teacher of the Year. Evidence can be seen in the sold-out "I See Literacy" tours at the High Museum. General classroom teachers from throughout Fulton and Cobb Counties are bringing their fourth graders to the High because the arts help them teach all students more robustly and reach students who fail if instruction is restricted to traditional pedagogic methods.

Most of all, what helps us to understand the importance of the arts is to see it on display as it is here this afternoon. Therefore, I want to express my thanks to the young artists who have put their works on view. This work is personal and these students are very brave to share it with us. Their courage to give of themselves is at the core of education. They remind us of what every child has to give. This work is a testament to what education, at its very best, can be. So let me say thank you once again to the students—and their art teachers—who have helped demonstrate this important lesson to us all.

## References

- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Eisner, E. (2005, January 3). Three Rs are essential, but don't forget the A -- the arts. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. B9.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goodman, N. (1978). *Ways of worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute lectures on aesthetic education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Siegesmund, R. (2003). *Assessing thinking in and through the arts: Second year evaluation of the California Arts Demonstration Project*. San Francisco, CA: The Performing Arts Workshop.
- Wilson, B. (2001). Arts magnets and the transformation of schools and schooling. *Education and Urban Society*, 33(4), 366-87.