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**A Place of their Own: The Arts and Literacy in the Age of Accountability**

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**Abstract**

The current millennium has seen an unprecedented move toward state and federal involvement in education. In a climate of high-stakes testing and reform, arts education and literacy education are each viewed from an instrumentalist perspective that values school subjects, not for their inherent worth, but for their role in achieving some larger purpose in the national interest, such as creating a competent labor force, contributing to industrial growth, or raising test scores. In this scenario, arts education has been largely ignored in the reform literature, while literacy education has been positioned as scapegoat for a host of national crises. This article explores the role of arts and literacy education in the current climate of high-stakes accountability and poses several directions for future research.

*Keywords:* Arts, art education, literacy, educational reform, accountability, progressivism, aesthetics

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### **A Place of their Own: The Arts and Literacy in the Age of Accountability**

As someone who has always been interested in the relationship between literacy and the arts, I am honored by this opportunity to explore the respective places and spaces of art and literacy in the landscape of American thought, politics, and educational practice. I will begin with a brief glimpse into my own journey as a teacher and a teacher educator.

As a teacher of English, speech, and drama in the mid-seventies, I was drawn to the “art” in the English language arts. I had grown up in the fifties, when Sputnik had launched the National Defense Education Act (United States, U. S., 1958) and turned the public view of American education away from the arts toward mathematics and science. Once I had my own classroom, however, I tried to engage my students in writing and responding to literature through the arts of dramatic performance, music, visual arts, and multimedia production.

My undergraduate education had been steeped in the ideas of the “romantic critics” of education (Kohl, 1967; Leonard, 1968; Kozol, 1967), the progressivist philosophy of John Dewey (1934, 1938), and the constructivist developmental theories of Jerome Bruner (1960). Unfortunately, few of those progressivist or constructivist ideas had filtered into the public and private schools in which I taught. Infusing my English classroom with the arts in those days seemed tantamount to what Postman and Weingartner had called *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969).

My interest in the relationship between literacy and the arts was further piqued when, after a decade of teaching, I entered my doctoral program and became enamored with Louise Rosenblatt’s progressivist notions of the aesthetic and intellectual role of literature in a democracy (1976; 1978) and James Moffett’s notion of drama as the matrix of other language acts (1968). I was captivated by the language and learning movement in the United Kingdom,

with its compelling portraits of children using language to create, and not merely demonstrate learning (Britton, 1970, 1975; Barnes, 1968; Dixon, 1967). As I explored the imaginative and aesthetic aspects of expressive writing and literary reading, I was further informed by art educators such as Elliot Eisner (1978) and psychologists such as Rudolf Arnheim (1969) and Howard Gardner (1973; 1983). During my doctoral research, I discovered a movement among arts educators to legitimize the arts as a “basic skill” that transfers to other school content areas (Broudy, 1978; Ellstrom, 1977; Furner, 1978; Thompson, 1977). Many years later, I would realize that this movement was, in part, an attempt to legitimize the position of the arts in the school curriculum at a time when art programs were being cut because of a “back-to-basics” impulse in American education.

Such reform efforts have abounded in the history of American schooling. From the National Defense Education Act (United States, U. S., 1958) to the current Common Core Standards (Council, 2010), educational reform movements have powerfully imprinted upon the public consciousness and influenced the trajectories of government funding and school curricula.

### **From Whence They Came: The Arts and Literacy in the History of School Reform**

Since the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child, 2001), there has been an unprecedented move toward greater intervention by state and federal government in the business of schooling (Jacobsen, Snyder, & Saultz, 2014; Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). Within this climate of reform, as art and literacy have each attempted to stake out their unique places in the landscape of schooling, they have had much in common and much in contrast. Historically, shifting political environments have increased their vulnerability, but the origin and nature of their vulnerability has been markedly different. In the language of reform, arts education and literacy

education<sup>1</sup> are often viewed from an instrumentalist perspective that values school subjects, not for their inherent worth, but for their role in some larger purpose in the national interest, such as creating a competent labor force, contributing to industrial growth, or fostering global competitiveness in student achievement (Higgins, 2008).

When art appeared on the landscape of American schooling in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was in the form of “graphics” and was seen as instrumental to school subjects such as writing, geography, and drawing, or developing manual dexterity necessary for laborers in a rapidly industrializing nation (Whitford, 1923; Hoffa, 1984). Since that time, arts education has struggled to establish a permanent place in the institution of schooling, largely because of a public perception that art is not a legitimate academic discipline in its own right (Broudy, 1978; Eisner, 1988). Attempts to raise the disciplinary status of the arts, such as “Discipline-Based Art Education” (Dobbs, 1992; Eisner, 1988) have done little to secure the place of the arts in the arena of school funding.

The same people who think nothing of the fact that Beyonce earned 53 million dollars last year (O'Malley-Greenburg, 2014) or that *The Hunger Games* movie grossed over 400 million dollars (Annual, 2013) balk at the idea of raising property taxes for school funding, and demand greater and greater accountability from already burdened teachers and school systems. When it comes to public education, voters have tight purse strings and extremely high expectations. Chris Higgins argues that the instrumentalist positioning of art contributes to a “marginalization of the aesthetic” in schools (2008) and creates a scenario where

[t]he arts are treated as an "enrichment," a bonus, a luxury. Thus, they are always the first subjects to be cut when school budgets grow tight, and there is no better way to win

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that “literacy education” as an umbrella term for school subjects such as reading, literature, writing, and English did not come into being until the late 1970s (Lankshear, 1999). “For the purposes of this article, I will define “literacy education” as encompassing these language-based academic subjects.

funding back than by showing that art experiences give students skills that are transferable to other subjects or favorable to test scores. (p. 11)

The fact that the arts are not currently included in statewide tests may be good news to teachers, but it has meant further marginalization of the arts from public funding, as schools are forced to devote valuable time to test preparation in other areas of the curriculum. Quite literally, the spaces in which the arts are taught have been co-opted by teachers of other disciplines, as positions in the arts are cut (David, 2011) and teachers lucky enough to remain are forced to perform other duties during the day, such as monitoring the lunch room or the hallways.

While literacy, in contrast to art, has typically been at the forefront of the national agenda, this visibility has come with a price. In the politics of school reform, literacy is often positioned as the scapegoat for whatever social, economic, or political crisis looms largest in the public mind. Since the mid-fifties, the public media have been inundated with catastrophic tales of American students' reading failure (Flesch, 1955), cultural illiteracy (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987), and lackluster performance on standardized tests (Murnane, 2013; OECD, 2013; Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). This instrumentalist portrayal of literacy's role in the national interest has been both a blessing and a curse.

In the discourse of reform since the mid-fifties, literacy has been positioned as the cure to a host of national ills—from poverty (United States, Senate, 1965), to the perils of global competition (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983), to low student achievement scores (*No Child*, 2001). Since that time, federal involvement in literacy has shifted from an equity paradigm in the Johnson administration to a paradigm of “accountability and results” (Hauptli et al., 2013, p. 395). For literacy, the problem has not been one of marginalization, but one of reductive reasoning and oversimplification.

Unlike academic subjects such as science or mathematics, which are more amenable to standardized tests, both the arts and literacy are a complex synthesis of skill and art. This is perhaps their greatest attribute; but in a climate of accountability, it is likely to be their Achilles heel. While art is not currently tested in on the statewide level, literacy is prominently featured. Unfortunately, current tests of literary reading often rely on lower-order skills such as basic comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and recall, seldom tapping “higher-order” thinking skills (David, 2011). A quick glance at the myriad of test preparation “tips and tricks” on the Internet reveals an odd mix of test-taking “skills” such as skimming, scanning, guessing, fact-checking, memorizing, and searching for line numbers, to name a few (How to Attack, 2014). Even more regrettably, what gets left out of this scenario are aesthetic modalities essential to the appreciation and creation of painting, sculpture, dance, performance, expressive writing, and the reading and creation of literature.

The adoption of the national Common Core Standards by nearly all of the states makes it imperative to closely examine what the standards movement and its inevitable national tests will mean for teachers, students, and schools in the days to come.

### **The Place of Literacy and the Arts in the Common Core and Beyond**

Currently, the Common Core Standards include only two subject areas: literacy (defined as English Language Arts) and Mathematics. Interestingly, literacy subsumes other core areas such as history/social studies, science, and what are called the “technical subjects.” The current exclusion of the arts in statewide high-stakes examinations is about to change. Presumably as an attempt to secure the place of the arts in the discussion of school funding, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) has recently released the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) (National Coalition, 2014).

At first glance, the intellectual processes described in the standards documents should not be objectionable to anyone engaged in the work of schools. The impulse to develop standards ostensibly promotes a thoughtful examination of the purposes of school subjects and an articulation of what it means to do them well. Historically, however, the tests and assessment apparatus spawned by standards initiatives have borne little resemblance to the loftier goals of the standards themselves. What should be of keen interest to us all in the short time before the Common Core assessments appear is what is (or will be) excluded or occluded in schools when the machinery of national assessment begins to roll out in 2015.

In pondering this question, we might do well to consider the aesthetic and imaginative processes left out of the standards, and who might be harmed by their omission.

Alice Wexler considers these questions in her recent critique of the Common Core initiative:

Who decides what is magnificent, transcendent, and beautiful? What will happen to street art, public art, activist art as well as the rough, tattered, unguided, self-taught, and intuitive works of art traditionally made by the isolated, neglected, and disabled among us? (2014, p. 175)

I am not arguing that something as private and un-quantifiable as aesthetic engagement and creativity should ever be represented in a standardized test. I am wondering, though, what happens in the zero-sum game of curriculum planning within the tight space of a school day, when national tests loom on the horizon and the stakes for teachers, students, and schools have never been so high. When school doors close, or schools become privatized because test scores fail to reach the benchmarks, or when teachers' salaries are tied to test scores because of federal funding initiatives, then "teaching to the test" begins to seem like a dire necessity for everyone who walks the hallways of public schools.

### **The Place of STEM and STEAM in Public Discourse and Government Funding**

In the current iteration of school reform, both literacy and arts education seem to have taken a back seat to what has come to be called “STEM” education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). The STEM movement has been cited as “the largest reform movement in K-12 education over the last decade” (Daugherty, 2013, p. 10). No doubt in response to the public’s fascination with STEM, a group of artists and educators, led by Georgette Yakman (Georgette, n.d.) and individuals from the Rhode Island School of Design (STEM to STEAM, 2014), have created a new acronym called “STEAM” (STEM + the arts). This movement is presumably an attempt to secure a place for the arts in the dialogue surrounding public funding (Boy, 2013; Chen & Cheers, 2012; Daugherty, 2013). Currently, no organized effort exists to include literacy in the STEM agenda, perhaps because English language arts is so prominent in the Common Core Standards, or perhaps because no one has yet come up with a suitable acronym (STEALM?).

Currently, STEAM seems to be building momentum among classroom teachers and industry leaders in the professional literature, public media, websites, and blogs. To date, there have been some descriptions of promising cross-disciplinary projects at the level of the community, school, and classroom (Chen, & Cheers, 2012; Eger, 2013; Henriksen, 2014). Unfortunately, this enthusiasm has not yet penetrated the rhetoric of government school funding. For example, in Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s speech, regarding the 2014 budget (Duncan, 2013), he mentioned the word “STEM” a total of 16 times. By contrast, despite the gathering grassroots momentum of STEAM, the terms “art,” and “STEAM” were completely absent from his remarks. Interestingly also, despite ample evidence of literacy deficiencies among American students and adults (Murnane, 2013; OECD, 2013; Reardon, et al., 2012), the

term “reading” was mentioned only twice, “language” once, and the terms “literacy” and “writing” were completely absent.

Hopefully, as more evidence of its effectiveness in engaging students and transforming practice begins to accumulate, the STEAM agenda will enter the arena of public funding. For the time being, however, it seems that both arts and literacy education are fairly low on the priorities of government funding efforts.

For those of us in the enterprise of educational research, the future directions of our work must be considered in light of these political, social, and economic exigencies; but in looking over the many innovative and promising projects that have emerged in arts and literacy education of late, I am convinced that there is much reason for optimism.

### **Where to? What Next? The Arts, Literacy, and Research**

Although I am tempted to start off by recommending a spate of large-scale studies linking the arts and achievement in other content areas, I am not sure that, in the current climate of high-stakes accountability, that would be in anyone’s best interest. I believe that the true contribution of the arts will never be fully discovered in an analysis of variance or even a correlation matrix. What art does for learning and thinking should be documented in artful, and not quantitative ways. It would be well to remember what Elliott Eisner said in 1999 after his attempt to find a quantitative rationale for the importance of art:

It strikes me that we do the arts no service when we try to make their case by touting their contributions to other fields. When such contributions become priorities, the arts become handmaidens to ends that are not distinctively artistic and in the process undermine the value of art's unique contributions to the education of the young. Sometimes it is better not to give the customers what they want but, rather, to help them understand what they

ought to want.... We must interpret what arts education can contribute to the young. We need to help parents understand what the arts can mean as a part of their children's education, and we must cease trying to become whatever people want us to be. (p. 158)

I wish that every political official, business leader, or parent who ever doubted the value of an arts education could have been in my classroom or in the classrooms of teachers all over the world, where they could see firsthand the glimmer in the eye of a student who makes visual art or performance out of poetry, the gleam of recognition when someone discovers that math can be learned by making a formula into a rap song, or the wide smile of success when someone marginalized by poverty or disability realizes that s/he is finally “good” at something that taps a creative intelligence that was just waiting to be unleashed. These are not the moments that show up in a congressional budget hearing or in the graphs and charts of achievement reports; but they are concrete evidence of the power of art to transform lives, one young person at a time.

**Redefining Practice.** The possibilities for teaching the arts and literacy have undergone a seismic transformation, as popular pursuits such as gaming, fan art, fan fiction, street art, flash fiction, and social media have entered the realm of research and practice (Lankshear & Nobel, 2011; Friere & McCarthy, 2014). Art is breaking out of the relative privacy of the museum, gallery, and classroom, and transporting itself to public spaces, such as city streets, military establishments, parks, shopping malls, and the global spaces created by social media (Duncum, 2013). Within these public spaces, art often functions as a critique of the government, commercial, and corporate interests that surround and constrain those spaces (Plessner, n.d.).

Similarly, the “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), emanating from an ever-developing array of digital technologies, have expanded literacy’s print-based identity to include a host of practices made possible by electronic media. Textual forms such as digital storytelling,

gaming, e-books, zines, film, and social networking are fueling a constant redefinition of what it means to be literate in the 21st century (New London Group, 1996; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014).

In both arts and literacy education, students and teachers are engaged in issues of equity and justice, human rights, environmentalism, and the interrogation of racism, classism, homophobia, and school violence, to name a few (Duncum, 2011; Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, & Alnajjar, 2014; Plessner, n.d.). As researchers, we are responsible for not only documenting and examining, but also inspiring and nurturing these promising transformations in the arts and literacy.

**Re-Imagining Research.** Elliot Eisner once said that the goal of research should be “to generate questions worth asking and ideas worth pursuing” (2006, p. 17). In that spirit, I would like to break out of the discussion of “new directions in topic and method” that typically follows a review such as this, and instead pose some worthwhile questions and thoughts about the forms, purposes, and nature of our research.

Eisner argued in 2006 that we were “pushing towards pluralism” in our research methods and subject matter, but that this pluralism was being eroded by a national shift toward a “convergent approach to educational research ... that emphasizes randomized experimental field trials as the gold standard”(p. 16). Regrettably, in the reform literature, it seems that we have made little progress in stemming the tide of this public perception in the eight years since Eisner made those remarks. Similar to teachers who feel forced to “teach to the test” in order to secure a future for themselves and their students, those of us in the research community walk the shaky tightrope between validating the ideals of our profession with large-scale studies of achievement on the one hand, and crafting nuanced multidimensional portrayals of art and literacy on the other.

Considering his lifelong effort to establish the place of the arts in the school curriculum, it is not surprising to learn that Elliot Eisner began his career as a teacher. Teachers are pragmatists, because they are the ones who will be hit head-on by the mandates of those in power. Whatever those mandates are, teachers have to make them work. If their efforts succeed, teachers seldom reap the reward; but if they don't, they are among the first to take the blame. When standardized tests are the gold standard by which teachers are measured, then raising test scores by any means necessary is the daily reality that they face. They cannot afford to shut their doors and ignore the mandates of the standards or the looming deadlines of high-stakes testing.

The first question we should be asking, then, is **What can we do in our research to improve the lives of teachers, students, and everyone else in schools?** Why not start by joining the ranks of our colleagues who have taken a postmodern turn, envisioning research as a form of social activism? Our professional journals in literacy and arts education are exploding with examples of students and teachers harnessing the power of literacy and art to interrogate political structures and corporate interests. What if more of us used our research expertise to interrogate the corporate and monied interests that surround the machinery of standardized testing and preparation, the efforts to privatize public schools or break up teachers' unions, and, for that matter, the very process of educational reform itself?

This critique might begin with historical and critical discourse analyses of the public documents, speeches, government brochures, reports, and websites surrounding school reform. Critical ethnographies, documentary films, art, and photography could be used to highlight the daily struggles of teachers and students wrestling with the realities of school closures, high-stakes test preparation, mind-numbing homework, and other collateral damage in the age of accountability. Autoethnographies and collaborative critical action research conducted by

teachers and other school stakeholders could put a personal face on how government mandates and private interests impinge upon the lives of children and the work of public schools. The findings of these studies should not rest in the annals of the academy, however. They need to be transformed for a public audience, spilling onto television and movie screens, the pages of the popular press, and the ubiquitous spaces of electronic media, until they reach the eyes and ears of the voting public and policy makers.

The next question is a personal one, but I hope it resonates with all of us in some form: **What has happened to the exploratory, experiential, learner-centered principles of progressivism**, and how did we let them slip away? A closely related question is, **What is the role of the aesthetic in the reform dialogue surrounding literacy and the arts?** Many of our journals are already showcasing a host of innovative and multimodal teaching practices that demonstrate the value of engaged, inquiry-driven, learner-centered pedagogy. As I look through the major research journals in our respective fields, however, I find few theoretical pieces or research reports that carefully examine and challenge the shift from progressivism in the past several decades.

I realize that I run the risk of appearing out of touch with reality, since it doesn't seem particularly *au courant* to be harking back to the good old days of neo-progressivism when everybody is so focused on achievement scores. Nonetheless, I was pleased to see an article in *Research in the Teaching of English* by Kathryn Au (2011), about making the vision of progressivism a reality in schools. Au poses this question: "Why are progressive approaches to literacy instruction so seldom seen in schools and classrooms with high proportions of students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?" (p. 162). Au notes her frustration in searching

for large-scale quantitative evidence supporting the effectiveness of progressivist methods such as whole language and the process approach to writing.

This is a real conundrum for those of us who know for a fact that all students, but particularly those who do not learn in traditional logical and linguistic ways, can benefit from progressivist teaching. Au notes that many of us in literacy education have gradually moved from the quantitative tradition toward the social and qualitative, largely because we were more interested in the particularity and nuances of what happens in teaching and learning than we were with large-scale results.

Regrettably, I do not believe that hard statistical evidence will ever favor progressivist teaching, if test scores are the dependent variable. I do, however, urge more of us to explore the relationship between progressivist teaching and a host of critical issues that **do** make it into the public media; these include student attendance patterns, dropout rates, numbers of in-school suspensions and disciplinary incidents, attitudes toward schooling, and grade point averages, to name a few. We need to argue the case of an arts-based progressivist curriculum by examining learning outcomes that we instinctively know will be improved by those approaches. This could be accomplished through large-scale experimental designs, qualitative and quantitative analyses of school data, interviews with school stakeholders, and site-based longitudinal studies of teacher-development projects. Once obtained, these results should spin off the pages of our professional journals and make their way from the grassroots of academia to the halls of government and the outlets of the popular media.

My final question is, **why aren't more journals like this one?** *Ubiquity* is, to me, a quintessential expression of what we in my field call "the new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). It is multi-textual and multimodal, inviting a variety of texts and creative works in an

attempt to connect researchers and praxitoners who might not typically encounter each other in the realm of academia or elsewhere. As a wordsmith, I am rather fond of my print-based logical and linguistic bent; but there is something to be said for breaking out of the print culture and exploring what can happen in the virtual world of the e-journal. As I write this, I am feeling a bit guilty, as I think about the many places and spaces where I might have inserted a photograph or a video clip in this text that would have been far more powerful and explanatory than the words before you. But I will save that for another article.

Congratulations, then, to the creators of this journal for your vision, your artistic sensibilities, and for advancing the future of literature, literacy, and the arts--a future that I know will be powerfully shaped by your imprint in the years to come.

#### **Coda: Research in the Arts and Literacy as Performance**

I am going to borrow a literary device from Louise Rosenblatt, who ended her book, *Literature as Exploration* (1976) with a coda, in which she argued for a view of literature as a performing art. A coda in music is a cadence that brings a piece to an end. My final cadence, then, will be more of a personal wish than a mandate for future research.

Although it is undoubtedly worth our time to march through the halls of government and lobby for the value of the arts and the complexities of literacy, I believe that we might be taken slightly off our course with this move. Political initiatives and reforms are acutely responsive to how everyday voters see the business of schooling. If the American people look out at the world of academia that we are privileged to inhabit with skepticism or narrowed vision, or if they fail to visit the pages of our professional journals, that is our fault, and not theirs.

Ordinary citizens need to be given a vision of education that they would be willing to stand in line and pay good money for. I am not talking about diluting or denigrating our

academic and professional work; I am talking about crafting it in a way that hits people, not just in the intellect, but in the heart and the gut. While we are having this unhurried conversation about what constitutes the arts, literacy, and research, the Common Core Standards movement is rolling out its inevitable tests with great speed, and the teachers and schools that we write about will soon have to face the very real consequences of all that.

It is time that the arts reached across the curriculum in higher education and taught those of us in other disciplines a lesson about igniting the imagination that product designers and advertisers have known for years. Where are the films, the inspiring advertisements, the television spots, the performances that vividly and compellingly portray what inspired teaching and engaged learning look and feel and sound like? Why aren't the charts and graphs in our research studies as compelling as those in the forefront of the accountability movement? As much as we are indebted to the postmodern turn for awakening us to the social and political, the language of postmodernism is a "real snoozer" to Jane and John Q. Public. They have one question for us: "How are schools going to help my kid to put bread on the table, a car in the garage, and a roof over h/er head?"

If our answer is that schools do far more than this (and I hope they do), then we need to make that "something more" as concrete, visceral, and compelling as a Super Bowl advertisement. This is the artful performance that we must enact, if we want to do more than allow the winds of school change to sweep over us and the machinery of accountability to roll perpetually on its way.

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