A Thesis in the Field of Education

for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

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Creativity in the Classroom:

The Intersection of Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Teaching and Art

Multiculturalism is present in the classroom on a daily basis. Everyone has a culture that governs how we perceive the world around us. Culture goes beyond observable and concrete elements, relating to unspoken rules and unconscious assumptions. The classroom environment may naturally challenge the cultural expectations of children, leading them to feel unsafe. The brain is responsible for keeping us alive, when we perceive threats to our safety- both physically and emotionally- that becomes our focus. It's biological. As culturally responsive-sustaining educators, we have the ability to midgate this response for children by creating environments intentionally designed to reflect a student's culture. I argue that art is a powerful tool to this end because of its ability to connect children to themselves, each other, and the physical space. It is a multi-sensory modality for expression that has been connecting human beings since the beginning of time. It welcomes multiple intelligences and allows for all students to be successful. Art lends itself to community building, creating safety and belonging in physical spaces. All children need art as a tool to promote deep learning and empower global citizenship through community and creativity.

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Annotated Outline:

Thesis Statement: Student's culture influences how they experience school. Integrating arts in the classroom is a powerful tool for self-expression, connection to the space, and connection to others. In using art to create a culturally responsive-sustaining community, students from diverse backgrounds can feel calm, alert, and ready to learn.

1. **Introduction**
    a. A recollection on my initial experiences with art in education
    b. Joining Hearts and Homes for Refugees, I wondered about their experience in school and reflected on how to teach children from traumatic backgrounds
    c. *Art of Teaching core philosophy*: Center the child and their story
        i. Quote: "Fundamental to Prospect's philosophy and to the descriptive process is what I will call a way of looking at people, both children and adults. It is a way of looking that honors the complexity and uniqueness of each person. It is a way of looking that strives for as a full a picture as possible of that person's way of being in the world, while acknowledging that however full the picture, it will always be partial. It is a way of looking that aims at recognition of each child's and person's capacities and strengths, understanding these to be indispensable for the child's education, including for the negotiation of any hard spots and bumps in the road she may encounter as she grows and learns." (Carini, 2007, p. 6)
    d. Guiding questions for thesis exploration:

i. How can I honor their lived experiences of children from diverse backgrounds and how they manifest in the classroom?

ii. Can art be a tool to help my students connect to themselves, the space, and to others?

iii. How can I integrate art on a regular basis in my teaching practice?

2. Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework

a. Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Pedagogy as a way to create a safe environment for my students

i. *Terming Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Pedagogy*: a pedagogical approach that uses cultural references to build intellectual capacity for high order thinking. It is a pedagogy that prioritizes children's feelings of safety in the classroom as the precursor to all learning experiences

ii. Quote: "Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 21)

b. What is culture?

i. Surface culture- the observable and concrete elements of culture such as holidays, music, food

ii. Shallow culture- the unspoken rules and social norms that put our deep cultural beliefs into action

iii. Deep culture- the knowledge and unconscious assumptions that dictate our worldview

iv. Challenges to cultural values and beliefs are interpreted as threats, leading to mistrust and trauma responses

c. As culturally responsive-sustaining educators, we must think about how student's worldview, governed by their culture, impacts their experience in the classroom

3. The Brain and Culture

a. Culture dictates how the brain responds to our surroundings

i. Quote: "Culture, it turns out, is the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain's hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help dependent learners do more higher order thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction." (Hammond, 2015, p.22)

b. The three layers of the brain:

i. Reptilian region- primary function is keeping us alive, constantly scanning for danger and changes in the environment. Houses the RAS

ii. Limbic region- links together emotions, behavior, and cognition, helping us learn from past experiences. Houses the amygdala

iii. Neocortex region- executive functioning, thinking, and working memory. Controls planning, organization, abstract thinking, self-regulation, and intellectual capacity

c. Intellectual capacity can ONLY be accessed if the RAS and amygdala responses are deactivated. If students do not perceive their environment as safe, they will not learn

d. Zarretta Hammond's guiding principles linking culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and brain science:

   i. Quote: "The brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in the community." (Hammond, 2015, p. 47)

   ii. Quote: "Positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check." (Hammond, 2015, p. 48)

   iii. Quote: "Culture guides how we process information." (Hammond, 2015, p.48)

4. Creativity as Connection

a. The connection between culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and art:

   i. Our brains can keep us safe through fostering safe connections with the physical space, with those around us and with ourselves

   ii. Art has the power to support this in the classroom as a multi-sensory modality for nonverbal expression and communication

   iii. Quote: "On a fundamental level, making art externalizes our thoughts and feelings and creates a distance between them. Once these are externalized through an art form they can begin to take up physical space outside of the individual and can be seen, heard, and interacted with, potentially leading to change." (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016, p. 60)

b. Examples from the field:

   i. *Kindergarten at the Brooklyn New School (BNS)*: Zuri's feelings book creating space to talk about emotions

   ii. *4/5th ICT at the Earth School*: Elijah's drawing of his goal allowed for deep exploration and understanding of who he is

   iii. *Kindergarten at BNS:* Marvin showed an interest in puppets, the class joined in to support him and put on a puppet show. Art provided a social opportunity for Marvin to be included in the community

   iv. *Robbin's 3's at the ECC:* Adam had severe challenges integrating into the class. Through inclusion in the classroom routine he developed a passion for art that gave him a sense of belonging

5. The Role of Art in the Classroom

a. Creativity in the classroom welcomes multiple intelligences and allows for *all* students to be successful

   i. Quote: "Bringing arts into the educational setting allows them to manifest their full power to motivate interest and improve performance in other disciplines as well as self-image in the learner. Moreover, the potential for varied and exciting activities present in all the arts offers endless pathways for children to discover their own avenues of success and fulfillment." (Gelineau, 2012, p. 4)

b. *4/5th ICT at the Earth School:* Students made cover pages for scripted curriculum

   i. Student's took pride in their work when they made it their own

   ii. Learning was extended across disciplines and modalities

iii. Student's had time in their day to create and enjoy the process

c. Art lends itself to community building: promoting multicultural understanding, creating a sense of safety and belonging

i. Quote: "As multicultural themes become part of our classroom endeavors, their implementation should consist of more than mere reference to a country's existence; rather, it should involve participation in many aspects of the lives of its people. What more delightful ways to get acquainted than through the arts? The presumption here is that arts are reflections of culture, engaging children in these arts can provide not only personal benefits to those who experience them but also productive pathways to greater understanding and appreciation for those who produce them." (Gelineau, 2012, 11)

d. Kindergarten at BNS: Making a community mural

i. Each child's perspective was included

ii. The final product was a physical representation of the community: individual people coming together to form a whole

iii. Children were given space to work together and create lasting connections

6. Implications for teaching

a. Quote: "Work bears the imprint of the maker." (Carnini, 2006, p. 3)

b. Art in my future classrooms:

i. Art as a way of understanding the child, fostering a safe and loving community

ii. Art as a tool for students to express themselves and understand each other

iii. Art will be a regular fixture in the curriculum, understood as fundamental to the process of learning

iv. It is my role as a teacher to cultivate a space responsive to the neurobiological needs of a student, art is the *how*

c. Using art and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy, each student is placed at the center of their learning

i. Quote: "The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves." (Freire, 1990, p. 181)

Process Paper

The process of creating my thesis was surprisingly emotional. I was planning on doing a research paper surrounding the impact of art on refugee children, and in a way I did. But what emerged from this process was something that I never expected going in. As a student at Sarah Lawrence College, I was very used to doing conference papers. I would choose a topic that interested me and delve into existing research and literature on the subject. I could then write pages upon pages summarizing, connecting, and drawing conclusions on what I learned. What felt slightly alien to me was creating a project where my own experiences and insights held the same weight as existing literature. I felt imposter syndrome creeping in, *what could I possibly have to say that has not already been said?* I also felt a sense of guilt connected to the imposter syndrome. I worried that I was not prepared to serve marginalized populations. I wanted my thesis to be a deep dive into research that would prepare me in this way. I wanted to think about tangible steps I could take in my classroom to protect my students.

Upon reflecting on my process creating this thesis, I'm realizing the value of holding existing literature *and* my experiences. I was able to reach deeper conclusions about my future teaching practice by connecting what I was learning to what I already knew. I've been in school for the past 17 years of my life at this point and I really have learned a lot. I have worked with many many different children across a multitude of settings. I have made mistakes and reflected on how to improve my practice. I have had successes and deep connections with children that I want to carry with me forever. I have gained an understanding of the foundations of teaching and developed my own pedagogy. I have read and written a lot, forming my own opinions along the way. In working on my thesis, I am seeing how much I have learned. This is what I hope for my future students. I want them to be proud of how much they know and see how their experiences

inform their knowledge. I will ask them to make connections between what they know and what they are learning.

I first came to the topic of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in my sophomore year at SLC working with Denisha Jones. I was in her Children, Families, and Identity course at the same time as volunteering for Hearts and Homes. She introduced me to the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and Zaretta Hammond. These two scholars have guided my thinking on teaching diverse populations since then. For this thesis project, I took a particularly deep dive into the work of Hammond in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students.* I was drawn to this book because of the focus on brain chemistry. It asks how the brain functions in processing the world around us. Hammond argues that culture is software to the hardware of the brain. Software is the programs and instructions that tell a computer what to do, whereas hardware is the physical components that make up the machine. Like software, culture tells the brain how to perform various tasks. How the brain reacts in various situations is governed by the cultural norms (both conscious and unconscious) that each person inherently possesses.

As a society, we are asking children to take on more and more when it comes to "academics." The increasing pressure on children for high performance is replacing genuine curiosity and deep learning. Student's data becomes the forefront of their learning, not them. On a larger scale, we see a gap in achievement between target and agent groups. Schools with lower income populations may face an even greater pressure to perform well on standardized assessments as their funding depends on these scores. This affects children on an individual level, robbing them of their right as a child to explore. It is my hope as an educator that all students be given opportunities to meaningfully learn material that is relevant, responsive, and

rigorous. Regardless of any element of a students' identity that may position them as targets or agents (race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, sexual orientation), students have a brain. And this brain has the same autonomic functions as every other human on the planet. We all have the same three layers of the brain that I specify in my thesis: reptilian, limbic, and neocortex.

If it seems simple to say everyone has the same brain, that's because it is. All the systems that exist around us are complicated, but how our bodies function as humans is consistent. We want to feel safe, seen, and cared for. In our society, feeling safe and cared for is not a necessity. Instead, it is secondary to our responsibilities. A reward for fulfilling duties and obligations. A privilege enjoyed by some, but not a requirement for anyone. Taking this into the school setting, students and teachers alike suffer under this mentality. We are receiving the message that measurable indicators of achievement are more important than safety, self-expression, interconnectedness, and love. But that is not how the human body functions. That is not how brains are programmed to think, that is not how our culture is meant to be valued. Yes, maybe students can regurgitate information, maybe their scores will improve. But there is nothing that this capitalist society can do to rewrite our brain chemistry, try as it might. It tries to convince us we are in it alone, everyone is against us and we are against everyone else. This is how our society functions. This is how the systems of oppression remain pervasive. But it's a lie, so let's push back.

I want to hold the value of safety as I enter my career. It's easy enough to say you want a child to be safe, but safely isn't something you can get someone to feel by sheer willpower. Feeling safe is a biological function of the human brain. Students need to perceive their surroundings as free from threats- physical and emotional. Only then can they learn. This perception is governed by their culture and cultural expectations of the world. As educators, we

position ourselves to educate our children. We claim to prepare them for the “real world” by equipping them with the proper information and skills for success. This is a huge task, especially if we think about what success really means and who gets to decide what’s successful. I aspire to set the expectation in my classroom that not only are we learning academic subjects and skills, but also learning to be global citizens. I would like to teach my students the importance of community in learning. I argue that art is a powerful tool in achieving this interconnectedness in the classroom. It is a way for students to process their own experiences and share that experience with others in a creative way. In classrooms with diverse students and learners, I want to think of many ways children can share themselves. Words may not always suffice as forms of expression. Art allows children another mechanism of connection that is natural to them.

The process of preparing the Masters Oral was meaningful in a way that I never could have predicted. I knew I wanted to explore my time with the various children I have had the honor to work with. However, I did not anticipate how much my work would lead me to reflect on my own experiences. I thought about teachers that have made me feel safe in the past and how they did it. I thought about my own experiences of making art and how it was such an emotional solace for me. I forgot how much of a passion I had for making art as a child until digging around in the archived works my father had saved. I’m so grateful that I had art as a coping mechanism. I hope to make space for art in my own classroom so that children can use it to process the world and their experiences within it. I will never be able to fully understand a child’s culture, but through using art I hope to get close.

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