Addressing Inequality in Education Through a University/School Arts Partnership

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Introduction

I am concerned with the growing gap between rich and poor in our country, how invisible this crisis is to many middle class and affluent people, and what we can do as college level art educators to address this issue. This paper will describe how my Detroit Connections project at the University of Michigan connects primarily affluent and middle class college students with poor children in two inner city elementary schools in Detroit, and how their learning processes and growth become integrated and expanded through collaborative art making. It is about my attempt to connect two very separate groups in a relationship of equality.

While many college students begin the project expecting to “help” the children, what, in fact, develops is a mutual recognition of assets and satisfaction of needs that leads to a deepening of individual potential and agency for the participants. I believe that the “helping” framework that many students start with is problematic. Most college students who arrive at the University of Michigan have been educated at schools that can prepare them for institutions of power in our society. They grow up with the assumption that they will be prepared for college, which will prepare them for a job, which will enable them to have a family and live in a neighborhood much like their own. (Of course there are exceptions to this. I also have students from Detroit and other lower income
areas in urban and rural Michigan.) Most of the schools that my students come from are segregated. Either their school is primarily of one race and without contact with schools of other races, or, if they are in a mixed race school, there is usually segregation within the school. They have had little education about the history of class conflict and racism in the United States that would give them a sense of their isolation and a concern for the suffering of poor people. While they may have learned about the civil rights movement and Brown vs. Board of Education, for the most part, they have not been taught about the ways in which racism and segregation are currently maintained in our educational and criminal justice systems. In *The Night is Dark and I am Far From Home*, Jonathan Kozol argues that our educational system is designed to exclude learning experiences for the privileged that would create compassion and activism, while keeping poor students from gaining the resources they desperately need. The kinds of community service that middle-class high school students are encouraged to do is, for the most part, not accompanied by any kind of analysis or history that would explain the root causes of poverty or racism, thus reinforcing the worldview that “there are poor people and there are middle class and rich people and that’s the way the world is.”

All this is not to say that relatively well-off students’ lives are easy. Even if their families earn a more than decent income, our current economy and the rising cost of college tuition demand that most students hold down a part time job. They struggle with managing their time, some with mental illness and other health issues related to stress, family problems and friendships. There is always anxiety about the job market, how they will fit into it and the ever-present problems of the environment, war, terrorism and other
current and impending global crises. Many of our students are eager to engage with these
issues as well as with communities of people who are different from them.

My Detroit Connections class is part of a new Engagement initiative at the School
of Art and Design. All of our students are required to take at least one three-credit class
that actively engages students with people outside of the school community as they work
together with some form of art or design. The response from the students has been
enthusiastic. Most are eager for engagement outside their normal sphere of activity. They
are eager to make a difference in their community. When students talk to me about their
desire to be in one of my classes – which will take them either into a prison, juvenile
center or an under-resourced urban school, they express a need to expand their
understanding of the world. (My other class is Art Workshops in Prisons.)

While they may desire to help people who they see as “disadvantaged,” I believe
it is important for my college students to come to see their own disadvantage in the
world. Their lack of meaningful contact with people of different social classes and their
ignorance about inequality creates a limit on the humanness that is their potential.
Because the needs of poor children are far more apparent than the need of the college
students for a more realistic and active grounding in the world, it is easy to conceive of
their relationship as unbalanced. I see the work that I have done through my classes as a
struggle to create a more truly reciprocal relationship, in which the strengths and areas of
need are visible. This becomes a process of constructing meaning as we all undergo the
unfolding of creative expression together.
Inequities in Art Education

Increasing numbers of poor children in our country are attending schools that are strapped by limited resources and rigid national educational policies that demand a focus on testing rather than discovery based learning. Young children of middle class and affluent families attend preschools and kindergartens where they play with brightly colored educational toys, listen to music and explore enticing art materials. While much of their time in elementary and secondary schools will be consumed by test preparation, most will continue to have art and music classes, be in school plays and musicals, school bands and orchestras and many will have extracurricular dance, music and art lessons, besides being in weekend sports leagues.

In contrast, many children in poor urban schools have few art materials to explore, no art or music classes and limited libraries. Severely limited by the threat of failure and subsequent withdrawal of funds or the closing of their schools, their principals and teachers are tied to educational policies that are not based on the belief that creative exploration of materials, art, drama and music are a sound basis for cognitive growth.

Detroit Connections

It is in this context that I began my work in 2000 with two severely under resourced elementary schools in Detroit. (One school has an art teacher for grades K-3, and the other had no art teacher until 2005.) I wanted to create a program that would
simultaneously provide much needed art experience for the school children and give my students the opportunity to shift their perspective on their place in our society and on the importance of art making in human development. Throughout the five years of the project I have been fortunate to have either a graduate student or a project coordinator working with me. This person supervises the work at one school on the same day that I supervise work at the other. The class divides into two groups with one group at each school. Our projects are structured so that we work simultaneously on the same project at each school. On the other day of the week that our class meets, we review the previous session at the school, prepare for the next week and have discussions about contextual readings, which include *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol, *36 Children* by Herbert Kohl, selections from Rudolf Arnheim’s writing on the artistic development of children, *(Visual Thinking)* and other readings on *No Child Left Behind* and the current crisis in school testing. The class is really composed of two interlocking curricula – one for the college students and one for the children – which ideally unfold simultaneously. The college students have a series of readings which are intended to lead them toward a greater understanding of the philosophies, policies, and economic structures that create inequality in our schools as well as some of the fundamental principles of artistic development in children. The readings form a background for the experiences that the college students have at the schools with the children and come alive as they see or experience what they are reading. In class discussions, we argue, question and speculate as many students struggle with the clash of their preconceptions and what they are learning. The projects that we do with the children must respond to the needs of the school and must also provide a sense of development and individual expression for each child. But with each
semester, I begin a collaboration with my students in which we discover the details of the projects within certain guidelines that I have set in consultation with the teachers and the principals. In this way, the curriculum for the children evolves as our curriculum evolves, and they mutually inform and change each other.

**Beginning The Projects**

The two principals welcomed our project into their schools, recognizing that we bring close mentoring relationships for the children as well as experience in art, personal discovery and enhanced self-esteem. At Harms Elementary school in Southwest Detroit, principal Patricia Diaz conceived of an after school program in which all clubs and activities would emphasize science skills – the lowest scoring area for her children on the Michigan standardized test (MEAP). I was asked to develop an art curriculum that would link to and strengthen skills in science. At the same time, the principal Charles Hopkins, at Greenfield Union Elementary School, asked us to paint murals with the children on the interior walls of the school. Both principals understood what art could bring to their children but didn’t have the resources to incorporate it into their daily schedule.

That first year (2000) just two of my students worked with me to develop the art and science curriculum. The students worked with a group of children once a week in the Harms School after school program, and at the request of the principal, we also produced the Harms School Art and Science Curriculum Guide, which documented our work. We sought out the links between art and science on an elementary level, and ended up designing projects, which involved close observation, perception of essential characteristics of phenomena, and the perception of parts and wholes. The project was a
success (the science scores went up!) and we were asked to do the same thing the next year with mathematical measurement. During that same year, another group of students was working at Greenfield Union with fourth graders on a mural for the kindergarten hallway.

The next year I worked with two wonderful graduate students who supervised the project at each school, Anthony Smith at Greenfield Union and Ceci Mendez at Harms. Each site produced spectacular work. At Harms, Ceci supervised two projects that each involved metric measurement skills. The first was the designing and production of collaboratively made Alebrijes – imaginary animals made out of wire and paper mache and painted with brightly colored patterns. The second semester’s project was to produce individual books in the shape of an object that represented a possible career path. Each of these projects beautifully incorporated metric measurement skills with art making. At Greenfield Union, the students created a huge mural for the central hallway of the school, right outside the principals office. Starting with simple drawing exercises, the students guided the children’s work toward the clarification of major themes. It became the Greenfield School and Community mural, with images of the school and its people, surrounded by real and imagined environments.

The class and the projects were a big risk for me. I had never done a large public mural and, although I had done a significant amount of work with children, I had never specifically tackled an integrated arts curriculum. However, I was intensely interested in both projects and felt that I had a good background for them. The risk was in entering into a project with my students without knowing exactly where we were going. Part of the reason that I was willing to do this was to model risk-taking and a tolerance for chaos.
I felt that the risk of some moments of confusion were probably worth the lessons that could be learned from a process of collaboration and discovery. These beliefs were validated by my participation during the fall of 2001 in the Liz Lehrman Dance Exchange Hallelujah project in Ann Arbor. It was a large production, which Liz facilitated with professional dancers, non-dancers from Ann Arbor and Detroit and members of the dance department at the university of Michigan. The Hallelujah Project, which occurred in several cities around the country, was a celebration of a particular local community, created with members of the community and members of the Dance Exchange. Ours, though performed in Ann Arbor, was a celebration of the Black community in Detroit before it was destroyed by the building of major freeways that cut through the city. Liz worked simultaneously with her own ideas while structuring inventive ways to generate material from all participants. The September 11th tragedy occurred during the first week of the production and Liz collaborated with all of us to first respond to the event and then to rethink the entire direction of the project. Her capacity to hold true to her beliefs and methods in the midst of tragedy and chaos, her capacity to structure an expression of celebration with a large number of disparate participants was truly inspiring to me and has provided a model that I have learned from in the structuring of Detroit Connections and all my other community based projects.

**Basic Beliefs**

The Detroit Connections projects are based around each child’s need to be listened to and paid attention to. Due to limited resources and the emphasis on testing, the school environment provides little time in which each child’s inner experience can be treasured
and validated. This meant that we would have to create a structure in which this could happen. Most of these children had never had an art class before and so as fourth graders, their drawings looked much like first and second graders drawings. They had few basic skills in painting or any other medium. On the other hand, they were so excited to try everything we had planned. I sometimes felt that the children I worked with at Greenfield, had been waiting for us forever. For them, this was the magic moment when they got to make art. They knew how important it was for them, and because we were there to meet this need, we had a mutual understanding from the beginning. Because for most of them, this would be the only art class they would ever have, I believed that the experience needed to have continuity and a sense of development and it needed to result in something wonderful.

We chose to make primarily collaborative work that could be permanently displayed in the hallways of the school. Partly this arose from the painful reality that only a small number of children out of the whole school were going to be in the art workshops. If we could produce public art, it would benefit the whole school. Also, in making a permanent change to the school, the children would feel a power in their ability to change their environment. In her book, *Weaving a Tapestry of Resistance*, Sharon Sutton has described the ways in which the physical neglect and deteriorated state of their school buildings convey a message of low social status to the children who occupy them. While our schools are in remarkably good shape in comparison to the houses and neighborhoods that surround them, the point still holds true, and I decided that letting the children paint on the walls, creating sculptures that would be installed on the walls, and creating
permanently installed painted panels would give the children a hopeful experience of changing their own environment.

In being collaborative, the work would be large and expressive and complex. It would be our job to take what they made - each drawing or image - and construct a process in which all these elements would combine and expand into a magnificent whole. We were not going to take a child’s drawing of a person with the arms coming out of the neck and show them how to “make the drawing better” by changing the orientation of the arms. We were going to take that drawing and place it in a context in which it would shine. This is not to say that we couldn’t guide the children toward development of their drawing. But it would be in the relationship of all their fragments that the experience would be fulfilling. I had a feeling that the lives of many of these children felt fragmented, that much of classroom learning felt arbitrary. We would aim for their experience in the art project to be a sustained process in which they would feel a sense of meaningful undergoing, a sense of a whole that they were part of. They would see themselves grow as their work developed beyond what they had imagined. In the collaboration, our role would be to create the structure in which their images would flourish, to treasure and keep everything that they did, and make sure that each person’s imagery and contribution ended up in the final product.

The Struggle to Enlarge Our Vision of Each Other

In order to meet another’s needs, we must first be able to see the person clearly, to see what is going on. I have struggled both with my own perceptions of my students and
children, and with the difficulty that my students sometimes have in forming accurate perceptions of the children.

In the first semester of the fifth year of Detroit Connections, I had a group of students that were the first class to go through our school’s new curricula. They were all juniors and seniors, and because of my particular position in the school, I had not taught any freshman or sophomore classes. I felt somewhat out of touch with what they were going through. I felt a lack of enthusiasm in the class and couldn’t understand it. They seemed passive and resentful. After facilitating a discussion in which they aired some of their frustrations with our school, I understood some of the background for the mood of the class. One day we took a break and, for some reason, everyone got into a discussion about games. They were still in the classroom, but it was not class time. They were animated and talkative, in utter contrast to the lethargy I felt moments before during a class discussion. When I reflected that night on what had happened I realized that they were tired and angry with people talking at them and being given structures to follow. And I was giving them a structure for Detroit Connections that we had invented the year before! I thought about Herb Kohl and his description in 36 Children of the first time he gave the 6th graders a break in the day when they could do whatever they wanted. He let the children lead him, and those breaks each day led to wonderful invention and learning. I needed to do the same thing. As I had listened to their animated conversation about various games they played when they were children, I really felt the generation gap. I didn’t know most of the games they were describing. But I realized that this was the key to our class, that, with the help of our project coordinator, Kathryn Stine, who is an excellent craftsperson, we could make board games with the children. I decided to change
the course of the class and the project. This would be a project that grew out of their interests and that would provide a common ground with the children. It was a bumpy process as usual, but each group came up with their own invented game, a board, box, players, strategies and instructions. It was again, an adventure into the unknown, but in the end, well worth it.

There was a day in the beginning of the same semester when we played a name game that involved standing in a circle and running to replace someone else in the circle. When we talked about it at the end of the day, the college students said that the children had been too wild. This was a surprise to me since I had thought they were excited. Yes, they were somewhat wild, but after a whole day of sitting still, what fourth grader wouldn’t be. After all they have very few outlets during the day for physical expression. It seemed to me that the naming of the excitement as “wild” was probably a reflection of how the college students had been contained and restricted during their own educational lives.

Another example: Ceci Mendez and I had created a name game that involves each person naming an animal and making up a gesture to go with it when they say their name. Like many variations of this, we had to repeat everyone’s name each time we came to a new person. This began to take a long time to get around the circle. I noticed some children getting fidgety, but I also noticed the happiness that each person (even the college students) felt when everyone was paying attention to them. This formed the basis for the kind of attention we would give to each child. My students, however, thought it took too long. Were they not noticing the looks of joy on the children’s faces? What was it that made it hard for them to see the range of feelings in the children? These questions
stayed with me as our work progressed and I watched the students grow closer to the children. The children made it easy. When we arrived, they ran up to us unleashing a flood of talk about their day, and their lives, and questions for each of us. Each day, the rush toward each other became more mutual, and there were hugs and confidences shared as the college students fell in love with the children. Along with the urgent joy there were also tantrums, fights over territory and sadness that the children brought into the room from their lives. When we wrote poems about emotions, one little girl who always worked with a quiet intensity, wrote a beautiful and sad poem about being tired. She got up every morning at 5 to take care of her younger siblings while her mother got ready for work. She also helped her mother in the evenings and then did her homework until she went bed. One of the liveliest girls in our group came in one day and started drawing children going up to heaven. Her cousins had just all died in a fire in their home. Another boy was always stealing snacks, and we realized that he was, not only hungry, but also trying to bring food home from his brothers and sisters. Here were the realities of poverty that would have remained theoretical if we hadn’t been there. And I wanted my students to hurt from seeing these things. I hoped that they would feel not only sad, but angry. But my real piece of work came in our classroom back at our school, where I tried to take the hurt that they felt and see the chain of events that led to the hungry child, the tired child, and the child in mourning for her cousins, to see it going back to real people who make real decisions about unequal funding for schools, about cutting social services and about creating policies like No Child Left Behind.

Perhaps the most direct lesson for my students is in the incredible resilience that they witness in the children. It is resilience not only in the form of joy and humor and
intelligence, but also in the wily ways that they try to get more for themselves and get their needs met. It is in the love that they witness between brothers and sisters when the younger siblings arrive at our classroom to wait for their older brother or sister. It is in the independence that they witness as the children find their way home from school by themselves, and in the games they invent for themselves when they are on their own. It is in the insight that they reveal in their comments about us, their teachers, and the movies and TV shows they have watched. Our students, for the most part, have been so carefully guided, watched, cared for, and sheparded through lessons, athletic competitions, tutoring, art classes, and test preparation that they have missed out on some of the raw source material for life that our children have. They have, for most part, been groomed to enter institutions of power that they feel are rightfully theirs, and now they have arrived – at the University of Michigan – one of the finest public universities in the wealthiest country in the world. And yet, when they finish the semester of work with the fourth graders almost all of them say they learned so much from them. What were they missing that they needed?

In her book Unequal Childhoods: Class Race and Family Life, Annette Lareau describes the findings of a study she made of child rearing and schooling in middle-class and poor families. She spent a great deal of time with a handful of white and black families in both classes. She found that the middle and upper middle class children had more opportunities and found their way much more easily through school, that their parents spent more time looking out for them and were better at protecting their interests. However, because the poorer children had more unsupervised time to themselves, they created their own kinds of play, were more independent and developed forms of
resilience to deal with life’s difficulties. They also tended to have closer ties with extended family more of which lived closer to them than did the families of the middle class children.

Of course there are exceptions to these generalizations, but over the years in my work, I have found that Annette Lareau’s findings applied to my students and to the children in Detroit. Through Detroit Connections, I have attempted to set up a situation in which the college students can share the benefits of their access to institutions of power, their skills, and their ease negotiating in the world, while the children can share their cleverness, their strength and their resilience. The greatest difference between them is that, for the most part, the children know what they are missing, but the college students don’t. This gives the children an advantage over the students, which is a revelation, if not always conscious, for the students. The children are poorer, but perhaps more grounded. When the college students realize this, they begin to realize their own limitations and what the children have taught them.

Conclusion

Hopefully we have given some of the children an experience that they can refer back to and build on. We know that some of them, now in high school still bring their friends and family back to see the mural they painted in the hallway. They come in, periodically, proud of their accomplishments, pointing to the section that was theirs, remembering the good times that they had. But, under No Child Left Behind, this school may be closed down next year. With 99% of its children below the poverty line, this school has been hard pressed to achieve the required test scores under the law. With many dedicated
teachers, and children trying their best despite the unemployment, hunger and ill health that their families suffer, the school raised its test scores last year. But it must keep those scores up for two years. Otherwise, the school will close and the children, teachers and administrators will be scattered to other hard-pressed schools around Detroit.

Meanwhile, my students and I sit around tables in a spacious building on a grassy knoll in Ann Arbor, where we spend lots of money on visiting artists who come in from New York and California, on video, computer, sound and other kinds of high tech equipment. We go to Detroit once a week, the poorest and the most segregated city in the United States, and we do our best to connect with wonderful resilient children who may never again have an art class. Clearly what we are doing is valuable. But is it enough?

References


Sutton, Sharon, 1996, *Weaving A Tapestry of Resistance: the places and power and poetry of a sustainable society*, Bergin & Garvey, Westport CN