Under Pressure: Negative Impacts of Pressure on Students within Art Education

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Taking a regular parental check up on my kids, I asked my fifth-grade daughter how she was enjoying her art class this year. To my surprise and disappointment, she began to express her grievances and ended with saying art was her least favorite among the subjects in school. This news was disheartening, considering that she has always shown a vast love for art, particularly with the hours of drawing and coloring she spends at home. This displeasure and frustration affected her deeply because of the expectation of creative and personally rewarding opportunities that are anticipated in art education. Following an exchange of questions and answers, I concluded that her dissatisfaction came from unexpected pressure—pressure for academic excellence, and pressure for aesthetic excellence. I use the term unexpected, since her experience with art has always been an autonomous and enjoyable one. Art, compared to the more rational disciplines, is more subjective and profoundly influenced by opinions and emotions. I summarize here the negative impacts of pressure that can be found within art education, and possible remediations that could bring an art class back on track towards its intended aim.

The pressure put upon students is an unintended inhibiting effect stemming from the demand to abide by educational board standards, as well as the concern to appease the school and parents of art students with visually identifiable progress and superficial knowledge (Buffington, 2019). This superficial development is assessed by completed project output, which includes public art displays on school grounds and throughout the district, and artwork brought home for parent admiration, or "assessment." It is understandable that teachers would like to meet the requirements of both school and home expectations, which are often linked directly to aesthetic improvement through Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) methodology. These traditional standards are generally acknowledged and valued outside of the art education field, a perception deriving from culturally and formally taught art adopted from a long history of

European art influences and a resurgence of back-to-the-basics in the 1980s (Delacruz & Dunn, 1996).

American society has been groomed to place a high value on this particular approach to art, allowing those that do not study or create art, but recognize its distinction of human genius, to have some sort of expectation of what “good” art should be. This narrower perspective is often found in the standards imposed on art education curricula and may be very difficult to broaden. Though DBAE plays an important part in art education, the over-emphasizing and misuse of this method comes at the expense of creative and cognitive benefits of the field. With art educators under pressure to meet these expectations, pressure is also imposed on students but in two areas—academic excellence and aesthetic excellence—and they unfortunately receive a rushed, restricted, and one-dimensional experience to reach them. Art should be a cognitive pursuit, and therefore loses strength when students are pressured in both academic success and aesthetic excellence.

Pressure for Academic Excellence

Teachers are accorded the responsibility to lead their students towards academic excellence through instruction, homework, rigorous testing, and by whatever means necessary that will raise academic success, particularly in scoring. Expectations in artistic achievement is not overlooked, though due to the unique facets of the field, excellence may be assessed by measures different than other disciplines such as public displays of art, skills mastery, and progress by comparison. Oftentimes when art teachers strive to raise a class’s artistic merits to meet these expectations, they unknowingly confine methods into a focused objective that negatively affects or rebuffs other artistic opportunities.

Two such methods, often placed in unison, are allotting a short timeframe of completion and mandating a strict fixation on the art project itself in order to complete the project in the time dictated. Some teachers give into the pressure of esteeming quantity over stimulating quality of artwork, thus having students produce projects within a limited and unrealistic timeframe. This intense work ethic may be stressed so that art projects could be completed by the end of class, seldom extending past a single class session, which results in a larger production of completed work for the year and a greater variety of showcased works, all under the guise of providing a diverse range of small art projects that held little meaning or substance. There is obvious value and necessity in setting a timely goal of completion. However, when students are pressed to complete work (not experimentation) within a significantly small window of time, it is at the sacrifice of *too* much, including critical thinking skills, holistic development, and deeper understandings of one's peers and in the world. Art is a cognitive activity, and by rushing students to complete work that should be inherently personal, many of the cognitive experiences within the process can be sidestepped. Students are compelled to take shortcuts and subordinate artistic choices are made to meet timely expectations, all of which result in dissatisfaction and a disconnection from the work in which ownership is not claimed.

In the hopes to serve both a cultural purpose and time with a simplified assignment, teachers may task students with a project that mimics historical objects of past and present cultures, what Buffington and Bryant (2019) refer to as a mimicry approach. Instead of students gaining a deeper understanding of these cultural practices, "lessons have little regard for the meaning of materials, context, function of objects, cultural significance, or relationships to contemporary culture. This leads to superficial knowledge and misunderstandings of cultures, not deep and nuanced learning" (p.22).

Most elementary school students participate in art class once a week. Combining a lesson and art project each class session is a commonplace practice to make use of the minimal time given. To provide a more meaningful experience, the goal should not require a finished project each session, but an opportunity to explore creativity. Possible alternatives to the rushed lesson and project schedule are to plan a larger lesson spanning over multiple sessions, or begin with a session dedicated to a lesson with the limited remaining time used to allow student collaboration and idea building that can include experimentation or sketch planning for their future project. This would leave room for multicultural lessons, as well as more meaningful art projects. Project planning, sketches, and experimentation works can also be displayed in the classroom to show progression and can also be included in take-home planning and sketching portfolios for parents to view.

Referring to the second method, that of strict fixation, one of the complaints my daughter expressed was not being able to talk to her classmates while working on project, all of which required full concentration. This, like appropriate goal setting, is understandable as well. Be that as it may, creating art requires various modes of attention for different reasons. Fixating on artwork is important, but the artist knows best the intensity that is needed, and when. At times, the intensity wanes and the progress takes on a relaxed state of enjoyment. The artist also attends to their work by seeking inspiration. Inspiration often comes from exterior resources, sometimes from viewing a peer's work or by social interaction. With my daughter's experience, social interactions were rarely allowed. Even moderate chatting with classmates could distract from an intense focus on the project, leading to verbal reprimands. Such a strict environment removes the enjoyment from the project, which can inhibit learning while developing a dislike for the task. It also bypasses the social connection or bonding with peers, a pivotal opportunity that could help

in future sharing, discussion, and peer critiques. Working together towards a shared goal does not only apply to collaboration on one project; students engage in collaborative learning as they communicate with each other on reaching personal goals. Peer-to-peer questioning and feedback is meaningful and helps create a student-centered environment.

Pressure for Aesthetic Excellence

Art educators are bombarded with new pedagogical theories and methods that could improve the applicability and significance of the field, while deciding the relevance of older traditional ones. This cyclical reformation of art education (Delacruz & Dunn,1996) can generate methodology advocates on both ends of the pedagogical pendulum, with some favoring traditional methods that focus on technique and aesthetics, and others on full unbridled autonomy. Though both have their benefits and, if left unchecked, their disadvantages, I will focus here specifically on the teaching and promotion of aesthetics through DBAE, and the negative effects of its overuse and misuse.

The 1980s brought on a resurgence of a reformation for excellence. “As the question What constitutes a quality education? became the center point for educational reform initiatives, efforts toward making education more substantive and rigorous took hold. Concepts like back-to-basics, competency, and accountability became the buzzwords of the decade” (Delacruz & Dunn, p.67). How do we account for the quality of art? If it is argued that quality art is a product of a quality education, what is the measurement to evaluate this? I believe it goes back to the American perspective in which art’s value lies in the traditional European aesthetic nature, than in modernist creativity where valuation is often split. There is less argument on the value of traditional art than on contemporary art, and in this we see where art standards in education germinate.

Not unlike the pressure to achieve excellence in the respective objectives of any discipline, pressure can be found within art education's own conventions, many of which are supported by a foundation of DBAE practice. Aesthetic excellence appears to remain the imperative goal, if among others. Artistic practice should require the study and experimentation of methods and medium to gain a proficiency that broadens creative ability. Gardner (1983) references this artistic mastery stating, "those whose interests focus on educating artistic vision examine various methods for enhancing an individual's capacity to encode and decode artistic symbols" (p.47). Product creation in various forms, or "symbols" as Gardner names them, is a trademark of human cognition. Nonetheless, there is more that can be acquired in art education besides technical and visual component mastery.

An artist does not persist through this cognitive experience only to achieve a completed work; the process is an enjoyable growth and learning experience in several ways which many unfamiliar with art often do not comprehend. Gardner asserts that "the investigator of artistic knowledge studies the ways in which skilled (and unskilled) individuals handle artistic symbols: the goals they set, the problems they encounter, the steps through which they pass in fashioning or interpreting artistic symbols" (p.47). It can be argued that communication of the interpretation or idea is strengthened with skilled symbol manipulation, however, interpreting artistic symbols and other encounters mentioned in this process do not require technical skill but demand other mental efforts and experiences. "Cognitivism calls on us to show that artworks as well invite us to take a cognitive stance toward their content. That is, it asks us to show that if we acquire knowledge from art, it is because artworks themselves are active and competent players in the pursuit of knowledge" (Gibson, 2008, p.3). Unfortunately, these cognitive opportunities can be easily bypassed if a curriculum sets blinders which restrict the peripheral facets of art education.

Art teachers who are stern advocates of DBAE may push a curriculum centered in its methods, which unarguably builds the skills of students, but at the sacrifice of many other rewarding experiences and learning opportunities. The desire to raise excellence in aesthetic and technical skills can be partially due to traditional output valued by the school and parents which meets the accountability standards expected. A method sometimes employed by teachers, including my daughter's, is group imitation for traditional quality, which reflects technical progress to the school and parents. There are several negative issues that can arise from implementing this unsparingly throughout a curriculum. More often than not, quality assessment is conducted by means of comparison. This can develop fear of imperfection as well as anxiety in students who feel that they are not meeting expectations when charged with the task to replicate along with their peers.

Replication or concentration on subject rather than concept may also be assigned out of convenience for the teacher. The assumption that students will benefit from an easier task in duplication, which in turn leads to the desired speedy completion, is misleading. The act of replication is often a beneficial practice tool to be given at appropriate times and depending on the intention in which it is given. Many artists purposefully set aside time or take a class to enhance their skills in a particular artistic area. When it comes to art education for K-12 grades, the focus of the art class is meant to remain broad, encompassing various artistic approaches including but not limited to replication. When replication becomes a standard, it does not allow for deviation and consequently inhibits natural creativity. Excessive student replication may also be the result of a teacher finding themselves creatively or technically inadequate to present a personal artwork as an example to their students, in which case severely limits the education entitled to students. According to Baer's (2012) experience with prospective teachers, many

carry the feeling of inadequacy as artists, and "are giving in to doubt and discomfort, allowing it to halt the experience all together" (p.43). An art teacher's fear in presenting their own artistic work may be a deciding factor in what lessons are taught in class, resorting to replication as a common directive. Extending Howard's (1999) thought "we can't teach what we don't know" (as cited in Gay, 2002, p. 106), we won't generally encourage what we are not willing to do ourselves. Baer continues of his preservice students, "they are unique and expressive individuals giving themselves far too little credit for their own potential growth as artists" (p.43), and then cites English and Stengel (2010) to say, "if there is no interruption that arises in our engagement with the new, unfamiliar, and unexpected, there is no educational possibility, no learning, no growth" (pg.531).

To study the technicality of art, in this case via subject replication, becomes measurable and a cognitive science (Delacruz & Dunn, 1996) that is valued in public education. The diverse creativity of students that can be uncovered through a concept or connection lesson is absent. With replication, comparison would be quick to follow, since it can be used as a form of quality assessment, especially when showing a student's work. Depending on the comfort of the student, this may not seem to have any negative impact, however, it can on those students who suffer from low confidence in their artistic abilities. Providing a teacher's example is significantly different than singling out work by a student who is expected to be at an equal level of expertise. This may show favoring work over another, and displaying a false sense of a right and wrong way to art. This raises the bar, and thus, the pressure. If the teacher is attempting to stimulate inspiration, it may be better to allow students to walk around and view their peers' work, a choice that involves preparedness of mind in attitude and acceptance of the student. Exhibiting a

wall of student work, even of the same subject, highlights the artistry of all the students, rather than one.

“The classroom is a place to pull apart, to flesh out, to reconsider, and to weave together new and old ideas to form significant understandings of the world and meaning within it” (Baer, 2012, p. 43). Rethinking how students achieve academic excellence and artistic excellence in art education to relieve the pressure mounting on students may be a difficult task ahead of teachers and preservice students. Can we take a step back from our curriculums to assess their implementation and serviceability and ask ourselves, Is what we are teaching allowing for the critical experiences of cognitive growth, collaboration, creativity, problem solving, and understanding? We may then ease or remove these burdens being placed on young learners. What changes would we make? How do we convince the educational establishment and parents of the value of creative and explorative ethics found in the artmaking process? The importance of project development methods of planning and critical thinking? Educating parents of the purpose of art, expectations, and aims of progressive creativity and awareness growth in classrooms could be a beneficial step in changing how the wider education system views the value of art education and its assessment. Art should never have to feel constrained or negatively intimidating but should be a personally meaningful opportunity and cognitive activity for reflection as much as a method for communication and a deeper understanding of people and other cultures.

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