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# Commentary: Educational Change and the Arts

SYDNEY WALKER and MICHAEL PARSONS

The five articles in this special section are very diverse. Each is about reform in or through arts education, but they rest on different assumptions about reform and present a range of attitudes about the possibilities of success. They reflect at least three different major reform projects—more if you consider the variety of change efforts that Brent Wilson's reflections are based on (the eight years of the Getty-funded Regional Institute Grants and the Arts Education Partnership) and the variations within the national TETAC project. This diversity represents differences present in the field as a whole. There is a continuing national interest in reform in art education and an incipient alliance between art education and the current more general school reform movement. Among the authors of these articles, there appears to be agreement that change should aim for the goal of understanding and be based at the level of the system. But this very general agreement leaves a lot of room for differences of assumptions and goals, many of which we find in these articles.

Take, for example, the question of what is to be reformed: is it the way we teach the arts or the school as a whole? Much, but by no means all, of the art education interest in reform today seems to be shifting toward an interest in whole school reform (and, conversely, some school reformers are becoming interested in using the arts for their purposes). But the shift is ambiguous and the ambiguity is reflected here. Brent Wilson's article, for example, presents the case for what he calls "systemic" reform in arts education. Wilson focuses on programs that integrate the several arts together, and he offers an optimistic account of a curriculum unit, from the Vancouver, Washington, school district, that integrates dance, music, and the visual arts around the theme of composition. It is an impressive example, and Wilson claims that it represents what is happening in a number of school districts around the country. The goal appears to be to change the way the arts are taught.

This sense of an "integrated curriculum" is different from what is happening in at least parts of the TETAC project, where the attempt is to integrate the visual arts with much of the rest of the school curriculum—with the social studies, science, language arts, math. There the themes selected for study (such as composition) come not so much from the arts specifically as from larger real-world issues (such as community, heroes, hunger, the natural environment). And—to descend to a detail that is nevertheless quite significant in practice—the Vancouver program appears to require that the arts teachers all be scheduled together with the students from a particular grade level at the same time. This is a common scheduling pattern in elementary schools around the country because it allows the classroom teachers for that grade level to meet together to plan a shared curriculum, while their students are with the arts teachers. This helps greatly if the aim is to integrate the arts together. But it is a problem if the aim is to integrate art into the rest of the curriculum because it isolates the arts teachers from the joint curriculum planning. Overcoming this established pattern has been a problem for some TETAC schools. What is an ideal pattern in the one case is a serious obstacle in the other.

In the case of the third major project discussed in these articles, the Getty-funded project in the Fairfax community schools in Los Angeles County, it appears—though it is not absolutely clear—that the aim was to improve instruction in the visual arts through what used to be called discipline-based art education. This is suggested by the account of the ten-day institutes offered to the teachers and principals. The difference that most strikes us here is not between Wilson's relative optimism and Slavkin and Crespin's relative pessimism—because any reform movement will have successes and failures—

but between their goals, both of which go by the label of "reform." DBAE has rarely seemed interested in the several arts, even less so in integrating them together, and has spoken little of reforming the curriculum as a whole. And even these differences are not clear. For example, Wilson speaks mostly of the reform of arts programs districtwide, but in his last paragraph he suggests that the goals are after all larger than that: They are to transform schools into communities, or even whole school systems.

In the introduction to these articles, Hutchens and Pankratz remark that much of the literature on reform initiatives in arts education has been "either too negative or too promotional in character, and often disconnected from the realities of teaching and learning." One could hardly say that of these pieces. They are very much in touch with the practical world of educational change, and they reflect the difficulties of making confident general pronouncements about it. There is considerable emphasis on the complexities of practice and the need for tradeoffs required by working for change in schools. The reader should know that we respond to these discussions from the perspective of "mentors" involved in the TETAC project, very conscious of the practical difficulties and aware that judgments of success and failure are always partial and in need of updating.

From this perspective, we are also struck by differences among the authors about the meaning of the "system." All of the authors agree that what distinguishes the current phase of reform from previous ones is that it aims at "systemic" reform. They all agree that change efforts should not aim at the level of the individual teacher or classroom, as so many have before, but at something larger. But they vary in what is to be included in the system to be reformed. The TETAC project is aimed at individual schools, being a coalition of thirty-five schools nationally, and it seeks to promote collaboration among teachers in each school and between the school and members of the local community. This inevitably emphasizes the importance of the school principal, as did the Fairfax project, and the importance of considering the individual differences among schools. One can see this as sympathetic with the movement toward site-based management and the differentiation of purpose among schools—into magnet schools, arts-based schools, science-based schools and so on. Wilson, on the other hand, is emphatic that the "system" at issue for him is the school district as a whole, and he emphasizes that reform works best at that level because of the importance of the superintendent, the arts supervisor, and districtwide policies. Frechtling, who is the most explicit about what a system is, includes in it three levels: individuals, schools, and school districts. And even that does not include the university programs of teacher education and professional development that Hutchens and Pankratz identify as key items for change in systemic reform.

None of these can be called right or wrong, of course. Any of the levels can be regarded as a system, and it is always a practical and a political question where best to draw the lines in any particular case. Where there is a district superintendent like the one in Vancouver, Washington, it is surely best to include the whole district. Where there is a principal like the one at Newton D, Baker Elementary in Cleveland, it is best to include the school and the parents; and so on. Our conclusion is that these issues are complex and highly situational, and that what is wrong is to insist on any one definition of a "system" to be reformed.

One assumption of these articles is that the system to be reformed does not include the change agents—the foundation, the grant agencies, the mentors or university professors, the evaluators. The model seems always to be that of a change agent coming from outside, intervening with new ideas and additional resources, participating in the reform effort, but not being part of the system that is to be changed. One mark of this is that the intervention, in every case an externally funded project of some sort, has a stated time limit at the end of which it is to withdraw and leave the system in its new, changed state. A practical consequence is that, because the power to make key decisions always lies within the system, change agents must rely in the end on their abilities to persuade. This is most evident in the account of the Fairfax schools, where the principals were not sufficiently committed to the project. It is also true even of projects where commitments have been discussed, made clear, and signed for in advance, because local politics changes every year and personnel turn over, and the result is that the commitment to change has continually to be renegotiated. All kinds of paradoxes and ambiguities of aim and motivation follow that are familiar to those who work in these projects.

One of these paradoxes is the one emphasized by Goodlad in his contrast of reform with renewal. The paradox is that we are always involved in "seeking from the outside for what is necessary on the inside," which invites the "nasty connotation of things and people gone wrong" and needing to be done to by outsiders. We agree with Goodlad in rejecting the conception of school improvement that always makes "the desired outcomes more precise, the inputs more vague . . . and the human targets . . . more accountable." The politics of schooling at both national and local levels has targeted achievement on proficiency tests as the primary way to assess students, teachers, and schools, and several authors in this collection refer to the negative effects on the arts and school reform. Slavkin and Crespin report the effects on the school principals of district pressure to devote their efforts to improving student performance on upcoming standardized proficiency tests, a scenario that occurs repeatedly in schools across the country. We too have witnessed occasions on which a curriculum aimed at student understanding has had to be put aside in favor of concentrating on preparing students for proficiency tests. And Frechtling observes that when "preparation for testing (as distinct from teaching) occupies three to four months, it is very difficult to gain access to teachers and students, especially for evaluation

of activities in content areas like the arts that are not the focus of the tests."

There seems to be little doubt that the focus on standardized testing is damaging to arts education and to the cause of school reform in general. It seems inevitably to distract teachers from teaching for understanding and to focus them on less sophisticated and less desirable goals. Characterized by multiple choice and short-answer responses, such tests almost always pull toward knowledge and skills that are more dependent on rote-memory and drilled instruction. Howard Gardner has recently argued that "the test of understanding involves neither repetition of information learned nor performances of practices mastered. Rather, it involves the appropriate application of concepts and principles to questions or problems that are newly posed."

On the other hand, it is difficult to deny the political appeal of large-scale testing, despite its power to focus attention on lower-level outcomes. How to proceed? To ignore the issue of evaluation does not seem to be an option for the arts or for school reform.

Frechtling, in her article on evaluation, notes the inclusion of arts assessments in the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress as at least a symbolic recognition of the arts as consequential disciplines and also as a possible model for large-scale assessments more supportive of school reform. She also recognizes the "paucity of instruments for measuring outcomes in the arts" and describes the efforts of the WESTAT evaluation team to develop their own more sophisticated assessment instruments for the TETAC project. As mentors with access to these instruments, we agree with Frechtling that they represent promising tools for assessing attainment in the visual arts. The assessment tasks on which these instruments are based embody language such as *explain why, support your answer, find differences,* and *make comparisons,* which calls for a demonstration of understanding rather than of the rote learning promoted by standardized testing. It remains to be seen, at this point, how the responses to these tasks will be scored, how useful the scoring will be, and especially how much time and other resources it will take. It seems inevitable that large-scale testing of understanding will take more resources than do standardized tests, which are usually scored by computers. Ease of administration and scoring seems to be their major advantage.

It is also a question how much large-scale assessment we really need and whether, if we need it, it should have such an effect on classrooms. Grant Wiggins, director of research for the Center on Learning, Assessment, and School Structure, suggests that local assessment, devised and conducted at the school or classroom level, is more useful for the purpose of the improvement of teaching and learning. He argues that our best strategy is to minimize the effects of standardized tests on classrooms and at the same time build a local capacity to develop high-quality assessments of learning. It would be better if teachers were able to develop assessments based on their own curricula, to assess their own students' grasp of the understandings they teach for, and to use the results to adjust their own teaching. In such cases, the issue of the time required for sophisticated assessment is less significant because the assessment becomes in effect a part of the curriculum and instruction. The admonition to build local capacity for high quality assessment is being taken seriously in some TETAC regional sites. It is unfortunately true that most teachers, in all subject areas as well as the arts, are not skilled in designing high-quality assessments; it has not traditionally been expected of them. It is our belief that if the arts and/or school reform are to prosper, teachers' abilities with assessment must be addressed.

Why the arts in school reform? Arts educators, as Frechtling reminds us, face special challenges. What is needed is a strong argument for the role of the arts in school change. Goodlad raised the question, maintaining that the arts and educational renewal need one another, that there is a natural meshing of purposes between them: "both are nonlinear, both are ecological." Unfortunately, in our view, he also suggests that this means we should avoid issues of assessment: "the essence [of both] is in the doing and so there are no end markers of accomplishment." In this direction, as we have suggested, lies the continued marginalization of the arts.

> If school reform means a sustained focus on understanding complex issues, the arts are inevitably called for, because they are uniquely suited to serve as vehicles that embody complex understandings.

Hutchens and Pankratz commented on the concerns of the Advisory Council for the TETAC project about the ability of the arts to function as a platform for whole school reform. They speak of a conception of school reform as an initiative which seeks "to integrate all subjects with parity, attempting to use the disciplines as modes of inquiring into essential questions and big ideas about human existence." There are two parts to this formulation. The first is the notion that the arts should have parity with other subjects. This appears to be the goal assumed in the discussions by Wilson and Slavkin and Crespin and certainly it would constitute a major reform of the teaching of the arts. Whether it would amount to whole

school reform is not clear to us. When we add the notion of integrating the different school subjects, including the arts, as different modes of inquiring into the same big ideas, the arts become not only equal with other subjects but also interconnected with them through the substance of the big ideas. This would indeed be school reform. It is perhaps the core idea of the school reform movement in general that the curriculum should be conceived as inquiry into "big ideas about human existence," and there is no a priori reason why the arts should not be the one to lead the school curriculum in this direction. Integrated curriculum based upon big ideas offers an opportunity for the arts to model instructional approaches and strategies that are cogent in all school subjects.

We recognize that in principle any subject could do this (especially perhaps the language arts), and the political weakness of the arts might seem to make them an unlikely candidate for leadership. But despite the apparent implausibility of the arts as agents of whole school reform, we have seen some encouraging signs in the TETAC project, primarily through efforts to develop integrated curricula that ground teaching and learning on a conceptual basis, away from an activity orientation. We have seen elementary, middle, and high school teachers transforming their instructional strategies, valuing the teaching of ideas, collaborating with other teachers, and recognizing the contribution the arts can make to understanding. And in the course of our experience, we have discovered a further way of thinking about the value of the arts as a synthesizing agent.

If school reform means a sustained focus on understanding complex issues, the arts are inevitably called for, because they are uniquely suited to serve as vehicles that embody complex understandings. If students are to engage with big ideas that transcend specific subject areas and that can be studied in several ways, there exists a need to pull the complexity together somehow. The arts, which call for coordinating several perspectives, dealing with ambiguity, and incorporating of personal values, are uniquely well suited for this purpose. They can serve not only in a parallel and equal role but also as a way to coordinate different points of view, and perhaps a whole curriculum. An artwork might sum up the results of a whole curriculum and be of significance to the whole school faculty. This would be a different role than Goodlad's suggestion that the arts appear "on the make" and it is substantially unlike proposals that view the arts as an enhancement for teaching other subjects.

One articulation of the confluence of the arts with school reform suggests that what is good for the one should be good for the other. This is especially true in the context of curricula oriented to the study of human issues for purposes of understanding, together with the concomitant design of high-quality assessment at the local level for all subject areas. In implementing such a move will we lose what is valuable in the arts? It appears to us an opportunity to capitalize on exactly what makes the arts significant: their ability to convey the complexity and ambiguity of human beliefs and values. The arts have much to gain from participation in school change if we can persist with the effort.

**Note**

1. Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 117.

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## High School Teaching Kit Stresses Cinematography

A new guide has been designed for students in secondary school visual arts and communications, English, language arts, and other courses to teach students about cinematography as they complete specific assignments in their classes.

Distributed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the guide, "Capturing Images on Film," is aimed at stimulating critical thinking and visual literacy.

The Academy says the guide is part of "an ongoing commitment to creating a dialogue between the film-making community and the film-watching public." This is its second annual High School Teaching Kit, and it has been mailed to 18,000 schools nationwide. The kit is free.

The kits, produced by Youth International Ltd., of Easton, Connecticut—with direct input from cinematographers who serve on the Academy's Board of governors—are designed to capitalize on students' natural interest in current films.

The four activities in this year's kit are called Angling the Camera, Lighting the Scene, Framing the Shot, and Learning from the Best. Upon completing these, the Academy says, students should have a better understanding not only of the art of cinematography, but of the collaborative process that is the very nature of filmmaking.

Information about all of the Academy's programs in support of education and film scholarship can be found at www.oscars.org, or by calling (310) 247-3000.