

WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH THE ARTS: Challenging the “art for its own sake” vs. “art for social service” dichotomy

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-Arnold Aprill, November, 1998

The Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) is a network of schools, arts organizations and community organizations in long-term relationships. The partners co-plan arts infused teaching, weaving arts learning (and by arts we mean all the arts: visual, theatre, dance, media, music) across the whole curriculum (science, mathematics, social studies, language arts, foreign language, physical education, etc.)

In order to talk about what we do, I need to challenge for a moment what I believe is a false dichotomy that has been set up in this conference between serious art making and art as a social service. That false dichotomy springs out of the limits of service models (as opposed to capacity building models), as well as misconceptions of the functions of art.

We need to recognize that art only has meaning inside social systems, and that these systems operate in complex and varied ways. There is art that exists to maintain traditions, there is art that exists to break traditions, there is art that exists to individuate, there is art that exists to create cohesion, there is art that exists for exclusive connoisseurship, and art that exists for democratic inclusion. Art has multiple and even opposing functions embedded in larger social processes. Trying to distinguish between the social functions of art and the aesthetic functions of art is to misapprehend the diversity and complexity of the art-making processes themselves.

This false dichotomy prevents us from thinking clearly about arts policy. Remembering that the arts serve a variety of functions assists us in recognizing that different arts initiatives also serve different functions. Our work is not finding and funding the one right program, but rather understanding the functionality of each program, its “theory of change”, and how those functions interact with the functions of other initiatives to enrich the wider social fabric.

This means that no one arts constituency, neither “high art” nor popular art, downtown or community based, gifted and talented programs nor general education programs, is the magic bullet. We need to invest in an environment that generates a wide palette of options. We need to recognize the role that each program has in policy development, and the niche that it occupies in the larger social ecology. Not only do we need to look at the initiative’s programming, but also at how that programming contributes to systematic change.

This means that we’ve got to advocate for cross sector discussions. Specifically, in the area of arts and youth, we’ve got to overcome the failed discussions between the school reform community and the arts education community, as well the failed discussions between the youth arts community and the youth development community. In order to do that, we need to move from a marketing mentality of arts programming to a capacity-building conception. We’ve got to shift our thinking about program support from what

things the program is doing for whom, to who it is doing what for themselves through the program.

In the CAPE program, there are two primary capacities we want kids to develop. One is the capacity to create high stakes, diverse ways of generating and representing knowledge. We believe that the arts are essential to this process. The other is the capacity for kids to convene communities, whether it's a small working group inside the classroom, a program inside the whole school, a program between schools, or an international project.

Recent research on school improvement shows that there two skill sets-the capacity to create challenging, diverse learning opportunities and the capacity to create communities-are two of the primary elements needed for making better schools. The arts, exactly because of their diverse functions, have unexplored potential for supporting the school improvement process.

The CAPE initiative has specific strategies for school improvement through the arts. Again, these are not the "one right way" to do this work. They are CAPE's particular strategies: While our programs are built on the belief that the arts have importance both as stand-alones and as integrated into other subjects, we have chosen to focus on integration because we think that there aren't enough developed exemplars of quality integration. Although our artists work directly with young people in classrooms, we see CAPE's primary function to be increasing teachers' capacity to integrate the arts into their instruction, rather than providing direct services to youth. We believe in schools changing their school-wide policy towards the arts, rather than working with individual interested teachers. We're a systems change initiative versus a service delivery initiative. We believe that teachers have the capacity to write curriculum, and that in order for teachers to make serious connections to the arts, teachers need to be engaged in the curriculum writing process with the artists.

Our particular program is focused on democratic access to arts experiences. There is great value in talented and gifted programs; that's not what we do. Though we are connected to community-based and after-school programs, our focus is on in-school programming.

We believe in creating strategies to shift policy. Our work is not just at the ground level. We put a lot of thought and effort into how we carry our work into the policy arena. We're a decentralized program. Our partnerships are small clusters of arts organizations and schools.

We believe that in order to effectively manage change, the program has to be structured on a human scale. The cross sector planning teams have to be intimate enough for local policy to be set in a coherent manner. We believe in collaborating with other initiatives.

We are working with the A+ School program and the National Writing Project to deepen the connection between arts education and literacy development. Through the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest fund we are collaborating with other curricular initiatives such as the Illinois Writing Project, the Chicago Algebra Project and the Metro History Education Center.

It isn't about an art program coming in and fixing the school, it's about an art program being at the table with a mixed constituency in a collective effort to move things forward.

The Canadian arts education theorist F. Graeme-Chalmers talks about the need to stop talking about "what" is art to start talking about "when" is art. Art only exists as a social relationship. Quality arts programming generates productive new relationships for young people-with each other, with adults, and with themselves.