

As an educator, I have a strong understanding about the power of the arts in our lives as not only individuals but as well as a member of a community. As I am a primary/junior teacher, I can appreciate and recognize how young children's response to the world is primary sensory and aesthetic. According to Dissanayake (2007), the arts are central to human life. As it is central, humans have always made an artistic mark on the world as it is part of the condition of being human. Although I understand the potential of the arts, I do realize that there is not widespread acceptance of this potential in the current educational system. According to Smithrim and Upitis (2002), a teacher should experience preparation in the arts that would not only open their hearts, but their mind and paths of possibility. For Smithrim and Upitis (2002), there is a series of spheres of possibility for teacher preparation in arts education. At the core of these spheres is the notion that all teachers should be given opportunities to experience the arts for themselves before addressing the issues of how to teach the arts. In order to explore and experience Smithrim and Upitis (2002)'s arguments for spheres, I immersed myself into a series of painting activities. Through this process, I experienced the spheres of Teachers as Artists and the Aesthetic playground. By analyzing this art experience, I will carefully solidify and extend the theories presented by Smithrim and Upitis as well as consider future implications in my own teaching.

## Analysis

### Teachers as Artists

Throughout my educational experiences, as both a student and a teacher, I have rarely had the opportunity to experience the arts for themselves. As a student, I was often given pre-determined art activities that did not provide opportunities for unique explorations. In these art experiences, I would produce a piece that reflected the teacher's example or tedious goal for the lesson. As an educator, my pre-service learning was centered on creating lessons that were linked to curriculum expectations. Within this classroom, I rarely had the opportunity to explore, manipulate and experience the materials. However, in both settings, I was always told by art educators that the arts are important.

According to Smithrim and Upitis (2002), telling people about the importance of the arts is generally ineffective. Instead, Smithrim and Upitis (2002) describe how teachers need to experience the transforming power of the arts in their own lives in order to believe and understand the power of art experiences. Through the process of painting, I was given the opportunity to become a beginner artist. In terms of painting, my experiences prior to this piece were limited to the painting of rooms as well as furniture. As I was perusing options for art exploration, I considered Smithrim and Upitis (2002)'s observation regarding changes to teacher's practices and beliefs. For Smithrim and Upitis (2002), changes in the practice arose when teachers worked directly with artists and experienced the artistic process while making their own art. From this observation, I began my own art experience by contacting an old colleague, Kate. As an artist, Kate has created significant art pieces from a young age and eventually took her skill and talent to the classroom. As an art educator, she appreciated and recognized my desire to experience art individually before searching for the tools to teach my classroom. In most cases, Kate encourages this within her own classroom community. As a passionate artist, she recognizes that the importance of the arts is most often lost in the teaching of techniques in professional development. Instead, she is an honest advocator for her peers and students to explore art individually before attempting to teach others.

## The Aesthetic Playground

In order for the teacher to experience the arts, they must be immersed in an aesthetic playground. An aesthetic playground, described as being the second sphere, is considered to be a place and time in which a person is free to feel, to create and to respond in an atmosphere of acceptance, free from hurtful criticism (Smithrim & Upitis, 2002). In my own analysis with my experience with Kate, I can reflect on moments that truly illustrate this playground. On the first day of exploring paint, we began by dipping and mixing colours. Kate encouraged me to use colours in a way that I felt would make me more comfortable. Instead of asking me to use colours realistically, she encouraged the use of many colours and types of paint. Through this exploration, I was able to confidently choose a realistic palette for my future lessons. Although she encouraged me to not use a limited range of colours, I felt that if I did I would feel more confident in my final piece.

Interestingly, this freedom of colours led to a long day of manipulating shades, brush sizes, techniques, as well as different supports- canvas, primed hardboard and paper. For Smithrim and Upitis (2002), the dimension of the playground experienced within my own art experience illuminates their understandings of having self-direction. Self-direction, in this case, suspended the sense of time as well as the heightening of the senses. As each colour blended, I was lost in their complimenting tones as well as their absorption nature.

Throughout this process, Kate played a pivotal role in creating and maintaining the aesthetic playground. Smithrim and Upitis(2002) encourage people within this playground be nudged away from the rational realm. When I first began to paint, I systematically took each colour and brushed them beside each other. As Kate questioned my motives, I explained how I wanted to have each colour on one sheet as a reference. As a way to shift my thinking, she decided to play various pieces of music. While the music played, she asked me to place the colours on the paper in a way that expressed how I felt when listening to the music. In this way, she challenged the rational realm as well as instilled and endorsed imaginative thinking. According to Greene (2007), Imagination is described as a passion for the possible, meaning that it is the capacity to bring into realities alternative to common sense. By pushing for messy space and time, Kate effectively incorporated this imaginative piece into our aesthetic playground.

### Teachers as Learners

In this art piece process, I have extended and highlighted my own disposition to what Smithrim and Upitis (2002) describe as a second sphere. Teachers as learners, is highlighted through continuous learning in both professional and personal lives. Although this painting experience was inspired by an educational assignment, I sought out an artist who is connected to my own personal life. As a final piece, a selection of the painting would be hung in my next classroom. In doing so, the framing of the art and placing it within my classroom enables me to share a story with my students. Bartel (2005) challenges educators to talk about stories. For Bartel (2005), stories about one's teaching and learning specifically that have a strong connection to professional practice defines and identifies an educator to their students. From a professional practice, I believe that this painting experience is a story that truly illustrates what I value as an educator. First of all, it identifies my learning as one that is lifelong and diverse. As I am not an arts educator, this framed work exemplifies my genuine and true appreciation for arts in the classroom. When using the words genuine and true appreciation for the arts, the idea of being a strong poet is illustrated. According to Rautins and Ibrahim (2011), the strong poet does not simply write verses, but has the language and vision to tell us something new. Within the classroom, the strong poet is teacher who is likely to affirm creativity and imagination in their

students and to encourage them to go within for their ideas. By hanging this painting, I hope that the story I share will enable the students to feel this way.

### Implications for Teaching

Throughout this process, there were a series of significant experiences that highlight how painting has given me a different perspective on how to teach for understanding and learning. As the arts encourages people to go within for ideas, they give people experience with situations in which there is no known answer, multiple solutions as well as the idea that nuance is important.

Art work opens our eyes to the details in simple things (Smithrim & Upitis, 2002).

When choosing a brush, the length of the brush, the cut of the tip and the texture of the bristles are all areas that I had never considered. Prior to this experience, I did not recognize the complexity of choosing the brush as not only a tool but as an opportunity to create. As a future educator, I believe it is important to identify that every tool we provide a student with can be used in endless ways. More specifically, the tool that we give them may not be use for our intended purpose but should be used in the way the student sees fit. From a classroom perspective, this tool is not limited to an art technique, but can be used to encompass literacy strategies, science frameworks as well as mathematical thinking.

Art work teaches us that hard work and perseverance brings results over time, it teaches us to accept delayed gratification (Smithrim & Upitis, 2002)

In a classroom that is overwhelmed with meeting curriculum expectations and provincial deadlines, the average teacher struggles to meet their goals for each day. Initially, I had asked Kate if we could spend an afternoon painting. Instead, we spent a few evenings a week and a solid weekend exploring this art process. Time plays an important role in all learning. In a classroom with diverse learners, it is not always necessary to provide time limits on assignments. Instead, specifically in the arts, teachers should allow students to work hard in a time period that enables them to produce a piece that truly reflects their learning. In creating this environment, teachers will receive pieces that are not only more substantial but worthwhile for the student. Art work teaches us the value behind our own ideas

When I began this project, I assumed Kate would provide me with ideas for paintings. Instead, she created the aesthetic playground in which I could explore my own thoughts and process. Although she utilized music as a way to shift my rational thinking, she pushed me to utilize imagination and seek inspiration from within the inside. In the classroom, this idea can be fostered in a variety of ways. Instead of having students rely on popular culture, I can provide meaningful opportunities to search for other sources of ideas- classic literature, a significant experience, a part of their own history- as a starting point for their art pieces. Once their confidence soars, I hope to redirect students to find the ideas within.

At the core of my teaching implications is the notion that many of these approaches require my teaching of the arts confidence to be pro-active. Essentially, each student will bring a different level of experience to the arts to my classroom. As I know recognize and can relate to learning art from a beginning standpoint, I will strive to create this aesthetic playground for my students. In fact, knowing my students and the subject of art will depend heavily on my self-knowledge. As technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives, I will continue to immerse myself into art to allow this to happen (Palmer, 1998).

## References

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