



## ***ZEAL: An Aesthetic Revolution for Education***

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*Let us love what we love, let us be ourselves.*  
Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*, 23 November, 1881

### **Introduction**

Aristotle maintained that there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses; it is equally and more obviously true of the imagination (Standing, 1962, p. 339). Why have public education mandates in America denied and rejected the sacred imaginative realm within all children, thereby segregating or categorizing the arts as frivolous or unnecessary? The arts in America as proposed by Goodman (1976) are typically kept segregated and marginalized by common educational practices. Goodman chose to name the annual Harvard educational conference *Project Zero*, because America understands “zero” about the arts.

Goodman’s research presented the psychology of art and the critical levels of thinking provoked by art and aesthetic education. Like Goodman, Greene (1978) proposed that art and aesthetics reveal our “perceptual reality that underlies our cognitive structures of a primordial landscape in which we present ourselves” (p. 213). Eisner (2002) also warns of a culture devoid of the arts. If we continue along this path of alienation from the arts and our very nature, we invariably are at risk as a society:

Imagination, that form of thinking that engenders images of the possible, also has a critically important cognitive function to perform aside from the creation of possible worlds. Imagination also enables us to try things out-again in the mind’s eye-without the consequences we might encounter if we had to act upon them empirically. A culture populated by a people whose imagination is impoverished has a static future. In such a culture there will be little change because there will be little sense of possibility (p. 5).

The following research presents a new paradigm and culture of thinking for teacher preparation such that teachers are artists, where they embrace the fragile, innocent, imaginative world of children that must be protected and nurtured. The non-compassionate teacher is at risk to control a child’s imagination—a child’s core—or even worse damage a child’s becoming. The compassionate teacher practices the art of subtle possibilities and presents aesthetic experiences to make the invisible imaginative core of a child visible.

Hence, to nurture the sacred realm of a child’s imagination represents the possibility of growth, renewal, and change. Educators are hesitant to venture into the unknown landscape within a child’s heart and mind because they have throughout their education experienced the same non-compassionate teachers. This research proposes an awakening, making a wave for a new revolution of compassionate teachers that institutes aesthetic methodology to address relevant issues in children’s lives and in their communities. This paper will answer the question: How

will our elementary education majors as future teachers attain aesthetic methodology, resiliency, and transformative skills to address complex issues that come into the classroom—with an open mind, “a mind without fear?”

### **Awakening “ZEAL” in Pre-Service Teachers: Embracing Social and Eco Justice Topics through Aesthetic Education**

Research for this study began in an undergraduate elementary methods class for teacher certification with an excerpt from Albert Cullum’s (1971) famous and controversial publication, *The Geranium on the Window Sill Just Died But Teacher You Went Right On*. At the end of the story our pre-service teachers shared recent experiences in their field classroom in relationship to Cullum’s child advocacy perspective. Their thoughts and questions included: “How could teachers treat children in a dehumanizing way? I will never be a teacher like that, and I think Cullum is exaggerating.”

We continued to introduce research by Cullum (1967) such as *Push Back the Desks* and a more recent PBS documentary, *A Touch of Greatness* (2004). Our pre-service elementary education teacher candidates revealed that the majority of their field classroom teachers had stopped using the arts and aesthetic methods. The classroom teachers lamented that their hands were tied and strict outlines had to be followed for teaching and curriculum to raise test scores. There were no easels to paint on, no plays to be in, no poetry recitals for parents, no valentine cards for the elderly or soldiers, no celebrations, and in fact, in many schools, no recess. As one of our students shared:

In *A Touch of Greatness* Albert Cullum said that within his classroom all students are in the wagon of success; stronger students may be toward the front pulling the wagon, but every student succeeds. This is another important part of the relationships between students I yearn for. For students to work together in such a manner that they support each other, when learning is difficult or easy. I desire that each student have a true concern for each other.

To counter-act the trends of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race To The Top* mandates that have reduced creative, passionate teachers to curriculum puppets, as educators we felt an urgent need to design a revolutionary curriculum for teacher preparation that embraced social and eco justice issues through aesthetic education methodologies. Implementing aesthetic education methodology into urban school communities revealed the potential to become a compassionate and creative community such that all ideas, perspectives, cultures, hopes, and fears are realized. As Eisner (2002) dignifies,

What is clear is that culture depends upon these communications because communication patterns provide opportunities for members of the culture to grow. We develop, in part, by responding to the contributions of others, and in turn provide others with material to which they respond. The relationship, at its best is symbiotic. Thus the social contribution of the educational process is to make it possible for individuals to create symbiotic relationships with others through the development of their distinctive and complementary abilities and in so doing to enrich one another’s lives (p. 7).

One aesthetic class activity presented to our pre-service teacher candidates portrayed the contrast of light and dark in the educational arena. Two characters entered the room, *Miss Honey*, full of light, hope, imagination, and compassion; and, *Mr. Rat*, a vessel of darkness, despair, hatred, and scorn for children's imaginations. The aesthetic performance was an effective symbolic message designed to promote pre-service teacher's reflective and social intelligence regarding current political educational laws and events. One teacher candidate expressed,

“Chaining” us down with the chains of NCLB was powerful. The high-stakes testing weighs down learning and the students, as it did to us for that period of time. Miss Honey, the angel of inspiration, saved us. We, as pre-service teachers, are angels of inspiration. Miss Honey spread her inspiration by lifting off the chains and allowing us to be creative and free. We learned through play, by creating puppets and parading them through the hallways of Barnard. Our spirits and our minds were lifted.

As teacher educators, we didn't tell, we showed. Our students loved coming to class to find their teachers portraying a rat full of darkness and Miss Honey, a symbol of imagination. Through aesthetic role-play, *Mr. Rat* and *Miss Honey* became archetypes that effortlessly exposed the cancer of mediocrity in Teacher Education, and then broke the chains of *Race to the Top* public education mandates. Contrasting metaphors of despair and hope inspired our pre-service teacher candidates to compose their passionate beliefs on teaching and learning, which then in turn influenced their own teaching practice. Through the aesthetic, we transferred our energy to our pre-service teacher candidates, who believed they could do the same and then applied aesthetic methods in their field experience classrooms. Pre-service teacher candidates reflected,

When *Miss Honey* and *Mr. Rat* came into our classroom, my eyes sparkled. I felt like I was in a make-believe world in which I was a storybook character. It did not occur to me that throughout the performance, I would walk away with valuable knowledge that I learned from this role-play.

From the experience with *Miss Honey* and *Mr. Rat* it was obvious what style of teaching creates a positive environment. A caring and encouraging teacher makes her students feel more comfortable and accepted in the class. Even though we knew *Mr. Rat*...brought a completely different tone into the room. We are all adults, yet we were anxious and actually scared of him. *Mr. Rat* was focused on testing and limiting our imagination. The mood of the entire room changed, though, when *Miss Honey* stepped into the picture. She accepted all of our thoughts and we as students were excited by her enthusiasm. She allowed us to use our imagination and creativity without judgment or criticism. I have been able to bring this knowledge into my fieldwork classroom.

According to Greene (1998), social imagination leads to social action and involves looking at the world in new ways. She believes that developing social intelligence leads to imaginative creative action therefore increasing our collective potential to envision fairer learning and living conditions by aesthetic means of artistic investigation. Aesthetic education theory com-

bines with the creation of a compassionate community celebrating unique perspectives and diversity (p. 157).

The whole of this revolutionary aesthetic curriculum, of which *Mr. Rat* and *Miss. Honey* are a part, introduced our pre-service teachers to local, national, and international social and eco justice issues. Topics included ending homelessness within our university's surrounding community of New Britain, CT, and the dolphin slaughter for profit in Taiji, Japan. Our pre-service teacher candidates were given an opportunity to design for elementary school children aesthetic symbolic messages within a community performance, promoting imaginative social action.

Educational curriculum and teacher preparation has never been able to envision children's education for what Earth and sustainable cultures need to thrive, and critically in 2010, survive. As a society, we tend to be sleepwalkers, anesthetized visually and emotionally, as crime, homelessness, and ecological devastation continue to grow at rapid rates. So, what is education for and how should teachers be prepared to impact children's and teachers' future lives? Eisner (2002) implores, "Transforming the private into the public is a primary process of work in both art and science. Helping the young to learn how to make that transformation is another of education's most important aims" (p. 3).

Utilizing place-based creative commons inquiry, our students investigated authentic issues facing their surrounding local and global community. They explored their cultural biases and stereotypes, values, beliefs, identities, and sense of self as a teacher with invited community artists and activists leading a myriad of arts experiences. The artistic community forums contributed to a developing sense of the power of aesthetic education manifested in the creation and design of symbolic messages using masks, puppets, poetry, dance, music, and theater to address ending homelessness, and breaking down stereotypes of poverty. The symbolic ideas carried a compassionate message to build awareness, which was then integrated and shared within the community to empower transformative learning and societal contribution.

Ultimately, through the arts and aesthetic creative commons (Bowers, 2006b) experiences, we found that our pre-service teachers realized ZEAL for children and teaching, challenging pre-service teachers to develop intra and interpersonal reflective dispositions, and a growing sense that they wanted to be urban teachers and leaders of change in education. Through a series of aesthetic commons educational pedagogical practice course experiences, pre-service teachers' beliefs were "unlocked" leading to the revitalization of creative teaching skill sets supported by values and beliefs regarding teaching and learning that was transformative for both teacher and children. As one pre-service teacher wrote: "our ideas and imagination were the driving force of the class." Another pre-service teacher stated,

I have learned so much about myself this semester, not only about teaching, but also about myself as a person. I learned that I could be a performer on a stage, or even in a classroom, with an audience full of my students. I've learned that I have the potential to become a great storyteller with puppets as my props. I've also learned that I am capable of much more than I thought, and with this knowledge I would like to make myself a promise: I promise to become a transformative teacher, to create a welcoming, caring, and compassionate community, where students feel empowered and safe, and strive to become life long learners. I promise.

As will be shown, the underlying aesthetic structure of course activities and assignments, when enacted within a creative community commons, unlocked pre-service teachers' precon-

ceived perceptions of educational practices toward more transformative views and beliefs that drove instructional decisions and curricular social and eco justice initiatives. Aesthetic education provided the portal to empowerment, for not only our pre-service teachers' learning, but also for their fieldwork classroom students'. Shor's (1992) description of "Empowering Education" found authentic manifestation within our aesthetic embrace:

Empowering Education...is a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy in school and society. It approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other. Human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together. The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change (p. 15).

### **Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination: Releasing Pre-service Teachers' Imagination through Performance**

Where do pre-service teachers get their ideas? This is a question our students ask when we invite our graduates back to share their aesthetic lesson plans. Why does involvement with aesthetic education methodology, when enacted authentically about relevant issues, increase pre-service teachers social intelligence and creative capacity to apply action to social and eco justice issues? Additionally, why does involvement in aesthetic and authentic performance tasks enacted with children cause a sense of ZEAL, and passionate social action toward becoming teachers for change in education?

Uniting the "social imagination" (Greene, 1998) of aesthetic education and the "creative commons" of eco justice education (Bowers, 2006) into a new paradigm, presented a variety of symbolic expressions for the study of the emergence of pre-service teachers' beliefs. Utilizing an underlying aesthetic structure for course activities and assignments, an authentic creative community commons was established for students to investigate ecologically and socially sustainable teaching practices. Research-based aesthetic education, eco and social justice pedagogies (Bowers, 2001; Shor, 1992; Greene, 1998) were theoretical threads that supported transformative pre-service teacher strategies used in the study.

Supported by these theories and context, this action research studied pre-service teachers' beliefs and identity in order to 'unmask' their imaginations to address collective community social and ecological issues they would face in their field experiences and future teaching. One ecological issue was addressed in the performance *Make a Wave-Be the Change*. One thousand urban children from the surrounding public school community came to our college campus and learned about the dolphin slaughter for profit through puppets, dance, and poetry. Pre-service teachers danced the dance of the dolphin, portraying their own desire for freedom as teachers and artists.

Innovative methods of aesthetic and eco justice education encompassing social and eco justice issues were selected to address pre-service teachers' ideas and beliefs of transformative learning, sense of imaginative societal contribution, core values, and coping with institutional conflicts. Aesthetic education encompassed critical theory and questioned status quo waste, consumption and human behavior. Students were introduced in community efforts that embraced a

sense of possibility, social imagination and a sense of empowerment making the possibility to change behavior evident. One pre-service teacher candidate shared a growing sense of confidence and ZEAL as a teacher,

From this whole semester as a teacher candidate, I have found my inner light and it makes me want to go out there and make a difference. Since I was a very young girl, I knew that I have always wanted to be a teacher. But now I feel even more than that. I feel like I can be a teacher and change the world. I want to show students how school can be a learning celebration rather than something they have to attend everyday because it's mandatory. I want to create a classroom that is memorable. My students will be able to count on me for anything because I will never speak negatively of a child. When learning is memorable to students they will remember what they have learned for the rest of their lives. As a future teacher, I want to be the change I wish to see in the world. Can you hear my voice?

Another pre-service teacher candidate explained her impression of the performance impact on children's learning and sense of place:

I experienced first-hand how a performance like this can impact lives; my classmates all agreed that this was an experience of a lifetime. I witnessed how impacting a performance like this can be for students. There were a few elementary students who performed with us, but the students within the audience were also moved by the experience. By the end of their performance students were smiling, laughing and even on stage dancing with us. A special education teacher told us that she has never seen her student with autism so focused and interested in an activity like this they were when watching our performance, she told us their behavior was unbelievable. All the students went back to their classrooms after the performance and wrote about what they could do to be more compassionate to other people or their environment. The students literally wrote pages, we had to force them to stop writing because time had run out. I hope that will always be my dilemma, where students are so into their learning that I have to force them to stop because there isn't time left in the school day.

### **Unmasking a Revolution of Creative Compassionate Pre-Service Teachers: Enacting the Aesthetic Creative Commons in the Field**

As a result of their course experience participating in an artistically imaginative and eco-critical curriculum imbedded in community action, pre-service teachers transferred and implemented aesthetic creative commons experiences into their field instruction. The following case studies will describe specific aesthetic examples as evidence of our pre-teachers transferring methods to their lesson plans for children in their field classrooms.

After experiencing aesthetic methods and mask-making in our elementary course, John decided to enact this experience in his field classroom. He could see the importance of the type of aesthetic thinking the mask-making experience could have on his struggling writers. He asked his teacher if he could design masks with the entire class. The teacher told John that he would

have to arrange it with the principal and parents. John's ZEAL led him to encounter many obstacles as a pre-service teacher with limited field experience.

After many meetings he decided that the most feasible way was to come to school very early before school began and meet with teams of children that parents volunteered to bring early. The children were so enthusiastic about this plan that within two weeks everyone had their masks completed. John was able to let the masks dry in the art room. He later found out that when the district art teachers had their meeting they were very surprised and elated discovering the masks. Even in the art teacher's world restrictions were evident and exciting lessons were unfortunately becoming less and less of a reality.

John began his writing unit and each child was able to use the mask as a symbol of what they hoped to become. The children's voices were released and remarkable vivid portrayals of their deepest thoughts, hopes, and fears were revealed. Reflecting upon the mask-making writing unit experience with his students, John observed how previously affixed "high," "middle," and "low" labels from the Connecticut Mastery Testing assessments no longer applied. Within his aesthetic approach, John discovered that "a student labeled low was suddenly no longer 'low.' They were themselves. Everyone was expressing themselves and successful."

There simply was no place within John's aesthetic experience for students to feel isolated, inferior or superior. Students were given the opportunity to love one another for who they were and write about it unabashedly. Through an aesthetic education approach, John created student community and empowerment. As Shor (1992) describes in *Empowering Education*,

The teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class but negotiates the curriculum with the students and begins with their language, themes, and understandings. To be democratic implies orienting subject matter to student culture—there interest, needs, speech and perceptions—while creating a negotiable openness in class where the students input jointly creates the learning process (p. 16).

This experience transformed John's sense of self as a teacher of change for children. "Creating a negotiable openness" through an aesthetic portal, he instantly became a child advocate and continued to pursue and not lose his ZEAL, a sense of creative vitality (Nouwen, 1981) for imaginative experiences, applying social critical creative thinking to the development of transformative instruction for elementary aged children.

Participating in a storytelling and mask-making workshop for pre-service teachers, Caitlin was inspired to become the character Max from the children's story, *Where the Wild Things Are*. She imagined how excited the children would be if Max actually came to the classroom and acted out the story to a group of second grade children. With tremendous ZEAL and perseverance, Caitlin transformed the classroom into a scene from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Caitlin was a wonder to the other teachers as she bravely walked down the hall with her costume and props. She was not deterred by older teachers' comments or rolling eyeballs she could feel. This was a day in school her children would never forget.

Caitlin discovered that she was correct as children entered the classroom gasping with amazement, surprise and excitement. Several children labeled ADHD and "special education" were enthralled and captivated with great attention as Caitlin led the children through a highly sensory and visual depiction of Max's adventures utilizing visual thinking strategies (Arnheim, 1969). In a powerful and critical way, Caitlin inspired the children to express individual emo-

tions relating their feelings to Max and then designed a mask to symbolize their feelings about their lives and daily adventures. Within one hour of aesthetic education methodology enacted, the classroom teacher observed new behaviors from children she was concerned about: they were no longer detached but involved; no longer angry but happy and excited; no longer struggling with learning, but excelling and achieving with great success and creative expression.

Coming from their coursework into fieldwork experience, our pre-service teacher candidates marvel why this type of aesthetic methodology is not instituted in the everyday classrooms of children and teachers? What have we lost collectively and now need to regain? Caitlin went on to student teaching, impressing her principal within an urban school that had outlawed the arts. She designed her literacy lessons with great ZEAL, inspiring many children identified as below reading and writing for grade proficiency. Caitlin displayed their writings after aesthetic experiences, a testimony to the effectiveness on children's cognitive and affective expression. Thus the principal was impressed and could not argue the success aesthetic methodology had on children's learning and achievement.

Another pre-service teacher designed an aesthetic lesson to study the Earth, moon and sun. Courtney began the lesson with slides of Monet's haystacks. Children viewed the haystacks with imaginative perception carefully observing Monet's application of color and brilliance of light. Afterward, the children made their own haystacks out of modeling clay and with a flashlight simulated different times of the day and change of shadows. Drawings of the shadows were documented in their science journals. Courtney then discussed the relationship of the Earth, moon and sun with living, and the importance of understanding their roles. She asked the children to symbolically represent the Earth, moon, or sun as a mask. The results were again, to the amazement of the classroom teacher, remarkable. Students labeled as "non-learners" (Kohl, 1994) were involved and achieving with success. The classroom was a compassionate community as all children shared and delighted in the diversity of the masks and ideas.

### **Conclusions: Heart Speaks to Heart**

From the above examples and many others, we have observed our pre-service teacher candidates become, in a sense, boundary pushers and artistic change agents as they enter student teaching and their first year teaching experience. Our pre-service teacher candidates have experienced firsthand through aesthetic education application and authentic community action, how a teacher can change despair into hope for children. Unmasking our pre-service teachers' sense of their teacher identity through aesthetic education, imagination and transformational practices revealed an artistic sensibility to reflect on their extraordinary desire to enact aesthetic methods.

Gardner (1993) points to the ability of artists to reflect on experiences and in fact, form the resiliency in the individual to "find meaning—and even uplift—an apparently negative experience that fuels one to face life confidently and effectively" (Clark citing Gardner, 2005, p. 443). Nouwen (1989) speaks to the importance of ZEAL in our lives: "the heart needs to speak to the heart. How do we maintain the fire within us? How do we tend to the hope of self in the face of our lost selves" (p. 7)? We need creative teachers with high reflective and social intelligence that have unconditional love for all children.

Our pre-service teacher candidates expressed how they envision their future classrooms functioning as compassionate creative communities. Having seen their influence upon affecting children's interest to learn, our future teachers stated that they felt more likely to promote eco and social justice issues that connect to students' communities toward transformative thinking

and creative collaborative group potential. As one pre-service teacher candidate shared in their vision,

This class has taught me so many things about transformative teaching and things outside the box that I am planning on bringing with me to my own classroom in the near future. I have learned how to actively involve and engage students in order to get them involved with higher-level thinking and learning and empower them to take charge of their education. I have also discovered the importance of imagination in the classroom and the positive effect that community engagement project can have on students, teachers and the community. These things are so important in a classroom because they really determine the climate of the classroom. Without these things, the classroom may not be a safe, welcoming environment where students are willing to take risks to learn. In a time where students are often passively entertained and engaged by videogames, reality TV and the Internet, it makes it especially important that teachers are taking the time to encourage activities and engagement so that the students can grow up to be good citizens that want the best for their community. This will also help to build a strong generation of youth that are the problem-solvers and “go getters,” ones that will not let opportunities pass them by.

Significant to teacher education’s role in teacher training and in-service retention, aesthetic education experiences impacted pre-service teachers’ ideas, senses of identity, and eco-social imaginations as resilient teacher leaders for change. As Shor (1992) reminds us,

To be critical in...a democratic curriculum means to examine all subjects and the learning process with systemic depth; to connect student individuality to larger historical and social issues; to encourage students to examine how their experience relates to academic knowledge to power, and to inequality in society; and to approach received wisdom and the status quo with questions (pp. 16-17).

A new revolution of teachers is on the horizon embracing aesthetic education methods as a philosophy of everyday teaching with children. By experiencing the aesthetic in teacher education, our pre-service teachers learned to know what it was to inspire. They felt it. John Dewey (1934/1980) wrote, “Art also renders men aware of our union with one another in origin and destiny” (p. 271). Our pre-service teachers were empowered and inspired by the divine within their aesthetic learning, as will be their future students. One of our pre-service “artist-teachers” concluded,

These students could be future teacher candidates that need that one inspirational teacher to set their minds free and allow them to look at the world through whole new lenses. It only takes one person to inspire another, and I want to be that person for my students each and every day.

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