Critical Questions in Education
ISSN 2327-3607

Copyright © Academy for Educational Studies
January 2010

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

An On-line, peer reviewed journal hosted by the
Academy for Educational Studies
Missouri State University, Springfield

Critical Questions in Education: http://education.missouristate.edu/AcadEd/75532.htm

Academy for Educational Studies
academyforescationalstudies.org
Steven P. Jones, Director
Eric C. Sheffield, Assistant Director

Academy Mission Statement
The mission of the Academy for Educational Studies is to foster a community of inquirers and provide a public
space for debate and dialogue about important questions in education. The Academy encourages those interested in
education, teaching, and learning to engage in thoughtful reflection, discussion, and critique of educational theory
and practice. Involving people from across the state, region and country, the Academy promotes this vital dialogue
by arranging education conferences and symposia and by creating publishing opportunities connected with Academy
events. The Academy supports research efforts of graduate and undergraduate students and assists in the design and
delivery of teacher education courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Executive Board:
Thomas Deering, Augusta State University
Sam Hardy III, Augusta State University
David P. Morstad, Jr., University of North Dakota
Kathryn Richardson-Jones, The Citadel
Karla Smart-Morstad, Concordia College
Jerry Whitworth, Texas Woman’s University
Steven P. Jones, Missouri State University
Eric Sheffield, Missouri State University

CQIE is indexed in EBSCO Host Education Research Complete

Copyright: Authors warrant that they are sole owners of the material included in the paper and that it is original
and has never been published in any form previously. Authors grant to The Academy for Educational Studies all
right to the paper including rights of copyright. The Academy for Educational Studies, in turn, agrees to grant
permission to authors to republish their manuscripts subject only to the condition that Critical Questions in
Education be given proper credit as the original source and the Academy for Educational Studies as original
publisher.

** Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.
Dearest Colleagues:

As I sit here in my office freezing, along with everyone else in North America (I thought it was called Global Warming), I have one thing to say on this the official launching of the Academy’s newest venture, its online journal, *Critical Questions in Education*: YAHOOOOO! I was beginning to think I would never get my proverbial ducks in their proverbial row and get this thing up and going. Fortunately, there are several incredible people without whom this day would never have come.

First and foremost, kudos to the most wonderful graduate assistant ever, Becky Migas. Becky is as responsible for this new Academy venture as anyone. She has given us invaluable input, both technically and creatively (and, thankfully, with no punches pulled); and, most importantly, has the web “know-how” necessary to getting us finally online. Becky will be with us for only a short time, as she will graduate in the spring, and (even though she is an Ohio State Buckeye fan) we will miss her dearly.

I would also be remiss in not extending a heartfelt thanks to our Dean, Dennis Kear, as well as our department chair, Fred Groves. In the short time that the Academy for Educational Studies has been in existence, we have been continually encouraged and supported by both—and this newest endeavor is no exception. Without this kind of administrative and institutional support, we certainly could not have grown in the ways that we have.

The growth of the academy has also been greatly enhanced by the recent establishment of our board of directors whose members have provided both moral support and sage advice: Jeff Cornelius-White, Tom Deering, Lynda George, Kathryn Richardson-Jones, Karla Smart-Morstad, and Jerry Whitworth (could you imagine a board of directors with more hyphenated last names?). A big thanks also to our unofficial advisor/mentor, Chris Lucas, who has been kind enough to lend his experience and expertise to growing the academy wisely. I also extend my personal gratitude to those who have volunteered to do what, in the end, is a truly thankless job: our manuscript reviewers (you know who you are), without whom a blind peer reviewed journal could never come into existence.

Finally, a qualified thank-you to my friend and colleague, Steve Jones, Director of the Academy for Educational Studies; I say “qualified” because Steve is an idea guy, as my father would say it, and to be honest, if he comes to me with one more of his ideas…Ok, to be really honest, the
work of the Academy has thus far been nothing but fulfilling…so keep the ideas…trickling (rather than flowing), Steve.

All right, enough of that; and now a few words about this first issue of Critical Questions in Education. Within these pages you will find four “traditional” articles that take up what I would call spiritual aspects of teaching and learning. The first article addresses the specific question we asked at our conference in 2007 concerning the role of religion and public schooling. In it, Steve and I have outlined some historically important “visions” of religion, God, Goodness, and the role public schools have played in the moral instruction of America’s youth. Following that, Don Hufford suggests in his essay that teachers learn to be “agnostic” in their approach to teaching difficult or contentious issues such as evolution/creationism and that foundations courses incorporate an agnostic disposition to their list of instructional goals. Thirdly, Barbara Michaels, Ching-Wen Chang, and Debra Maxwell present an interesting historical discussion as well as research findings on utilizing labyrinths to teach (you can never go wrong with a bit of paganism on these cold winter days!); and finally, Barbara Clark outlines an aesthetic approach to teacher education that she believes can be “emancipatory.”

In addition to these four traditional manuscripts, you will also see a section of the journal entitled “Video Essays.” These are precisely what they sound like: video taped presentations of manuscripts, typically from well-known scholars. In this first issue you will find a talk by Nel Noddings on the value of teaching unbelief in our public schools and a presentation by Jordan Lorence on seven things the establishment clause of the constitution does not require. We hope to continue this section in the future, relying mainly on keynote speakers from our annual conferences, though we would certainly be open to video submissions for review. Finally, you will see a link ostensibly leading to book and/or film reviews. We have none for this first issue, but we hope to have a strong selection of such reviews for future publications.

We at the Academy for Educational Studies here at Missouri State University (and beyond) hope that all who enter this online journal find some tasty food for thought and that you spread the word, as we will now begin doing, because our first issue is up and running….YAHOOOOOO!

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
Critical Questions in Education
Critical Questions In Education

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

ISSN 2327-3607
Volume 1, Issue 1
Winter, 2010

Contents

Essays

The Role of Religion in 21st–Century Public Schools: Historic Perspectives
on God and Goodness in the Classroom .................................................................1
Steven P. Jones and Eric C. Sheffield

Intellectual Agnostics: Preparing Public School Teachers to be Open-Minded
Interpreters in the Religion/Public School Debate..................................................13
Don Hufford

Labyrinths: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow–Implications for Education ..............26
Barbara Michels, Debra Maxwell, & Ching-Wen Chang

Aesthetic Education and Masked Emotions: A Model for Emancipatory
Teacher Preparation ...............................................................................................40
Barbara A. Clark

Video Essays

Religion in Public Schools by Nel Noddings
education.missouristate.edu/assets/ele/AES_07_Noddings.wmv

What the Exclusionary Clause is Not by Jordan Lorence
education.missouristate.edu/assets/ele/AES_07_Lorence.wmv
The Role of Religion in 21st–Century Public Schools: Historic Perspectives on God and Goodness in the Classroom

Steven P. Jones & Eric C. Sheffield, Missouri State University

The Enduring Problem of Religion and the Public Schools

No other educational issue hits a more sensitive nerve with the American public than the role of religion in the public schools. This is the issue that causes parents to storm school board meetings and science teachers to duck and cover. It’s the issue that keeps newspaper editors busy all day and school administrators awake all night—the one stoking the public fire, the other trying to figure out what to say to a group of parents who demand that the upcoming graduation ceremonies be opened in prayer.

We shouldn’t be surprised that such issues evoke strong responses from people involved directly and indirectly with the public schools. The public schools have always been a public arena where people with vastly different political, moral, and religious ideas and understandings send their children for assistance with a task that could not be more precious or dear to them—the education of their children. Parents and other community members contend with one another and with those responsible for educating their children so insistently about the presence of religious ideas and activities in the public schools because something vital is at stake—the moral (and, perhaps, spiritual) development of their children, at least part of which happens in the public schools.

Parents think and wonder almost continuously during the years they are raising their children about the kind of persons their children will become and the kind of life each will lead. “Will my child be happy in the living of his or her life?” is always a first question they ask themselves, and so, too, “Will my child be healthy?” These are not usually questions that generate much controversy. We have a generally clear idea of what we mean by “health,” and we only disagree about what it means to be “happy” if we start to think about it too much. As long as we mean by “happy” the feeling that exists when one is relatively free from pain or anxiety or when a reasonable state of well-being is maintained—and as long as we agree that each of us has an unencumbered right to pursue what it is we believe will make us happy—then there is not much about which to argue.

It’s when we ask the third important question natural to all parents in thinking about their children that the trouble starts. The third question is “Will my child be a good person?” Like the other two, this third question has a correlate question: “How do I help my child become a good person?” It may be, in a certain sense, that this question is like the one about happiness—as long as we don’t think about what we mean by a “good person” very hard we can all agree. If by being “good” we have in mind only a sort of low-level civic responsibility—basic law abidingness
or a minimal tolerance of those we don’t especially care about—then we’re probably on safe ground.

But most parents have a more particular idea of the kind of “goodness” they want for their children. For most religious people, in most religious communities in the United States, the goodness they want for their children is bound up in a life of religious faith. For them, being “good” involves (at least to some extent) living a life that is in accord with the law or with the teachings of a god that has revealed to members of the religious community what it is they are to believe and how they are supposed to live their lives. The sacred texts of received religions set out an ideal, or an “ought,” for how one should live.

These religious parents often (usually) send their children off to the public schools. They look at children’s literature books and science textbooks. They look at curricular materials used in elementary reading programs and high school “Marriage and Family” classes. They look at moral routines chosen by the school, like the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the elementary school day and the presence (or absence) of a prayer at high school graduation ceremonies. They look at high school club activities, like Bi-Gala and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. They want to know what their tax dollars actually buy in the school setting, and they tend to support those things they believe contribute to the vision they want for their children, and they tend not to support those they see as detrimental. They want teachers and school administrators to support and contribute to the vision they have for their children, or at least not work counter to it.

Parents not oriented by religious understandings do the same kinds of things as religious parents as they try to make their children into good people; and nonreligious parents, too, send their children off to public schools, and there they watch over the content and practices of their children’s education. They are interested in the stories their children read in elementary school, and they want to know about what the biology textbook says about evolution or creationism. They care about how sexual relations are discussed in health and “Marriage and Family” classes, and they monitor the kinds of clubs or fellowship offered to their children. And they are as interested as the religiously oriented parent in whether or not their tax dollars and the practices of the school support or fail to support the vision they have for their children.

But while the intentions and actions of the religious and non-religious parents and community members overlap a great deal as they conceive of the good people they want their children to become, there is no apparent overcoming of their differences regarding the place of religious faith and religious life in that vision. Non-religious parents do not use religious language to describe the basis of their moral commitments and their hopes for the moral life their children will lead. Other second languages are available to them, each suggesting a community to serve, and each with the power to circumscribe our first instincts for radical autonomy. There is, for instance, the language of the civic republican tradition that articulates commitments and practices that can powerfully shape character. These commitments and practices establish interconnections between people, joining people to families, friends, communities, and churches—making each individual aware of his reliance on the larger society (Bellah, 1985, p. 251). The second languages of social responsibility and social justice suggest other commitments, duties, and obligations that can shape “the habits of the heart” of young people. Religious people have recourse
to these same second languages, and most of us speak a mix of second languages as we try to articulate the commitments that bind us to one another and suggest duties and obligations central to the living of a good life.

So, the group of parents and community members that wants faith-based understandings for their children press the school administrator to open graduation ceremonies with what they deem to be an appropriate prayer. The group of parents and community members that insists the school not endorse or inculcate faith-based understandings—the secular humanists and those with religious understandings who worry school people may be forced to endorse only limited and particular understandings—press those same administrators to deny the request for the opening prayer. And so the newspaper editor churns out his paper. And so the school administrator tosses in her sleep, unable to please everyone.

**Does Man Need God in Order to be Good?**

The question of God—about whether or not one should be raised to believe in God or some form of higher power—is a central educational question. We cannot will it away. That is because we cannot escape thinking about the kinds of questions with which this essay opens—about the happiness and health and goodness we want for our children. The moment we start thinking about the kind of good life we want our children to lead—the kind of good people we want them to become—is the moment we start down the road that leads to the god question. Why should man be good? Why should he be compassionate? Why should he care as much or more about others as he does himself? We ask these things in the frame of thinking about our children. We also ask them when we think about ourselves. Why should I be kind to others, even when I feel myself being abused? Why should I care about my children when the care goes unrewarded? Why should I come home every night to my wife instead of going somewhere else? Do I do these things because I have faith in a god who teaches me to do them and gives me reason for doing so, or do I do these things because I have some other conception of or reason for goodness?

Every important educational philosopher, from Plato on, has dealt with this question. And, in America, every important thinker worried about the function and purpose of the public school has dealt with them, from the founding fathers on. And, as it turns out, these thinkers couldn’t disagree more about the place of religious faith in the education of the young.

It will perhaps be useful, as we think about how and why this “God question” is so central to the education of our children, if we remind ourselves of the contours of the arguments put forth by some central educational thinkers. How is it possible that our best educational thinkers could disagree so radically on such an important issue? A brief look at the ideas of Plato, Rousseau, and the founders of the common schools in America, as well as more contemporary educational philosophers John Dewey and Nel Noddings, may help expand our ways of viewing this question.

**Plato’s Perfect City**

In Plato’s *Republic*, the rich and powerful young men of Athens—the young men who aspire one day to come to power and rule the city—gather around Socrates, first of all, to talk about the nature of justice and political power. To these ambitious and potentially dangerous young men, Socrates offers to describe the “perfect city” and the “perfect men” who will inhabit
it. In the perfect city that will satisfy the longings of these young men, Socrates describes the perfect guardians and how they must be educated. The perfect guardians are, of course, the ones perfectly suited by nature to be fierce defenders of the city. They are characterized by *thymos*, or a warlike spiritedness that makes them fearless and invincible in the defense of the city (375b)—the same kind of fearlessness we see in a guard dog that will die in defense of his (or her) owner or the property it takes to be its own. In humans this *thymos* can appear as anger, or rage, or zeal. We recognize *thymos* in the spiritedness of the war hero, fearless in attacking the enemy even when he knows he may die in the attempt.

But just as the dog, willing to attack (and kill) the “enemies” come to do harm to its owner, is a gentle and affectionate dog with the people it knows and loves, so, too, must the perfect guardian—the ferocious defender of the city—be gentle and affectionate toward his fellow citizens. This becomes the first educational task in Socrates’ perfect city: to make the guardians into *kaloagathos*, or gentlemen, who are gentle when among their countrymen, but fierce and full of *thymos* when defending the city from its enemies. While not an easy education to effect, it is, perhaps the most critical, as we see in our own time. We know the dramatic, even tragic, consequences of failing to conduct this education properly whenever we learn of some general in a third world country—tired of his own political impotence or urged on by the soldiers beneath his command—who conducts a military coup and comes to power. Absent the right education, the noble dog can and will turn on its owner.

To guarantee the fidelity of the guardians to the people, Socrates insists their first education be about the gods of the city—and the stories about the gods must be carefully chosen. The young guardians are not to hear all the awful stories about what the gods did to one another and to the humans who worshipped them—only the stories that depict the gods of the city in the most admirable and perfect ways. These stories, Socrates says, will make the young men into warriors who honor the gods and ancestors, and they will become men who are serious about their friendship with one another. The guardians will have proper opinions about the gods and will become pious and just (Bloom, 1968, p. 353).

But while this teaching about the gods is sufficient for the guardians of the city, it is not sufficient for those young men who might one day lead the city—the philosopher-kings. For the philosopher-kings, the gods are useful and necessary to the peaceful and orderly operation of the city, and they deserve respect and receive public homage. But the goal for the philosopher-king is not to come to have “proper opinions,” or “true opinions,” about the pious and the just, as it is for the guardians. The education of the philosopher-king is to lead him to knowledge (*episteme*), specifically, to knowledge about the truth of things. The way to the truth of things, for Socrates, was not divine revelation—it was through reasoning (*logos*). The education of the philosopher-kings was always aimed at perfecting this reasoning ability. The philosopher-king, liberated from the cave of opinion, was one day to come to know the *idea of the good*—that perfect, ultimate knowledge of the whole, of the one and the many.

The young men gathered to talk to Socrates (especially Glaucon, the particular favorite in the dialogue) are not interested in becoming guardians—they want to be philosopher-kings, and they picture themselves as such even as they may fail to possess the capacities outlined by Socrates as he discusses the nature of the philosopher-king. Throughout the course of the dialogue,
Socrates shows these young men something much better for them than what they thought they wanted at the beginning of the dialogue, which was political power—specifically, the power of the tyrant who is able to command whatever it is he believes he wants. Superior to political power, Socrates convinces them, is knowledge, or wisdom—the life of the philosopher—and by the end of the dialogue they turn away from their tyrannical ambitions in favor of the pursuit of wisdom. Here, religious faith or adherence to the teachings of the gods does not make the young men good—the perfection of their reason does. Even the erotic Glaucon now has reason to subdue his passions and be “stronger than himself” (431a) because now he knows something better and more worthy of his strongest desires. The guardians and the artisans (the hoi polloi) need faith in and fear of the gods in order to subdue their passions and become good, but the elite few need only the power of their reason. With the arguments of Socrates and Plato and a commitment to untrammeled reason, the Western tradition begins. Faith in reason and the rational discovery of the truth of things led to philosophy and natural science as we know them.

Rousseau’s Natural Man

An inheritor and great critic of that tradition, especially a critic of the Enlightenment and its understanding of man based on tenets of natural science, stands Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great Romantic who protested that those who understood man simply as some great reasoning animal were simply setting aside what most animates and distinguishes man—his passions. In Emile, Rousseau proposes to make not the elite philosopher-king—the man with perfected reason who knows the truth of things—but the man most necessary to his own time, the modern democratic man. Rousseau proposed to make the man who was good for himself and good for others, the man who had sure judgments about things, the man who would be able to stand independent of others yet be compassionate to those in need. Rousseau proposed to make the natural man—not the man completed by a vision of perfected reason—but the man completed by following the dictates of nature. According to Rousseau, nature establishes both the goals and the limits of the education we should contrive for our children.

And what does nature tell us about ourselves? “Natural man is entirely for himself,” Rousseau writes early in Emile. From the infant’s first cry, to the self-interested demands the child makes of his parents, to our desire to be the most preferred when we seek to capture the interest of a mate, we operate on the basis of our own self-interest. Rousseau calls this “self-love,” and according to him there are two kinds—amour de soi and amour-propre. Amour de soi is the natural self-love given us at birth, a self-interested love that reveals itself primarily in our instincts to preserve ourselves. It is not a self-love we should be ashamed of, and we could not overcome it even if we sought to. Amour-propre, on the other hand, is a comparative kind of self-love—a love of self with a view to how others see and esteem us. It is self-love with a preferential demand that others love us more than they love themselves. The baby who cries because he is hungry or wet and seeks remedy for his condition cries out of amour de soi; the baby who cries as a demand for his mother to pick him up and pay attention to him—a demand for his mother to prefer him over herself—cries out of amour-propre. The child, in a famous passage in Emile, who runs a foot race against fellow competitors so as to gain the prize for the victor—sweet cakes that are a favorite of his—competes out of amour de soi; the child who runs the race to receive the accolades accorded to the victor, and so as to see himself as superior to the other competitors, competes out of amour-propre. The one is a healthy, inescapable, entirely natural self-love. The other is a function of pride and vanity. The one, Rousseau claims, is given by “the Author of things”; the other is a relative sentiment, artificial, and born in society. The education-
al object, then, is to preserve the healthy self-love given us by nature and to do all we can to prevent the development of the unhealthy self-love—to prevent the development of pride and vanity (See Bloom, 1979, p. 483–84). Now, all this is neither possible, nor, in the end, desirable. Amour-propre, after all, must come to be in a man’s sexual life when he wants a woman to prefer him to all other men (and vice versa), and it can powerfully motivate his actions. Still, delay of, and then delicate control of, emergent passions is the primary task of the tutor, and this the tutor, Jean-Jacques, provides for his pupil Emile.

But how is a “natural man, entirely for himself” to be made good for others? Even amour de soi, a healthy self-love, is “entirely” self-interested. How is such a self-interested man to be made compassionate? Why would a self-interested man be willing to accept duties and obligations that come with being a citizen, a member of a community, someone’s son, or someone’s husband or father? Is there a place here for religion and faith in God in the moderation or elimination of man’s instinctive self-interest?

Not according to Rousseau—at least not as we typically conceive of the ways religion counteracts the native impulses of men. In the long “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” Rousseau addresses religious faith, though the text makes it clear that the profession of the good Vicar would be more valuable and appropriate for a corrupt adolescent (such as Rousseau was, himself) than for Emile who has received protection from the corruptions of society. In his profession the Vicar speaks of “inner sentiment” and “conscience” as being natural to us. These are innate senses of justice and virtue, deep in our souls, and they are not contrary to our self-love, but come to be natural expressions of it (Dent, 1988, p. 234–242). Cruelty and injustice are the result of an enflamed amour-propre, and in the person with such inflamed self-love the development of conscience and compassion for others is problematic, if not altogether doubtful. But in the man Emile becomes, these passions are not inflamed, and his natural compassion for others is an expression of the divine gift given him at birth. His passions need careful education—there is danger of corruption all around. But these passions can be sublimated, or lifted up, to lead Emile to see his duties and obligations to be as sweet as they are necessary (Bloom, 1979, p. 15–16). Emile has no need of a pastor, or a Catholic priest, sermonizing on the evils of pride and submission to a forgiving god. He will recognize, thank, and even praise god as the giver of the gifts he enjoys, but it is doubtful one would ever find him, on any given Sunday, sitting in church.

The Founders’ Dilemma

The founders of the common schools in America—careful readers, all, of both the Greeks and Rousseau—were less sanguine about the natural goodness of man and the possibility of his perfected reason. Carl Kaestle writes about the ideology these founders shared—their common ideas about human nature and society that allowed them to interpret complex human problems and devise solutions to them (Kaestle, 1983, p. 76). This ideology, he argues, gravitated around three poles—republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism—but the name he gives this thinking is “Native Protestant ideology.” In this conception, human beings were “born malleable and potentially good but need much careful guidance”—exactly opposite the thinking of Rousseau. These founders believed all men are equal in some formal ways, but they also believed some groups are more able, wise, and refined than others. This meant, in education and other arenas such as economics and politics, that institutions be shaped to maintain the values and leadership of cultivated, native, Protestant Americans (Kaestle, 1983, p. 95).
“The survival of the American republic depended upon the morality of its people,” Kaestle writes, “not in armies or constitutions or inspired leadership—but in the virtue of the propertied, industrious, and intelligent American yeoman” (Kaestle, 1983, p.79). Schooling was to stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence (p. 81). Here, moral education overlapped citizenship education (p. 97), and moral education was bound up with Protestant religious understandings, these understandings being its source and ground. The founders had a common understanding about the moral purposes for common schooling, among them that moral education was to produce obedient children, reduce crime, and discourage vice (p. 101).

The historical record is pretty clear: God used to be in the common public schools. Protestant understandings were evident, directly or indirectly, in the readers given to children in the one-room schoolhouse, in the citing and rehearsal of Bible verses, in the moral asides of teachers and schoolmasters, in the explanations of expected behavior given to students, and in school prayers. Protestant ideology and its place in the common school was extolled from the pulpit, demanded in the town hall, explained in domestic manuals, and proposed in educational texts.

The historical record is no less clear about how, from the very beginning, this native Protestant ideology was deeply problematic and the source of contention. The efforts to establish a common culture and a national unity, underpinned by a distinctly Protestant theology, caused anger and resentment from ethnic and religious groups with very different understandings, especially the Catholics. Even Protestants who might affirm much of the prevailing ideology could disagree with one another in quite vociferous terms about the conduct of their local common schools. Localists who disputed with those who favored centralized schooling objected on several counts. Many objected because they wanted to limit the costs of education that came with centralization, but many objected, as well, because they detected the sacrifice of their own traditions and the elimination of their own prerogatives as parents or members of minority groups (Kaestle, 1983, p. 148).

It was a relatively short time after the founding of our nation that Horace Mann’s vision of state-run common schools attended by “all” Americans became a reality—schools that were to be the moral training grounds that would end poverty, eliminate crime, and create a common American morality. Inculcating the American character into our children remained loosely based on Mann’s “pan-protestant” notion of moral instruction: with hard work and a good education, an American child could indeed be whatever he or she wanted (Kaestle, 1983). Just as the American Dream mythos was birthed, common schools became institutionalized and a burgeoning bureaucracy grew and was rationalized: public schools were perceived as the American institution to protect and grow the American Dream—a dream based in Christian Protestantism—an institutional panacea for all of America’s problems (Stevens, et. al, 2002).

On the other hand, it was not just Catholics or “fringe” Protestants who had growing concerns about the distinctly Protestant ethic at the heart of American moral instruction in our public schools. Increasingly moral instruction in public schools was less faith-based and more industry-based, developing into a mix of church, state, and increasingly, industrialist influence by the early part of the twentieth century (Spring, 2010). The growth of state-centralized school systems
paralleled demographic, economic, political, intellectual, and even “spiritual” shifts that were part and parcel of the industrial revolution and our growing belief in the American Dream—shifts that our founders could never have imagined. These cultural sea changes brought a growing sentiment that the nation would be well-served by a “common faith” grounded not in (a) religion (Protestant or otherwise), but rather in the new “scientific method” enacted through democratic institutions, particularly the institution of public schooling.

**John Dewey and the “Religious”**

Thinkers from a very American and very new, philosophical tradition, Pragmatism, most vehemently championed this vision of a democratic common faith; and, not surprisingly, it was John Dewey who led the philosophical charge in this direction. Given that Dewey is one of the most prolific writers in our brief history, particularly on educational matters, it is something of a mystery that he wrote so little on religion’s role in public schooling or, for that matter, religion itself; on the other hand, given that Dewey (1910; 1916; 1920; 1938) spent much of his career “reconstructing” philosophy with the goal of making it experientially valuable, it makes some sense that he “ignored” issues of a completely metaphysical flavor. It is also clear that Dewey (1910; 1916; 1938) believed successful moral instruction, as with all “instruction,” should be based on democratic, earthbound, student-centered, “experience” rather than religion-based metaphysical “faith.” However, it was not until 1934, at the age of 75, that he took up, in any specific manner, the questions of God, religion, and what he deemed the religious “attitude”—an important educational quality.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1934) argued that “religion” is “concretely” non-existent. Instead, “there is only a multitude of religions. ‘Religion’ is a strictly collective term and the collection it stands for is not even of the kind illustrated in textbooks of logic” (p. 7). He went on to propose that in religion’s stead, we would do better to think of the “religious”—free from the encumbrances of historic “religions”:

To be somewhat more explicit, a religion (and as I have just said there is no such thing as religion in general) always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective “religious” denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal. (p.8)

And, for Dewey (1934), any experience that arouses the emotions and induces actions that unify the self, are religious—and it is in these “religious” experiences that we grow morally and can become increasingly “good”; and, these religious experiences will quite naturally happen in public school settings.

As to the “God question,” Dewey suggests that such a deity, in pragmatic thinking, is found in the actualizing of ideals; God is the union of ideas and subsequent action, thought and experience joined together:

Whether one gives the name “God” to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter individual decision. But the function of such a working union of the
ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content.
(p. 35).
And so, as to the question of whether man needs “god” to be good, it seems Dewey would say resoundingly yes; for, it is in ideas turned to action that progress and human happiness are established and maintained; but it is certainly not the “God” envisioned in most traditional religious systems.

For Dewey, then, and as a reflection of our ongoing democratic experiment, to learn goodness, to find truth, to be moral is to be religious; however, to be religious is not to attach oneself (or nation) to a single or even a handful of specific religions or religious texts; to be religious is to become emotionally engaged in experience; to grow from experience, continually. God is not found in an ideal or in antiquated religious texts; God is found in the union of thought and action—actions ultimately judged by their practical, human results. Successful “moral” instruction in schools, by implication, is accomplished via the construction of educational experiences that rely on students’ emotional engagement; and, “God” is to be found in the actualizing of student interests/ideas—putting their ideas to the test and in so doing fomenting physical, intellectual, emotional, and, yes, spiritual/moral growth.

Dewey did much to further our understanding of educational practice; but, as the reader certainly must be imagining, his ideas on religion, the religious, “God,” and a common faith built on the democratic and scientific manifestation of ideals did little to endear him to Americans—the majority of whom remain steeped in traditional religious understandings, tied to specific religious traditions; and so the battle over religion in the public schools raged on . . . though as Nel Noddings (1993) argues, educational philosophers have been rather quiet on the issue over the last half-century, “as though the enlightenment project had succeeded” (p. xiv).

Nel Noddings’ Critical Lessons

A self-described philosophical Deweyan (as well as a self-described secular humanist), contemporary educational philosopher Nel Noddings is anything but reticent when it comes to the tough issues of moral/spiritual/religious instruction in American public schools. She not only suggests not quelling religious debate in schools, she suggests encouraging such debate—religious or otherwise—so long as it is civil, intelligent and informed. As Noddings (2007) puts it in her chapter on religion in Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach,

There are certain questions that every thoughtful human being asks, and most of us long to hear how other reflective people have answered them. To “educate” without addressing these question is to engage in educational malpractice. It won’t do to argue that such questions should be explored in religious institutions, not in public schools. In most religious institutions, students will hear only one set of answers and, although some people find such answers deeply satisfying, single answers—accepted unreflectively—are intellectually unsatisfactory. How would a person committed to one view respond if she or he heard another well-articulated view? (p. 250)

Additionally, according to Noddings (2007), there are students (increasingly) who have no formal religious education—nothing with which to frame an understanding of the “big questions” in life and, “met with silence [in public school settings], they remain unexplored” (p. 250).
What makes Noddings’ (1993) position here so uniquely important (and contentious on the parts of many religious communities) has to do with three school/teacher suggestions for practice: first, take up religious questions (the nature and existence of gods; the existence of evil; religion and gender; etc.) as they “come up” in the regular course of subject matter instruction/investigation, not in a stand-alone course on world religions. Secondly, and, even more contentiously, it should be expected that teachers can and will “maintain pedagogical neutrality” in the face of such enduring questions; finally, and most contentiously, teachers should be ready to present the arguments of both believers and nonbelievers to their students (p. xv).

The first suggestion above develops out of a more general concern Noddings has with the division of subject matter that begins at least by 7th or 8th grade in our typical public school set-up. Noddings (2007) suggests that this division sets up an artificiality between experience and schooling . . . rarely are life’s questions/problems solved via only a single subject matter, as this common practice of subject matter division seems to suggest. Besides, argues Noddings (2007), there is no need to add yet another required course to our already long list when religious questions will quite naturally come up in the regular courses of study already required. The trick is in allowing those questions to come up, be discussed, and investigated further; only in this way will we succeed in helping our students investigate possible answers to these enduring human questions, and in that process “teach” our students to be strong critical thinkers.

The second suggestion, that teachers maintain “pedagogic neutrality,” is intuitively difficult to imagine—though Noddings believes it can be achieved. Certainly, as Noddings points out, converting and/or proselytizing, whatever the position and regardless of the subject being examined, is clearly unconstitutional and so teachers must maintain some sense of neutrality on many contentious issues; on the other hand, short of ignoring the questions when they arise, how does a teacher maintain complete neutrality? Noddings’ (2007) answer to these criticisms, put simply, is that “the idea [teacher neutrality] is to introduce students to a rich and fascinating literature that addresses the great existential questions from a variety of perspectives” (p. 250). That is, the teacher who successfully practices pedagogic neutrality is simply a guide and resource for student-centered investigation of religious and spiritual matters in the public school, leaving the student to reach her own reflective conclusions.

Finally, and maybe most contentiously, Noddings (1993; 2007) suggests that as guide and resource, and to insure well-balanced neutrality, the teacher direct students to the thinking of a wide variety of scholars—both nonbelievers and believers—and in that way we can educate for intelligent belief or, even, unbelief. And, once again, that these naturally arising human concerns can be used to further subject matter study in nearly all regularly required courses (math, English, science, etc.). This kind of broad teacher guidance clearly invites “a discussion” between the religious (and maybe, the non-religious) parent and the “neutral” teacher guiding her students to a variety of sources, many of which may fly in the face of the teachings of the parents. On the other hand, and as Noddings makes clear, we cannot call ourselves educators if we ignore the most important human questions; nor can we create strong critical thinkers if we don’t think about critical human issues. Still, the question remains: is the public school really the proper venue for such discussions?

Concluding Thoughts

“Will my child be a good person?” and “How do I help my child become a good person?” These are inevitable questions that both parents and school people must answer. And, as we have
suggested above, the God question is just as inevitable: Is faith in God necessary and central to being a good person and living a good life? The religious person and the nonreligious person are never going to see eye-to-eye on this central question, and so they are likely not to see eye-to-eye on the place of religious teaching and activities in the public school.

The religious person is likely not to share Plato’s confidence in the power of human reason to lead people to see, understand, and embrace the good and to want to live a good life. Neither is the religious person likely to share Rousseau’s faith in the natural goodness of man and his capacity to live a good and compassionate life when that goodness is nurtured and preserved. And certainly the religious person will not accept Dewey’s conception of “God” nor Noddings’ belief that much can be learned from both believer and non-believer. Plato’s understanding conflicts with the religious man’s commitment to faith over reason in providing answers to man’s important questions. Rousseau’s understanding conflicts with the doctrine of original sin and the idea that man needs faith and religious commitment in order to overcome his sinfulness and live a worthy life. Dewey’s God of experience negates the religious person’s ultimate focus on an after-life and Noddings’ informed reflective thinker seems a lot more like the influence of Satan than a neutral treatment of important life questions in the minds of many religious people. Neither is the nonreligious person likely to share the beliefs and practices of the founders of the public schools who believed their own Protestant religion necessary to redeem man’s flawed nature and make him fit both to be an American citizen and a servant of God, and who saw the public school as a legitimate and important place for such teaching. And, it might very well be the non-religious parent who protests Noddings’ “neutrality” when religious texts are suggested for the investigation of enduring human questions.

None of these different ways of conceiving the possibility for human goodness and the way to the living of a good life is silly, stupid, or unreasonable. Each argument has a place in our tradition, and each shapes our current understanding and our current conflict. If the truth be told, many parents no doubt borrow something from each of these understandings in thinking about how to help their children live good lives. They may believe they see a natural goodness in their children they want to preserve and protect, and they may believe the development of the child’s reason can lead to informed choice and compassionate adult behavior. They may also believe that religious teaching and religious faith may help their child along the way, perhaps as an anchor for the child’s understanding and choice of action. This might be mere confusion on the part of parents. It may also be, however, an amalgam of understandings that shape the policies, theories and practices of schools and the well-intentioned people in them who want the best for the children they serve.

Those who work in public schools, or who send their children to them, or who try to think carefully about them, have some reason to try to be clear about their own understandings about the role of religion and the public schools, and they have reason to be clear about the understandings of others. Each of us has an opportunity to enter the discussion and debate about this issue in a knowing, reasonable, and sensitive way.
References


Intellectual Agnostics: Preparing Public School Teachers to be Open-Minded Interpreters in the Religion/Public School Debate

Don Hufford, Newman University

Introduction

I live in the state of Kansas, a fertile battleground for the frequent skirmishes in the ongoing religion/public school debate. Our state Board of Education has received national attention, and more than a little media derision, for its ideological infighting and for how personal political and religious views have infiltrated educational policy. Policy decisions affecting the state’s educational system have tended to be revisited and revised, based on the power dynamics of the ten-member Board. For the past several years the power has shifted, depending on whether the ultra conservatives or the moderates controlled the majority vote. The latest election shifted the power once again from a pervasively ultraconservative worldview to a more moderate understanding of social, political, religious—and, hence, educational—issues.

Local boards of education, particularly in the more urban communities, are also continually faced with contentious issues that mirror how diverse understandings of the world impact the public schools. There seem to be never-ending possibilities for emotionally charged, sometimes antagonistic, interpretations of the purposes of public schools. And, we are continually reminded that religious issues are among the most divisive and contentious. The question, “what role—if any—should religion play in public schools?,” continues to be asked. The question—with all of its political, sociological, and pedagogical implications—is not going to go away; not if we continue to engage in the open-minded discourses that define a democratic society. In reflecting upon the religion/public school question we may be reminded of the Zen Buddhist aphorism: “There are no answers, search for them lovingly.” We are not going to have a single answer that satisfies all participants in the debate. The parameters of possibility are too broad, too infused with differing worldviews.

We are reminded by an educational philosopher that “(n)either the limited truths of science nor the dogmatism of religion can provide real answers to the fundamental questions of life, which must always be examined anew” (Kneller, 1958, p. 81). Perhaps, in ever-renewed examinations—in the search for answers, and for new questions—we will find ways to soften ideologies, ameliorate antagonisms, and allow communal dialogue to move us forward.

Connecting Thoughts

The judicial system, in all of its wisdom, has frequently disagreed on First Amendment interpretations of issues related to the question. Here again ideologies have entered into the decision-making equation. It is obvious that ideologies, whether sectarian or secular, are endemic in
the religion/public school debates. “Religion, like other aspects of culture, is often related to struggles over power. These struggles extend into the educational system” (Spring, 2002, p. 50). One problem is that, perhaps inadvertently, we have—as a society—separated not just the religiously dogmatic but also the religiously relevant from the public school educational process. As a society we recognize the divisive potential inherent in religious sectarianism. This makes it difficult to allow the vitality of meaningful religious inquiry to share space in the marketplace of ideas that is—or should be—the public school classroom.5

The possibility of “in school” dialogue is made difficult by the fierceness of the ideological debate occurring in the broader society. Differing views too often become battle lines. On one side of the battlements we find forces looking for ways to dismantle the Jeffersonian “wall of separation,” and to restore sectarian religious purposes to public school curricula and practices. On the other side we have defenders of the wall who are just as adamant in their defense of the secular purposes of public schooling. Too often both sides see the issue in stark, black and white, either-or terms; and alternatives are not considered. It becomes a case of an “I win, you lose” competitive mentality in which constructive dialogue is replaced by defensive postures and an argumentative, eristic-style confrontation.

It is dialogue, an open-ended, critically reflective process, which is needed; not a one-dimensional thought process that closes the door to intellectual options. “Advocacy doesn’t create respect—teaching the controversy does” (Seiple, 2007). This requires a pedagogical process in which secular knowledge and religious faith are not viewed as irreconcilable opposites and combatants in the educational arena, but are allowed to exist in a state of dynamic creative tension. “We must be able to perceive both the sacred and the secular aspects of a person” (Maslow, 1971, p. 116). It is difficult to achieve and sustain a positive, productive tension between the religious and the secular in the public schools. But, where ideas are the currency of intellectual exchange there should be opportunities for both secular and the religious diversity to be heard and explored.

Human life becomes much more interesting, stimulating, and even exciting when there are many varied ways of thinking, feeling, expressing, acting, and viewing the world... No one person or group’s way of life is so rich that it may not be enriched by contact with other points of view (Pai, 1990, p. 97).

Several years ago there was a meeting of organizations from both ideological sides of the “wall;” a meeting that provided evidence of the possibility to move from reactionary rhetoric to responsible dialogue. Eighteen organizations (ranging on the religious-political spectrum from the Christian Coalition [right] to the People for the American Way [left]) met to discuss principles of “religious liberty, public education, and democracy” (Walsh, 1995). There was recognition of two fundamental principles; (1) Public education must be “sensitive to, and open to, the concerns of religious-minded parents, who sometimes feel they are less than welcome,” and (2) “Religious-minded Americans must be willing to build bridges, to respect the freedom of conscience of other Americans, and to not see public education as the enemy” (Riley, 1995).

As it is, many parents of school-age children have opted out of the public school system because of a perceived lack of sensitivity to their religious conviction. Public school privatization groups, proponents of school vouchers, corporate sponsored management organizations, etc.
have aggressively responded to this “voting with the feet” approach. This has intensified the ideological “market mentality” which infects education, and which could seriously weaken and fragment the fabric that is public education. There will, of course, always be legitimate—and important—rationales for religious and other private schools in our diverse society. But the vital importance of public education in a democratic society should not be underestimated, or undermined. Perhaps a concerned effort to better understand the diverse religious thinking of students (and parents) who desire education in a public setting would make classrooms more accepting places for all students.

The opportunity exists to use the secular/sacred tension in American society to empower reflective thought in the public schools; to enhance student understanding of the diverse voices that provide a cacophony of possibility in the classrooms of our schools. “Religion and non-religion raise first questions that deserve heated exchange . . . we must find ways of talking to each other and not just past each other” (Wolfe, 2004, p. 38). A total divorce of the secular and the sacred in schools—whether by legal fiat, educational policy, or by parental choice—creates a disconnect between the schools and their democratic mission. We have an opportunity—no, a responsibility—to build upon the integrative, ecumenical, heterogeneous, and inclusive possibilities inherent in public education. This requires a vision of education that not only accepts but also encourages diversity in all of its positive forms including the incongruity of religious difference. As thoughtful educators, we are reminded that

thinkers who try to be holistic, integrative, and inclusive learn inevitably that most people think atomistically, in terms of either/or, black and white, of mutual exclusiveness and separateness . . . (This) leads to dichotomizing life into the transcendent and the secular, and can, therefore, separate them temporally, spatially, conceptually, and experientially . . . An education which leaves untouched the entire region of transcendent thought is an education which has nothing important to say about the meaning of human life (Maslow, 1976, vii, 33, 58).

It is, of course, obvious that often the “religious voice” is dogmatic and authoritarian in tone; and proselytizing in intent (more sectarian than sacred). And the same may be said of many secular efforts. There can be narrow-mindedness and arrogant self-assurance on both sides of the religion/secular divide. It has been said, “atheists can be as mindless as theists” (Wieseltier, 2004, p. 25). We can easily recognize that “there are competing but parallel tendencies” in the “closed-in rationalities of the (secular rationalists) and the closed-in world of institutionalized religion” (Kelly, 2000, p. 405). This makes it all the more important to search out and compare the foundational principles that fuel different versions of the “truth.” The search can be an educational opportunity. Religious diversity does not have to be educationally divisive. It can represent a unique opportunity for an exchange of ideas and perspectives: “Somehow we must embrace the paradox that both commitment and critique need to inform all that ultimately gives our lives meaning, if we are to walk a chosen path with eyes wide open” (Proctor, 2002, p. 54).

This is why we need public conversational dialogues (not win/lose debates) that allow and encourage parents, educators, legislators, judges, lawyers, clerics, the general public—the religious and the non-religious—to rethink the religion/public school issue from a more flexible, open, even paradoxical, perspective. This, of course, presupposes educating participants to be open to dialogue and conversation. It requires those who seek to understand differences, to actu-
ally hear and learn from the voices of others. Such on-going dialogue might help us recognize the “false dilemma” that is involved in an either/or mindset. As William Nord (1995) has written: “We need not dismantle the wall of separation or build it higher, there are alternatives—in the Reasonable Center” (p. xiv).

It is the search for alternatives—for a reasonable center—that may result in turning seemingly irreconcilable differences into a positive tension. The religion/public school issue contains both dangers and opportunities. We know that religion as dogma and misused power can indoctrinate, divide, control authoritatively, oppress, suppress, and silence; even give theological permission for violence. But, religion may also encourage, enlighten, liberate, motivate, raise questions of purpose and meaning, and seek justice and peace—all valid educational goals.

Perhaps the opportunities are worth the dangers. Public school silence on religion in our increasingly more pluralistic society does not eliminate the issue. Rather, it contributes to a lack of knowledge of the “other”—a knowledge that is needed to “build bridges” and create reasonable centers. If educational critics and reformers, either of the political and cultural right or left, are really serious about critical thinking as a learning goal, then academically sound opportunities to hear and think about diverse religious ideas and practices will be part of an integrative curricular process. We will “find ways to recognize and honor the place of diverse religious beliefs in human experience and history while prohibiting religious indoctrination” (Milligan, 2002, p. viii). All of our pedagogical concern for multicultural education is like “clinking cymbals and sounding brass” if we do not consider the cultural and educational implications of religious sensitivities. A strong proponent of humanistic, non-theistic values reminds us:

What should we teach our children? Surely, how to think critically, how to develop mature values, how to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of life, and how to prepare for a life of challenge and fulfillment . . . In particular we should cultivate the habit of thinking critically about one’s own beliefs . . . This is especially important in democratic societies, where students of every cultural background, secular or religious, must master the values of citizenship together (Kurtz, 2007, p. 6).

Ideological rigidities in both the “for” religion and the “against” camps result in the hardening of adversarial positions when the question of the role of religion in the public schools is raised. The emotional depth of the issue is such that it can easily seep into individual classrooms; sometimes with strong overtones, sometimes on the periphery of a classroom learning community. It is at this point that schools of education in our nation’s universities have a role to play. Teachers need to be educated to understand and to interpret the premises and the power of religion. They need to be educated to be aware of—and better understand and deal with—the ambiguities, complexities, controversies, and epistemological variety which religious sensitivities bring to the classroom atmosphere.

Teachers who have had significant academic preparation for understanding and appreciating “alternate ways of seeing” will be more aware of—and open to—the creative educational opportunities that exist to integrate religious questions, dialogue, and discussion into various subject areas. They will be better prepared to “negotiate passages” between the varying and emerging worldviews that their students bring to the formal educational experience. These are the
teachers who will seek—in their repertoire of creative teaching—ways to connect differing worldviews (including religious perspectives) while encouraging all voices to be part of the classroom dynamic. These are the teachers who will understand the importance of perfecting a personal “intellectual agnosticism” as preparation for interpreting to self and others the existentially powerful issues which slip under the official curricular radar, and filter into the classroom.

**Background Implications: The Agnostic Interpretively Defined**

The term “agnostic” has a distinctly theological ring. But, theological terms are frequently reinvented—almost in a mythological sense—as a way to critically assess other ways of thinking, reflecting, and doing—even *being*. Even the powerfully evocative word “religion” reflects a broad horizon of definitional possibility.

‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes, and therefore, is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology (Smith, 1998, p. 7).

With this thought in mind, this paper makes use of a little “creative linguistic license” in transferring “agnostic” and “agnosticism” from a theological home, and hanging them on an educational peg. After all, evocative words create possibilities for interpretive exploration.

Even when lines of definition seem to be clearly drawn, terms remain irreducibly complex . . . Constituted by the intricate interplay of sameness and difference, the distinctive contours of any term are a function of both its multiple components and its relation to other terms. Boundaries that separate terms are necessarily permeable and complex. This complexity renders terms polysemous and multivocal (Taylor, 1998, p. 16).

As a linguistic invention, “agnostic” was given birth by T.H. Huxley in the late 1880s as a way of describing how he was different from other thinkers of his day. He believed that his mind was more open, more uncertain of what others defined as certain. In creating this neologism of questioning open-mindedness Huxley made use of the ancient Greek, *gnosis* (knowledge). An *agnostic*, in Huxley’s lexicon, was one who did *not* claim to possess *the* truth, to have “certain knowledge,” particularly of God, creation, and other religious conceptions. There is a strong echo here of the Socratic epistemological benchmark: “To know that I do not know is the beginning of wisdom.” The wisdom of agnosticism allows one to be open to possibilities. It allows one to accept the possibility of personal transformation. It allows one to be an intellectual *heretic*, if interpretively repositioned as derived from to the original Greek meaning of the word: “one with the ability to make choices.”

As interpreted for the purposes of this paper, to be an intellectual agnostic is to be: intellectually open, flexible, heretical as a thinker, not certain of certainties, a willing listener to counterpoint worldviews, and a believer in the possibility of connecting the incommensurable. It is to be a believer in the power of paradox, and an understander of the positive power of creative tension. It is to be willing to open the self to the adventure of ambiguity. And here we have intellectual qualities that allow the teacher to build bridges of understanding, and to be a thoughtful interpreter in the religion/public school debate.
Educating the Teacher to be an Intellectual Agnostic

Intellectual agnosticism will never be one of the measurable outcomes for schools of education in America’s universities. In all too many cases, preservice teachers are—to draw upon theological imagery—baptized in the faith; immersed in a metaphorical pool of sanctified, pedagogical truth that is to prepare them for the promised land of officially sanctioned high stakes tests, accountability, and conformity to authority. It is the premise of this paper that somewhere within a school of education there should be a learning space where handed-down, official educational faith is demystified; where it is evaluated, questioned, and challenged. Dogma is handed down from on high, but as Chomsky (2000) reminds us “true learning comes through the discovery of truth, not through the imposition of an official truth” (p. 21).

As the religion/public school debate continues—and it does—the teacher who has been exposed to intellectual agnosticism will be prepared to mediate, referee, and interpret that debate; both in the classroom and the community. We need teachers who have an agnostic streak of intellectual curiosity that applies to the pronouncements of the self-assured on both sides of the religious/secular divide. “All too often the search for ultimate meaning stalls at a self-satisfying reassurance” (Livingston, 2000, p. 405). One place of critical interpretation and questioning possibility in a school of education is the social foundations classroom. Here is where educating teachers-to-be in pedagogically-inflected intellectual agnosticism just might be an acceptable option. This is in spite of accrediting pressures that increasingly mirror the “teach to the test” expectations that have been imposed by dogmatic fiat on the public schools.

In reflecting upon this possibility, a question arises: how do we teach a respect for intellectual agnosticism in a school of education? How do we academically sanction the right and the responsibility to challenge the certainty of a belief system, whether it be religious or secular? Whether it be self-held, or an expression of the “other?” How do we teach educators to be prepared to listen to, acknowledge, question—even build upon the many and diverse expressions of the human experience—and human spirit—that are brought to the classroom? We have a beginning in the emphasis on multiculturalism and multiple intelligences, concerns that have become ubiquitous in our teacher education classrooms. But, because of misunderstandings and deliberate misrepresentations of court interpretations of the meanings and intent of the first amendment, we have been reluctant to allow religion to play its leading role in the drama that is multiculturalism. We need to respond to the fact that

religion is not an ancillary but, rather, a pivot in understanding the worldview of a culture . . . (R)eigious beliefs and practices are something more than “grotesque” reflections and expressions of economic, political, and social relationships, rather they are coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about the natural and social environments in which they operate (Summers, 1994, p. 71).

It is in the social foundations classroom that expressions of personal religious sensitivities can—and should—be legitimately allowed into the academic dialogue. Here is where—according to a standard setting body—“a number of academic disciplines, combinations of disciplines, and area studies” should become “disciplinary resources to bear in developing interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on education, both inside and outside of schools (Standards, 1996, p. 4). It is here, in the most interdisciplinary of education classrooms, that intellec-
tual agnosticism should be welcomed as a way of learning, and incorporated into the pedagogical toolboxes of future teachers. Here is where future teachers may be inducted into an understanding that controversy—if handled appropriately—can not just enliven but also enrich the classroom. We are reminded that

many administrators and teachers (are) unprepared to face the explosive forces that now surround (issues of) religion in the public schools. Because religion is so controversial a subject, many educators have opted for benign neglect in their classrooms . . . The outcome has been massive ignorance of any faith besides one’s own, and sometimes even of one’s own (Davis, et. al., 1987, p. 9).

Lack of preparation for using controversy as a learning opportunity limits a teacher’s ability to fully use the lived experiences of students to explore issues of existential importance. And every religious issue is fraught with existential importance. Different ways of viewing the world—whether seen through a secular or a sectarian lens—may lead to confrontations, but these may be transformed into opportunities for personal growth. “Good academic study . . . is a process in which one has to repeatedly risk interpretation . . . in risky, transformative exposure to an as yet ungrasped truth” (Highton, 2005, p. 179). It is the transformative possibility that motivates the intellectual agnostic’s search for the ungrasped truth.

In being introduced to intellectual agnosticism, the future teacher is not only exposed to the reality of opposite truths, but also to the expectation of an open-minded “hearing” of the other’s interpretations. There is a similarity here to what John Bennett (2000) has defined as “intellectual hospitality.”

An indispensable characteristic of healthy learning communities, intellectual hospitality involves welcoming others through openness in both sharing and receiving claims to knowledge and insight . . . Being intellectually hospitable means being open to the different voices and idioms of others as potential agents for mutual enhancement, not just oppositional conflict . . . The object is not to convert the other but to provide insight into the positions held . . . Genuine hospitality recognizes a multiplicity of persons and gifts; it is a witness to contemporary pluralism; it acknowledges the provisional character of knowledge (pp. 24-25).

Intellectual agnosticism incorporates intellectual hospitality into its welcoming embrace of differing worldviews. Each student in a classroom - as well as the teacher - is motivated by a personal worldview, consciously or unconsciously held.

This worldview is essentially a “philosophy of life,” with a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an axiology—even though these “big” words may be unknown to the individual. A worldview often contains hidden and/or unexamined philosophical assumptions that are reflected in what we believe, and what we say and do. A worldview is the lens through which a person views the world, the self, other people, and events. It involves knowledge, prejudices, attitudes, assumptions; and beliefs, religious or secular—perhaps even irreligious. A personal worldview grows from transmitted traditions, and from lived experiences. A worldview is a personal interpretation of the universe. The teacher as intellectual agnostic welcomes diverse worldviews - including religious interpretations - as valid currency into the marketplace of ideas that is the classroom.
The preparation of future teachers for practicing this kind of openmindedness (defined by John Dewey (1997 [1910]) as “mental play” (p. 219)) has a place in the school of education curriculum; specifically in the social foundations classroom. It is in this academic venue that the future teacher is expected to practice intellectual agnosticism as a pedagogical possibility.

**Conclusion**

The above discussion adds a word invented by T.H. Huxley to the many “outcomes” expected of teacher education programs. The idea is presented that “agnosticism”—as applied to intellectual endeavors—has a place in the lexicon of pedagogical practices. Huxley’s definition of “agnosticism,” is linguistically sculpted so that it becomes an educational term. The case is presented that intellectual agnosticism is a teacher disposition which should be stimulated and encouraged in teacher education programs. The disposition toward intellectual agnosticism allows the teacher to use the varied religion/public school controversies as ways to bring diverse voices into the classroom. As an intellectual agnostic the teacher is prepared to interpret the voices that are heard, and to be a neutral, objective referee as divergent worldviews are expressed. The teacher is prepared to help students to challenge “certainties,” their own and others, and—at the same time to build bridges of understanding between worldviews.

Public education will continue to provide ideological battlegrounds for the cultural wars—including religious skirmishes—even as bridges are being built. As Michael Apple and Lois Weis (1983) have written, “the culture of the school (is) a terrain of ideological conflict, not merely a set of facts, skills, dispositions, and social relationships to be taught in the most efficient and effective way” (p. 16). A problem is that teachers are being prepared to emphasize “the most efficient and effective way” to define educational purpose in measurable, testable, student-as-human-capital terms. Where are the intellectual agnostics who are able to interpret, build upon, and learn from the broader issues that stoke ideological conflict?

The opportunity does exist to use the religion/public school tension to allow those who are unsure of certainties—either sacred or secular—to moderate and interpret the dilemmas presented. It is possible to educate teachers for our public schools who are intellectually agnostic; those who value both religious and non-religious diversity, who encourage a search for truths instead of a Truth, who are open to the creative challenge of opposing views; those who—as noted earlier in this discussion—are intellectually open, flexible, heretical as thinkers, not certain of certainties, willing listeners to counterpoint worldviews, and yet believers in the possibility of connecting the incommensurable. We are “seeking thinkers who help bridge the two worlds” of the secular and the sacred (Kreimer, 2007, p. 79).

Benjamin Barber (1995) has reminded us that “education is a training in the middle way between belief in absolutes and the cynical negation of all belief” (p. 167). The intellectual agnostic understands this is not an intellectual atheist. He/she is educated in intellectual skepticism, but does not allow the skepticism to degenerate into cynicism. As a teacher, the intellectual agnostic encourages questions about basic assumptions (religious and secular), about doubts and uncertainties, about the ambiguities that are found in contentious issues. The intellectual agnostic is willing not only to listen to—but also to “hear”—those who express religious curiosity, interest, and knowledge. Intellectual agnosticism allows the teacher to bring repressed issues “out of the closet,” and to encourage silenced voices to speak. “Silence on issues of religion in schools, far from easing tension, fosters ignorance and mutual incomprehension among people.
with widespread religious beliefs and practices that live in an increasingly pluralistic society” (Ross, 1993, p. 213).

And so, we understand that “engaging in ecumenical, cooperative, and self-reflective dialogue on the difficult issues of religion . . . in the schooling context is essential” (Slattery, 1995, p. 629). It is essential because every student brings a personal worldview into the classroom; and in many cases this individually internalized way of interpreting the world is saturated with religious knowledge, myths, and aspirations. The teacher educated to be an intellectual agnostic is best prepared to stimulate, encourage, mediate and interpret an ongoing dialogue based on complex issues raised by religious sensibilities.9 This teacher is also prepared to mediate disagreements arising between religious and secular ways of knowing.

To allow these sensibilities and disagreements into the classroom setting is to understand that public education is more than socializing a student into predetermined societal roles based on a political/economic status quo. It is to recognize that “existentially, education is becoming aware of the possibilities of being . . . (and) cosmically, education is the journey of becoming at home in the universe” (Vandenberg, 1990, p. 3). To educate toward these possibilities of human becoming requires allowing religious/secular opposites into the classroom, and then using the tensions aroused to generate the power of reflective, open-minded thinking.

When groups deeply at odds . . . get beyond confrontation to define real questions and work toward mutual answers, something important and hopeful is going on. We can’t solve problems or build a democratic future without learning those skills. And learning those skills requires that we have enough faith in our own beliefs to risk at least hearing the beliefs of others (Merritt, 1996).

The teacher who has been educated in the pedagogical possibilities of intellectual agnosticism will be most willing to risk the vulnerability of uncertainty, and be open to hearing the beliefs of others. It is this intellectually adventurous teacher who will be able to ask the right questions, create the stimulating dialogue, and encourage an open-minded, even “loving,” search for answers. It is in her/his classroom that the impenetrable (whether wall of separation, or wall of silence, or wall of ideology) may be breached by questioning, curious, critical inquiry.

Notes

1. In 1999 a majority of the Kansas State Board of Education, representing a neoconservative movement, removed the teaching of evolution and the discussion of the earth’s origins from the state’s science standards. This opened Kansas to ridicule in media coverage across the nation. Bumper stickers appeared with such messages as: “Kansas, as bigoted as you think.” By 2001 the moderates again held power, and evolution was reinstated as an important part of the science curriculum. Fast forward to 2005, and - with another election – the neoconservative majority ignored their own science curriculum committee, and reframed the standards. In September of 2005 thirty-eight Noble Laureates wrote a letter to the Board defending the integrity of evolution as a reputable theory; they were ignored. Once again, in 2007, a moderate Board was installed, evolution was back in the science curriculum, and the non-educator selected as Commissioner of Education by the neoconservatives was gone. A Wichita Eagle editorial noted that “Kansas . . .
can’t afford every few years to host these fringe debates which place our image firmly in the 19th century” (Schofield, 2007).

2. I was once informed by a political/cultural conservative—but moderate—member of the Kansas State Board of Education that the neoconservatives who had recently been elected to the Board made him feel like “a flaming liberal.” At the next Board of Education election, this conservative moderate lost to a candidate who not only was a “Creationism” advocate, but also suggested that children of illegal immigrants had no right to be in public schools. (I once heard this person comment that the Board should use its power to tell teachers what and how to teach.)

3. Horace Mann, father of the “Common School,” wrestled with this question in his 1848 Twelfth Annual Report. Even after several pages of discussion regarding four possible, alternative ways to view religion and public schools, Mann (1957/1848) wrote: “This topic invites far more extended exposition, but this must suffice” (p. 110). Mann (1957/1848) viewed public schools as non-sectarian and as vehicles for “free thought” (p. 110), yet encouraged the inculcation of a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) religious commitment.

4. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution contains both the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”). The amendment provides opportunities for differing interpretive possibilities regarding the involvement of religion in the public schools. Those who challenge the removal of religion from the schools look to the Free Exercise clause for constitutional support. In counterpoint, those who buttress their argument with the Establishment Clause believe that it “functions to depoliticize religion (and) . . . the establishment clause separates government and religion so that we can maintain civility between believers and unbelievers as well as among the several hundred denominations, sects, and cults that thrive in our nation” (Levy, 1994, p. xiii).

5. It should be noted, however, that there are those who assert that our society has adequately addressed the religion/public school issue. This is because they believe relevant Supreme Court rulings and other developments have pretty much brought public education into line with the religious neutrality required by the First Amendment and the increasingly pluralistic nature of our society. A fair balance has been established between the free exercise rights of students and the constitutional obligation of neutrality (Doerr, 2007, p. 100).

6. Some philosophers have challenged both the religious right and the scientific community’s efforts in regard to “truth” as implied in the Creationism (Intelligent Design) curriculum issue. An example:

   Both ID and science education have faith in their respective modes of knowledge production, yet neither displays a strong faith in the democratization of knowledge production through schooling . . . ID’s indictment of neo-Darwinian models of science . . . promotes certainty as opposed to openness and democratic sensibilities . . . (and) science education as a mode of knowledge production . . . advances antidemocratic content by teaching there is a false separation between
science, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other (Pierce, 2007, pp. 126, 129, 131).

A thought expressed almost one-half century ago remains valid today: “Neither the limited truths of science nor the dogmatism of religion can provide real answers to the fundamental questions of life, which must always be examined anew” (Kneller, 1958, p. 81).

7. Huxley’s linguistic invention *agnostic* is part of today’s vernacular. When, however, considering, the original meaning of early Greek words he might have chosen to add the “α” (antithetical) to another form of “knowledge,” *episteme*. *Aepisteme* would then mean a challenge to literal interpretations of various forms of dogma.

Gnosis, with its focus on meanings of existence, tended toward more poetic genres and made use of such figurative devices as myth, parable, fable, allegory, personification, and metaphor . . . Episteme, more oriented to the practical, everyday matters, was more suited to linear chains of reasoning, and literal expressions (Davis, B., 2004, p. 27).

8. Words are often redefined for specific situations. The interpretive usage of “agnostic” is here, however, not so much a redefinition as a transfer from theological to educational meaning and reflection. Perhaps, “(m)eaning is not ‘in’ words. Meaning is in people, and whatever meaning words have are ascribed to them by people” (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, p. 106).

9. It is important to help teachers understand that the right to discuss religion and religious issues has *not* been negated by judicial interpretations of the Constitution. Teachers may not advocate, or proselytize, for a particular belief system. They may, however, teach *about* religion in an objective, neutral manner. They may also respond to student questions and concerns about religious issues, as long as the response is accurate, objective, and neutral in interpretation. They may even bring up religious issues, if they are in relation to academic content, and if the objective/neutral stipulations are followed.

**References**


Labyrinths: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow—Implications for Education

Barbara Michels, Debra Maxwell, & Ching-Wen Chang, Missouri State University

Background and Overview

Educators are continuously looking at innovative ways to teaching and working with students of all ages. The tools we use range from the simplest technologies such as chalk and pencils to the high tech tools involving computers and information systems. The best tools and strategies often invoke the use of the old and new or the old in a new way. In 2002 an interest in labyrinths (the old) led most naturally to an Internet search (the new) and resulted in the obvious question of how these mysterious, yet marvelous, patterns could be applied to the instructional arena. An extensive search of the traditional literature databases and the Internet at that time revealed only passing comments and anecdotal records and there were few of those. The existing literature did reveal that these mystifying geometric forms have a long history. Curiosity was piqued and enthusiasm ignited as questions centering on how these may relate to children in an educational setting came to the surface. Courses such as Classroom Management that, of course, include student behavior, became a consideration. What if a simple geometric tool, such as the labyrinth, could positively affect student behavior and the overall climate in the classroom? Schools create a community in which effective teaching and learning occur. As teachers, we should care about students’ personal, emotional, and spiritual well being besides delivering knowledge. It is important that students are exposed to learning in a climate that nurtures their development in all ways. Could labyrinths help students look inside their minds and explore their potential? The students themselves have some of the answers. As one said, “It gave me a chance to reflect on the things I’ve done, said and felt.” (LECT, 2003)

This article will look at the historical background of the labyrinth as well as definitions. Then a modern view will be given with details on the various ways it is being used today including an overview of a school study. Finally, some questions for the future will be raised.

What is a Labyrinth?

First of all, let’s point out what it isn’t! It is not a left-brain challenge, i.e., a puzzle to be solved. Labyrinths are often confused with Mazes which are winding patterns that are of a more complicated design used to tease or trick and often results in dead-end passageways (Griffith, 2002) (Figure 1a.) These can be fun, but may be stressful. A labyrinth is a unicursal (single) path to the center of the pattern. The person walking encounters no challenges and is not required to make any decisions. “Labyrinths come in varied shapes and can be as simple as a sand drawing or as elaborate as an inlaid tile floor” (Spilner, 1997, p. 144). Unlike mazes (Figure 1a), which require constant decisions and can often lead to frustrating dead ends, labyrinths are one path to a center, turn around and take the same path out (Schlumpf, 2000). Labyrinths are
thought to enhance right brain activity and doing one can also be fun, and de-stressing. (Figure 1b.)

Research for the past 10 years has noted benefits for adults and children after labyrinth walking. Health professionals (Carnes, 2001; Griffith, 202; Nicolson, 2002; Older, 1998) and the clergy (Schlumph, 2000) have long recognized benefits from walking a labyrinth and educators are beginning to join their ranks. Some of these benefits include: lowered blood pressure, a calm feeling, better task functioning as a possible result of focusing while “walking,” and body balance. Other research suggests that peace of mind and improved cognitive functioning may result from this brain balancing, which may also result in better balance of the body.

The Legend

The 2000 year-old legend of Theseus and the Minotaur tells how Daedalus was given the task by King Minos to construct a model cow in which Queen Pasiphae could conceal herself in order to mate with a bull. She later gave birth to the half-man, half-bull, Asterion, the Minotaur. Daedalus was then commissioned again to create the Labyrinth as a place that the Minotaur would be kept and designed so that those who entered could not escape.


Figure 2. Theseus slays the Minotaur in the middle of the labyrinth. [Online image] Retrieved January 21, 2008 from http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Sp-TI/Theseus.html
Part of the legend recounts the killing of the Minotaur by Theseus who had fallen in love with King Minos’ daughter, Ariadne. Each year seven youths and seven maidens were sent into the labyrinth to satisfy the Minotaur’s hunger. Theseus was one. In order to save Theseus’ life, Ariadne gave him a ball of thread to use to find his way back after killing the creature. Theseus unwound the thread on the way to the center of the “labyrinth” (which was really a maze) and then followed it back out. They then fled to Crete. Earthquakes and fire eventually destroyed the “labyrinth.”

Both Sig Lonegren and Jeff Saward (Labyrinthios.net) have traveled and written extensively on the history and origins of the labyrinth worldwide. They are accepted as authorities on this subject. The earliest example of the seven-circuit, or “classical” labyrinth was found at Pylos in southern Greece. “This tablet provides us with the first securely datable example of the classical labyrinth symbol.” The earliest examples of the classical labyrinth symbol have been found at Pylos in southern Greece inscribed on clay tablets. (Saward, 2004).

Some of the most famous labyrinths and stone formations can be found in England. Sig Lonegren has found and documented many of them including Solsbury Hill. Near Bath, England is a labyrinth on this small hill. Built in the Iron Age, it is thought to be the site of Mount Baden and “King” Arthur’s victory over the Anglo-Saxon’s. (Lonegren, 2006)
In the United States, both the Anasazi Indians at Casa Grande in Arizona (West, 2000) and the Hopi Indians at the Montezuma Castle in the San Francisco area (Hopi Labyrinth – Southwest Parts and Monuments Assoc., 2003) have used the labyrinth symbol on the walls of their dwellings. Many other sightings have been found around the globe indicating that this symbol is multi-cultural and universal. In many cases the meanings and uses are obscure. However, it is evident there was, and is, an attraction to this geometric pattern.

The broad spectrum of the record both geographically and historically emphasizes the influence of this symbol in many ways. Jeff Saward, (2003) describes the diverse cultural references, uses and breadth of historical reference:

Labyrinths are a potent symbol in many cultures, and have been for thousands of years. When Theseus killed the Minotaur he defeated the beast at the heart of darkness—and and created a myth that is still vibrant and evolving. Roman mosaics often depicted labyrinths as fortified cities, while in medieval Europe they symbolized the one true path to Christian salvation. They have been used as ceremonial pathways, protective sigils, traps for unwelcome spirits, and for games and dancing.

The labyrinth pattern can be found on most continents and many ancient cultures around the world. In addition to being ground structures, labyrinths can also be found on domestic artifacts. For example, “The Nazcan civilization of about 500 CE in southwestern Peru constructed a number of labyrinthine figures (magical single path tools) on the Pampa Ingenio. Many times, their colorful pottery imitated these enormous drawings as with this fish.” (Saward, 2003) Motivations are sometimes unclear due to lost history but enough records are in existence to verify some commonality of intent ranging from those who walked as part of pilgrimage to great cathedrals to those who sought a successful day fishing.
Modern Settings

Jeff Saward (2003) of Labyrinthos (labyrinthos.net) provides more recent history: “During the last fifteen years or so the labyrinth symbol and its attendant mythos has undergone a rapid evolution, becoming once again a vibrant concept which has infiltrated into many aspects of public consciousness.” Labyrinths give designers and creators inspiration for their art world; labyrinths stimulate researchers to look for deeper and closer connections with our life. The increase of interest has brought people together to share and reflect more on thoughts and with each other. Labyrinths are not only exercised in the spiritual level activities but modern technologies and media level. “... the labyrinth has been appropriated by the media as a theme for computer games, financial chicanery, feature films and television alike” (Saward, 2003).

Throughout the ages labyrinths have been used for entertainment and enrichment. Labyrinths are also introduced to us in diverse forms. Saward (2003) pointed out “…the current resurgence of the labyrinth in its many multicursal forms as a fundamental part of leisure development, with the construction of many hundreds of mazes, often large and complex, in parks and playgrounds throughout the world.”

The urge to seek the balance between chaos and order has driven us to search out the deep secrets of labyrinths. Some take a more philosophical perspective on the deeper meaning and effects of this archaic representation. “The temporary suspension of time and direction, an isolation from two of the most important principles by which the world and our life upon it are ruled, has always been attainable within the concealing walls of the labyrinth” (Saward, 2003). We search and hope that we can seek the harmony for our spiritual inside world from the winding lines. Modern encounters with labyrinths also suggest physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual and, perhaps, unknown benefits. How, exactly, do labyrinths affect the human condition? What does this mean to people in various settings?
Schools

The Labyrinth Society, dedicated to the study and dissemination of labyrinths and labyrinth information (www.labyrinthsoociety.org) has started to facilitate communication between people around the world interested in taking labyrinths to schools. This discussion group collects data and shares information from members who work with pre-school through high school. Information from this site reveals details regarding materials, themes, age levels, and benefits. Labyrinths have been constructed from materials from the more sophisticated commercially printed labyrinths to those made of stones (Figure 7). Many times a theme is defined such as peace, creativity, problem solving or a world event. Labyrinth projects take place in different schools involving various grade levels and subject areas. Regardless of the differences, the common and significant benefits are “…calming, improved creativity, conflict resolution, problem solving, dealing with loss and fun!” (The Labyrinth Society, 2004)

An ancient method of creating labyrinths using stones is still done today. Ms. Newburn’s Math and Science Blog (Figure 7) provides examples and discussion of how this older method is being used today. There are also comments about others who have followed her example thus showing the increasing interest in labyrinths today. More information about labyrinths yesterday and today can be found at other Internet sites as well.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, Marge McCarthy (2007) spearheaded a school movement in which 10 schools installed labyrinths. In her book, Kids on the Path, she says,

The reaction to walking the labyrinth is different for each child. Children have reported that after walking the labyrinth they calm down, become more relaxed and less angry or frustrated, gain insight for solving problems, feel closer to a friend with who they walked the labyrinth and are more aware of the things for which they are grateful. Children who have experienced a loss find that walking the labyrinth helps in the grieving process. Other children have reported that they were very upset about parents divorcing, or parents fighting. When they walked the labyrinth, they felt calmer and better able to concentrate. Teachers and counselors have used the labyrinth as a tool in the conflict resolution process. (p. 2)

Churches

The general public is most commonly aware of labyrinths in churches. One of the most famous is at the cathedral in Chartres, France although there are many religions and cultures around the globe
that have them. Various patterns and variations can be found as well. Robert Ferre (2007), who has studied labyrinths at length and makes and installs them, has this to say: “The Christian church adopted the labyrinth as a symbol quite early on. The oldest known church labyrinth is a converted Roman labyrinth found in the Basilica of Reparata in North Africa. . . . “

There were, of course, connections to non-secular groups as well. Labyrinths can be found worldwide in churches and organizations of all cultures and denominations.

**Cancer Treatment Centers**

It is well known that the labyrinth experience has very calming and de-stressing effects. Therefore, the medical profession has begun to integrate it with various treatments and purposes. Some of the medical uses are for patient support during chemotherapy as well as for the calming effects, which are beneficial for caregivers. Outside the Celilo Cancer Center at the Mid-Columbia Medical Center in Oregon is a labyrinth used for walking meditations, family support activities (walking together with the patient) and stress reduction (used by many staff members). (Buchanan, 2005) described how Mark Scott, former CEO of the Center, underlined how well it complements the use of chemotherapy and radiation in cancer treatment. Walking the labyrinth can give a sense of confidence and control over one’s feelings about treatment. The attitude attached to this process of inner healing has been shown to be a significant factor in the efficacy of treatment, or outer healing. And for those patients and staff unable to walk the outdoor installation, there are small hand-held labyrinth relief models. These work through the technique of “taking your finger for a walk,” visualizing the journey and, after some practice, being able to remember the rhythm of walking the labyrinth.

**Alzheimer’s Treatment Center**

One of the most widely known and, perhaps, feared diseases other than cancer is Alzheimer’s. Since evidence suggests the labyrinth has effects on the brain, it is logical to connect the labyrinth to this disease. Much work still needs to be done but the future is promising:
The mind begins to short circuit. Performing tasks that once were as natural as breathing becomes a source of frustration. Confusion begins to crush hope. The caregivers for early- to mid-stage Alzheimer's residents know that these misfires aren't going to go away. At the Alexian Brothers Valley Residence (ABVR) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, an ancient ritual--walking the labyrinth--is being used both as a therapy and a devotional aid for these residents. It taps into the spirituality that remains deep within their hearts and gives them "A Place Where They Can't Get Lost"-the name of the ABVR labyrinth project (Carnes, 2001).

Public Parks

The notion that this is only a spiritual tool or experience is quickly fading. Public governments and organizations are now installing them into public spaces and gardens. For instance, the labyrinth at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Lower Queen Anne Hill in Seattle, Washington (Figure 10) is open to anyone who wants to take a few moments for prayer or reflection. (Pacific Northwest Sunday Magazine (online), 2007)


Study with At-risk Elementary Students

How does this relate to students and the school setting? Can a labyrinth be used effectively in this environment and for what purposes? Since the labyrinth has a long history, is international and multicultural, an art form, has mathematical proportions and relationships, and engages people on physical, mental and emotional levels, it is the perfect vehicle for various and integrated curriculum activities. For example, if the facilitator or teacher chooses to focus on the historical and multicultural aspects, it can very easily be used to illustrate diversity yet sameness. Cultures around the world have used the labyrinth over many eras sometimes using the same patterns and sometimes devising their own. However, the fact remains, they all used a labyrinth of some sort.
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if elementary students would experience improved physical balance after walking a labyrinth. A simple yoga balance exercise called “Standing Tree Pose” (Figure 11.) was used because it is often used in Physical Education classes to measure balance and is, therefore, a validated measure.

Benefits

Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, credited with the resurgence of labyrinth walking in the United States, discovered that groups of children with ADD/ADHD became more focused and quiet after walking a labyrinth (Carnes, 2001). Dunphy (2000) states that labyrinth walking is currently being used to decrease stress and aid in self-awareness, which could be beneficial to at-risk students and suggesting a broader generalization. We think a children’s world should be less stressful than ours, but they are actually going through certain pressures such as how to succeed academically, how to excel at sports, how to be popular at school, etc. It is essential and helpful if there is something that can guide them to calm down.

Site of the Study and Participants

The labyrinth study took place at a Title I elementary school offering an after-school program for two neighboring Title I schools. These schools have a population between 140 and 180 students from older lower-income neighborhoods. The majority of students were Caucasian with blacks ranking second with a few Asian, Indian and Hispanics. Because students for this after-school program were chosen from 1st through 5th grades, they were representative of the larger school population. There was a nearly even split between males (18) and females (17) who ranged in age from 5-11 with a mean age of 7.46 years.
The Process: Balance, Walk, Balance

The pre-test measured the amount of time each student could hold the Standing Tree Pose. Afterwards participants were given general instructions for walking the labyrinth but not told specifically how they should walk or how fast. This was done intentionally so that children could uniquely experience the walk in a manner appropriate for them at that time. Participants were allowed to enter the labyrinth when they were ready. Because of the size of the paths, it was possible for many participants to walk at the same time allowing for some passing on the paths (Figure 12). Students were reminded that it was not a race and that they must set their own pace. Upon completion of the walk, the same yoga pose was used as a posttest.

The Results

The following data was recorded:
1. Pre-test times ranged from 40 seconds to 120 seconds with a mean of 18.14.
2. Post-test times ranged from 2 seconds to 150 seconds with a mean of 27.97.
3. Balance improved for 77%.
4. The difference between the mean for pre-test and post-test was 9.83 seconds.
5. There was 1 participant who showed no change.

Some of the most interesting data was qualitative. For example, a younger participant tried to run the labyrinth and practiced over and over again until he was able to make the turns. His mother walked in just as he accomplished his goal and he was very proud that he was able to walk the labyrinth and show his mother. Questions remain as to why he had difficulty staying on the path and what happened in the process of “learning” how.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were students who connected with the labyrinth on a more internal level. An older student walked very slowly and with purpose, got to the center, reflected for a long time, and made his way out giving the facilitator two thumbs up with “Awesome” when he was finished.

These two examples show the very personal, individual ways people can interact with the labyrinth. One was the physical challenge which may suggest connections to brain structures related to gross motor skills compared to the more thoughtful, inward journey of the second student seemingly related to mental and emotional effects. Qualitative data was not collected in any formal manner since it was not part of the original research design and intent of the study. However, the following unsolicited comments were noted:

“It was so cool to walk.”
“I did it, I did it!” (This kindergartener had attempted walking the labyrinth three times before he was successful in completing the entire circuit at a dead run.)
“It made me a little dizzy.” (This was a fourth grade girl who at first was reluctant to enter the labyrinth possibly due to peer pressure.)
“Can I run it now?” (This kindergartener was somber while walking the first time and then excitedly asked if he could run it.)
“I liked it!”
“I feel better.”
“Can I do it again?”
“I want to show my mom.” (This fourth grade boy wanted to share this with the most important person in his life.)

“Sweet!” (This fifth grade boy took the experience very seriously. He ambled through, took his time at the center spending three or four minutes. He gave it double-thumbs up.)

These comments came from only one study. Others who have used labyrinths with adults and students report similar comments. The empirical evidence is undoubtedly showing that there are positive effects from the labyrinth experience.

**Implications**

These student reports open the doors to many more questions. How does the labyrinth experience affect people in more holistic ways? For example, what happens physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually, etc.? Does it affect stress levels? Since it is well known that managing stress leads to better health, couldn’t we make that association regarding the benefits of the labyrinth? How do you think stress management for teachers, staff, and students would affect education? What would be the influence on the ambiance in the classroom? Creativity? Test performance? McCarthy (2007) also noted that “…walking the labyrinth allows for creativity and intuition to flower.” There seems to be a connection to the right brain, clear thinking, and test improvement all of which are desired goals in the educational setting. The labyrinth provides the opportunity to improve the lives of children because it “…encourages right hemisphere activity in the brain—the nonverbal, intuitive. This calm focused attention stays with children and helps them focus after they walk a labyrinth.” (The Flowering City Forum, 2005). It appears that the labyrinth prepares students to be mentally, physically and emotionally ready for upcoming classroom activities.

Tomorrow

The labyrinth is also a natural vehicle for interdisciplinary and multicultural education. It has inherent connections to studies, art, music, literature, history, math, geometry, social and, of course, religion. Students need very little prompting to participate in a labyrinth walk making this tool an inherent motivational tool “invite” them to participate. Tomorrow will we go in individualized instruction, and media development, more aspects of education? Will we and how will we incorporate this tool into our lives and teaching?
Summary

The United States is part of the renewed interest in the labyrinth worldwide. Marge McCarthy (2007) said, “...we know of school labyrinths in at least 18 states as well as in Germany, Scotland and South Africa.” Of course, there are many more that are unreported. It seems that a new holistic, multi-faceted tool is being brought to our attention. Who knows for sure what the exact purposes and outcomes were of the ancient models? It is our future, our destiny, to define and utilize, to take advantage of this opportunity in history to rediscover the deep “mysteries” of this most amazing gift.

It is evident that there is a renewed interest in the effects of the labyrinth on mind, body and spirit as they are already being used in medical institutions, schools, and churches. The study described in this article focuses primarily on the physical aspect and leads to many more questions. It leaves us wondering, “Where is this going?” Do labyrinths provide us with some clues about the way visuals and personal interactions with patterns and geometry affect us? This leaves many doors unopened and waiting for exploration. If we can be so deeply affected by a visual and physical interaction with a geometric symbol, what does that imply regarding other visuals and symbols in our daily lives? How are we being affected? It is time to take a new look ways to present instruction that can change students in very profound ways. Although some questions will remain unanswered and, therefore, a mystery, the fact remains that this pattern continues to be intriguing and beneficial to modern man.

References


Aesthetic Education and Masked Emotions:  
A Model for Emancipatory Teacher Preparation

Barbara A. Clark, Central Connecticut State University

Introduction

According to Maxine Greene (1988), aesthetic education is “integral to the development of persons-to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development” (p. 7). Gardner (1973) like Greene presents the arts as a cognitive tool necessary to fuel the human developmental systems including how we see, feel and make new ideas within our imaginative core. When confronted with a painting, or piece of music we open “ourselves as perceivers to the work, entering into it kinaesthetically, we free ourselves to grasp it in its vital fullness and complexity” (Greene, 1988, p. 13). Greene (1988) asserts that aesthetic experiences provide us with a window to encounter the arts conscious that “we are in the present as living, perceiving beings becoming aware that there is always, always more” (p. 16). Eisner (2002) views the arts as transformative and a necessary process for critical cognition and cultural growth. Aesthetic education may be utilized as a primary method for teacher education programs that view the development of the teacher’s imagination as a primary aim. According to Greene (2001):

Aesthetic education, then, is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what there is to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way as they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience, new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened. (Greene, 2001, p. 6)

The purpose of this paper is to present the developing sense of self that pre-service teachers experienced through an aesthetic entry point, the 9/11 mural by Graydon Parrish entitled, The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy (see Figure 1). Pre-service teachers explored the psychosocial theories that Erikson (1963) outlined in the course text by Woolfolk (2008) while viewing the 9/11 mural. Greene’s (2001) research on aesthetic education and Perkins’ (1994) research on visual thinking structured and supported the aesthetic experience, thereby providing a foundation to begin thinking deeply about the psychosocial theory of Erikson when facing the expansive allegorical mural by Parrish. The museum arena in which the mural was displayed provided a community space for pre-service teachers to think critically with one another. According to Jeffers (2003) the museum as community, then, conceives of knowing and learning as a process of human relationship. This process also implements the museum’s mission, which is to empower students and teachers to make meaningful connections to art and each other through dialogue and discourse. (p. 117)

This kind of structured aesthetic experience can be key to an emancipatory form of teacher preparation.
Aesthetic Education in Teacher Preparation

The Psychology of Visual Thinking and Community Reflection

Aesthetic education utilizes powerful works of art in which to exercise visual perception or visual thinking. The visual thinking process unites the viewer’s intellect and intuition while meaning is made (Arnheim, 1969, Gardner, 1973, Perkins, 1994). “Visual thinking is the ability of the mind to unite observing and reasoning in every field of learning” (Arnheim, 1996, p. 119). Nikitina (2003) directs our attention to “the integrative aspect of art” thereby “connecting the self with the social world, and providing a space to reflect on the meaning of other experiences” (p. 56). According to Eisner (2002), viewing a work of art provides students with the challenge of talking about what they have seen, gives them opportunities, permission, and encouragement to use language in a way free from the strictures of literal description. This freedom is a way to liberate their emotions and their imagination. (p. 89)

From within the critical aesthetic experience among the pre-service teachers in the museum, a community of thinking emerged as personal experiences were shared while viewing the 9/11 mural. An intimate sense of empathy evolved as pre-service teachers listened to each other’s stories. The 9/11 mural, as the aesthetic entry point, provided the armature for a community of elementary pre-service teachers to share and shape new possibilities, ideas and realities. Eisner (2002) states:

The 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)

Jeffers’ (2003) research on aesthetic education views the museum as an alternative space in that a sense of community among the pre-service teachers supports multiple realities and perceptions in relation to the art and personal experiences are shared for the community to engage in critical and empathic listening. Jeffers (2003) presents critical criteria for an alternative aesthetic space and states:

The listening community also must be a diverse one in which a spectrum of voices can speak and be heard. Different perspectives, interpretations, and criticisms must be shared and creative conflicts (that lead to new discourse and new knowledge) must be engendered. Through these activities, the diverse community will succeed, both in facilitating learning and in protecting against group orthodoxy and dogmatism. (p. 117)

Aesthetic Process

Pre-service teachers participated in a visual thinking process within the museum sitting in front of the 9/11 mural. The devastated 9/11 landscape within the painting, with children playing, captivated the thinking of the pre-service teachers inspiring them to think critically regarding Erikson’s (1963) research on trauma during a child’s development. The 9/11 allegorical mural provided an aesthetic landscape for the pre-service teachers to enter, one in which their imagina-
tion could roam and wander igniting memory and making meaning—uniting the present and past with the future. Fenner (2008) argues that an aesthetic experience is not complete unless the imagination is actively engaged. The aesthetic experience thus becomes “individual and particular” through the imagination and experiential activation of the memory (p. 45).


**Masked Emotions Revealed**

As pre-service teachers viewed the 9/11 mural visual data was collected and recorded based on their personal histories, beliefs, emotions and perceptions in relationship to the 9/11 mural images and Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial theory of development. The aesthetic experience activated the pre-service teacher’s imaginations in an authentic fashion thereby connecting Erikson’s theory to current events and challenges faced in the educational arena. Pre-service teacher’s discussions and reflections portrayed how trauma impacts the development of a child. One pre-service teacher stated, “I recognize the fact that I will be in a position to influence (I hope it will be a positive influence) students during times of emotional stress” (focus group notes, September 18, 2007). When confronted with the mural’s symbolic imagery and in conjunction with children’s development as related to cultural memories and life experiences another pre-service teacher revealed:

This has affected me in a way that I didn’t think it would. When 9/11 first happened, I was a sophomore in high school and didn’t know anyone that lived or worked in New York, so I didn’t really feel as though I was directly affected. I never really talked about it with my family or friends because they really didn’t seem to be affected by it either. All I remember is my dad talking about how he disliked foreigners. Then when looking at the painting that expressed so much emotion of those who were directly affected that opened my eyes to all of the others out there. It was then that I started to think about the affect that it had on not only the people directly related but also the children and the questions they would have about it. (focus group notes, September 18, 2007)
The concept of the *mask* children and teachers “wear” to hide trauma was highlighted as a potential theme. Initially the entire class created the idea of the mask after visually thinking about the blindfolded twins standing at the center of the mural (see Figure 1). The pre-service teachers decided to design masks to symbolize how humans protect or hide their true selves from trauma. Educational psychology theories were discussed in relationship to the theme of the mask and the 9/11 mural. In a sense, while viewing the mural, the pre-service teachers were “breaking through to new horizons of sound and feeling-beginning, just beginning to suspect what still lies beyond” (Greene, 1988, p. 17). One pre-service teacher shared a reflection after viewing the 9/11 painting and stated:

September 11\textsuperscript{th} tore some people apart, and put others together. Although the pieces of the Constitution are shredded, the Constitution’s importance in the history of America will never die. And through it all, through the debris and fog, you can see the faint light of the Statue of Liberty. Although you may need to look hard to find it, it is still burning bright—a shred of light and hope for the future of America. (focus group notes, October 2, 2007)

During the mural discussion pre-service teachers recalled personal moments they experienced when the 9/11 tragedy occurred and revealed feelings regarding the affects of the 9/11 trauma. As pre-service teachers they wondered how they might have discussed the event with children in their classroom. Greene (1988) believes that “in a sense coming in contact with a work is like meeting another human being” and acts as the “ground” to lay our “necessary stories” upon (p. 16). Once the pre-service teachers completed their aesthetic experience in the museum they collectively decided to design a performance to represent their personal stories and beliefs. The next section will describe the aesthetic process the pre-service teachers participated in and the symbolic poetry created.

**Designing an Aesthetic Performance for a Museum**

This section will describe the process students encountered in developing a dramatic performance using movement, masks, music and poetry in front of the 9/11 mural in the museum. Throughout the shared experiences while designing the *Masked Emotions* performance, the pre-service teachers reflective and imaginative realms were ignited to problem-solve an interpretation regarding the 9/11 mural and Erikson’s psychosocial theory of human development. What message as pre-service teachers did they want to share regarding a child’s development? Overwhelming the pre-service teachers agreed that the loss of innocence, when impacted by trauma, was identified as the central theme to be explored. A storyboard was developed in relationship to cultural and social development of the pre-service teachers when growing up in the USA. Who are we as a nation? What was at risk after 9/11? How are moments with family shared when faced with a tragic event? A paradigm evolved as pre-service teachers juxtaposed the loss of innocence with the hope in the future. One pre-service teacher invited her five-year old sister to participate as the symbol of innocence. Another pre-service teacher asked her middle-school son to play his oboe, a deeply haunting sound of a child learning, uniting the various collaged poems and performance movements. One pre-service teacher shared thoughts after viewing the 9/11 mural and stated:

I see my little cousin Chelsea actually as the little girl to the left of the portrait; she is shaped and looks just like her hair and all. Then we have the young girl who has a blindfold on, but the older man is holding it maybe to hide the fact her
parents are gone, but he has his mouth covered because he doesn’t want to tell her. (focus group notes, September 18, 2007)

Eisner (2002) supports the power to release the individual perceptions and voice exposed through an aesthetic experience stating:

the opportunities to speak or write...are not only ways to describe what has been seen—though they are surely that; they are also a way of searching in order to see. The opportunity to talk about a visual field is also to imply a need to have something to say. (p. 89)

Pre-service teachers read their reflections and their symbolic poetry (see poetic collages one, two, and three) after visiting the 9/11 mural and completing the visual thinking exercises. In small groups pre-service teachers discussed, compared and analyzed potential themes and created artistic strategies so that the identified themes might be symbolized in a dramatic performance. The following photo (see Figure 2) illustrates three pre-service teachers connecting to one individual representing the Statue of Liberty. Seated below are masked pre-service teachers (see Figure 2). The performance unfolded to represent a specific theme that amidst tragedy people reach for hope, hope in the symbol of our lady of liberty.

Figure 2. The Statue of Liberty: Pre-service Teachers Design Masked Emotions Performance.

The Masked Emotions performance was an entry point for pre-service teachers to experience aesthetic education thereby revealing their potential and reflective intelligence (Perkins, 1994) to use their imagination. Johnson (1993) states that imagination is the capacity which allows us both to experience present situations as significant and to transform them in light of our quest for well-being. Imagination is a means
for going beyond ourselves as presently formed, moving transformatively toward imagined ideals of what we might become, how me might relate to others, and how we might address problematic situations. (p. 209)

Greene’s (1988) theory parallels with Johnson (1993) and places great emphasis on the development of an empathic imagination through aesthetic experiences. “Imagination is not only the power to form mental images, although it is partly that. It is also the power to mold experience into something new- the power-by means of a sympathetic feeling-to put oneself in another’s place” (Greene, 1980, p. 30).

Pre-service teachers thought deeply regarding the USA tragedy represented in the 9/11 mural and the traumatic impact on a child’s personal experience. Symbolic language developed to create poetic statements that captured the 9/11 tragedies. For example, in the first poetic collage below, the pre-service teacher describes the horror he feels when viewing the 9/11 mural as a place where “silent screams rule”:

*Images violent and disturbing, but clean
Silent screams and pain from invisible wounds
Smoke, gray and ominous, covers the sky
Obscures the distant city
Glow of flames not seen
One plane rises while another falls
Toppled buildings in the shadows of buildings untouched
A bed of flowers for an old man dying
The constitution lies in ruin
All rising, sweeping upward to the center
Where silent screams rule.*

The symbolic imagery within the painting is silent yet provokes the intense feeling of agony thus a sense of screaming within the pre-service teacher’s mind. The scaffolding and layering of imagery the pre-service teacher describes elaborately depicts the cognitive analysis of the murals symbolism.

The second poetic collage represents a pre-service teacher looking toward the future with a sense of hope in contrast to the first collage that expresses the immediate destruction and despair of the 9/11 tragedy:

*An island on a sunken city
Drowned in tragedy
Filled with pain and hope
A background of desolate buildings
And wreckage and smoke
A lady of liberty stands out of the water
Dim, blurred, and small
Her torch still stands
High and bright
A beacon of hope.*
The third poetic collage contrasts a continuum of human development, from innocence to despair, from blindness to clarity, which moves to an abstract and complex analysis of life’s tragedy:

*A world that moves...*  
*From law and structure to flower of mourning.*  
*From innocent children to broken adults.*  
*From a world of blind children to adults who can SEE.*

These three poetic collages may be viewed as the development of reflective thinking toward critical analysis of the pre-service teachers initial thoughts and reactions towards the 9/11 mural (see Figure 1). Thus the cognitive and affective realms, the intellect and the intuition (Arnheim, 1969) united to form three highly expressive poetic works (see poetic collages number one, two and three).

According to Nikitina (2003), “there are many theories of meaning of arts teaching in education” (p. 56). Nikitina concurs with Siegesmund (1998) “that teaching art is about educating “reasoned perception,” which takes us to a realm of “feeling, sensory concepts, and exquisitely varied forms of human representation that give us insight into what it means to be in, relate to, and comprehend” (as cited by Nikitina, 2003, p. 56).

Aesthetic education opens a cultural and social arena providing a space to be reflective among shared experiences with others. Dewey (1934/1980) stated that, “the first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art” (pp. 345-346). According to Dewey (1934/1980) aesthetics including poetry and paintings among other works of art give our culture “a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress” (p. 346). Greene (1993) asserts that, “we all need to recognize each other in our striving, our becoming, our inventing of the possible. And, yes, it is a question of acting in the light of a vision of what might be—a vision that enables people to perceive the voids, take heed of the violations, and move (if they can) to repair” (pp. 219-220).

**Pre-service Teacher Voices**

After the completion of the Masked Emotions performance one pre-service teacher shared the following thoughts in a reflection:

I was able to take risks. Masked Emotions was a model for me. It was really significant that we were part of a big community. We made the puzzle complete. I want my students to feel that. I felt worthy. I could contribute to someone else’s experiences and someone else’s learning. It takes courage to take risks. There is potential that you have to unleash. It was not a material reward. It was contributing to society—that was the reward. It made me feel we can all reach higher ground. One person standing next to me is feeling something completely different. This helps people see their way out of situations and being actively involved around people-It brings out hope and wonder. The Masked Emotions Performance created an intimacy—you are able to back away and see your class as a community. It has grounded my decision to be an elementary classroom teacher and impacted my educational philosophy. (personal notes, November 6, 2007)
A second pre-service teacher implemented a mask-making activity within the language arts program during her urban field experience the following semester, after her experience in the Masked Emotions aesthetic experience. She shared the following thoughts and felt compelled to express that the participation in the aesthetic performance brought out a sense of hope and wonder within her.

I decided during my field experience to have my fifth grade language arts class make masks and to write identity poems and stories about the masks. I walked into a classroom that had weak classroom management. I needed to create an environment conducive to caring for each other. To see your hands in plaster makes an aesthetic difference. Every aspect (of the aesthetic experience) teaches everyone. There was an appreciation for everyone. The kids felt privileged and appreciated to interact like that (touching face as if making a mask). Children are still developing and want to take risks. If we take risks at a mature level (referring to Masked Emotions Performance)-just think about what our children can do. They are becoming more conscious and aware of their actions-I wanted their identities to shine and to build confidence and a self-concept in them. (personal notes, March 4, 2008)

Conclusion

Three aspects of aesthetic education were developed as a model for implementation into teacher preparation. A great work of art such as the Parrish 9/11 mural was selected having a social message utilized for visual thinking to analyze a significant event in American history. Secondly, pre-service teachers wrote poetry inspired after viewing the painting. The visual thinking process revealed emotions and memories contributing to critical thinking and the development of poetic symbolic language. The last part of the model involved the pre-service teachers constructing a dramatic performance of mask, movement, poetry and music to represent critical themes that emerged from their aesthetic experience with a great work of art.

Aesthetic entry points elicit reflective discourse and critical analysis thus making critical thinking visible by pre-service teachers (Tishman, Jay, Perkins, 1993). Aesthetic education is critical in the preparation and development of pre-service teachers in revealing emotions and beliefs regarding how children learn. Aesthetic education provides experiences and entry points to critically challenge preconceived bias and stereotypes that pre-service teachers initially bring to method coursework and field experiences. In a way the aesthetic experience acted as an emancipatory possibility (Greene, 1988) for the pre-service teachers in that their thinking was made visible and voice released within a community setting. Greene’s (1988) passionate voice for the importance of aesthetic education raises the urgent need for aesthetic experiences in education as “the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation, will help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might someday attend” (p. 132).

If pre-service teachers are to one day become participants in radically transforming public schools then it is imperative that they are working together to transform themselves and “mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality that they seek to transform (Freire, 1997). This idea is reflected in the following pre-service teacher reflection:

Sharing this work with the rest of the class taught us things about each other...some of us have overcome stereotypes and hardships, or that some of the students have moved around a lot during school years. All of these things that we have learned about each other helped us come together as a class. We were no longer a group of
random people, but one unit made of individuals who all understood each other. (focus group notes, December 4, 2007)

Freire (1997) argues that we must also fight for the freedom to create to be truly free and presents Fromm’s (1956) theory that humans must have “the freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture” in order to fully become (as cited by Freire, 1997, p. 50). The pre-service teachers participating in this study had not previously encountered aesthetic experiences as part of their teacher education program.

The pre-service teachers witnessed transformative thinking as a community preparing to one day to teach in the local public schools. A sense of awe, sensitivity and awareness developed as the pre-service teachers understood the importance of the child’s search for identity and sense of self as critical to teaching children.

The museum experience was a platform for the pre-service teachers to exhibit their learning and personal voice. First, the pre-service teachers evolved into a community of learners sharing ideas and working together. Secondly the pre-service teachers developed a deeper understanding of their self-concept as teacher and awareness of each other as a community. Finally the pre-service teachers revealed in their reflections a sense of social imagination (Greene, 2001) that can be used to promote change, teach significant historical lessons and express individual voices.

The pre-service teachers will be the next generation of teachers to confront current curriculum pedagogy that restricts freedom and diversity in America’s public school system. Greene presents the urgency in education to rethink current curriculum and to create curriculum towards becoming fully human:

It would appear to me, in an emerging society marked by a rich range of differences that restrictions do indeed have to be brought within reach so that persons of all sorts can come together to change them. There must be a deepening consciousness of the plague and the need for healing. There must be a confronting of the contradictions, the instances of savagery, the neglect, and the possibility of care. We require curriculum that can help provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become. We want to see in their multiplicity linking arms, becoming recognized. We want them in their ongoing quests for what it means to be human to be free to move. (Greene, 1993, p. 220)

Pre-service teachers discussed the rare instances they experienced any type of aesthetic education practiced out in their fieldwork in elementary classrooms. The pre-service teachers wondered why few classroom teachers were employing aesthetic methods in their teaching methods and felt strongly that aesthetic education impacts critical thinking. One pre-service teacher stated:

If you were to implement this project into an upper elementary school classroom, the response would be impeccable. The children would respond to this type of thinking and analyzing. It would be beneficial to learn about how the September 11th events impacted others. (focus group notes, December 4, 2007)
As presented within this study aesthetic experiences provided individual pre-service teachers a framework to develop similar experiences within their fieldwork within elementary classrooms thus supporting evidence that these aesthetic experiences transfer impacting educational critical pedagogy. If curriculum in America’s public schools is to be radically changed critical transformative methods and strategies must begin with pre-service teacher preparation.

References


