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**Art Process with At-risk and
Underprivileged Children and Youth:
A Reflexive Overview of a Short-Term
and a Long-Term Out-of-School
Programme in Canada and Singapore**

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Art Process with At-risk and Underprivileged Children and Youth: A Reflexive Overview of a Short-Term and a Long-Term Out-of-School Programme in Canada and Singapore

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Abstract

The Arts have proven to be an important component of development in young children and offer unique opportunities for development in older children and youth. Worldwide the arts are used as a balm for suffering, underprivileged and at-risk children and youth. It is often assumed by artists, teachers and volunteers that participation in the arts is a healthy and beneficial activity. The conditions under which institutions are involved in providing such programmes are as varied as the places where they are conducted. The approaches of the instructors/teachers and administrators are likewise varied in their pedagogy preferences and intended goals for the children and youth under their care, with these two factors often influencing each other. This paper will examine two examples. The first will recount and examine the experience of a visual artist assisting a drama practitioner under the auspices of a provincial Canadian art gallery offering a short term arts workshop to an inner city school known for students affected by poverty and other social distress. The second example is the recollection of a long term and ongoing programme taking place in Singapore at a charity arts school offering out-of-school programmes to underprivileged and at-risk youth. The common approaches between the two, each taking place on opposite sides of the globe and separated by almost fifteen years in time, will be reviewed and analyzed in comparison with the process approach as advocated by current early childhood education theory.

Keywords: At-risk, Arts education, Process, Under-privileged, Children and youth.

Introduction

The first day we arrived at the school for a briefing of the students and teachers I was in for a dose of my own medicine. Having attended primary schools that were often populated by a mix of under-privileged and at risk children, I partially knew what to expect. It would be loud. It would be obnoxious. It would be chaotic and difficult to get these children under control enough to communicate anything coherently. They exceeded my expectations.

The school Marshal and I were visiting was a school in the centre of the hood, a neighbourhood where the middle and upper class feared to tread, and indeed I had a friend who had been mugged by a group of other youth while walking through the area we were about to venture into. I was new to the museum but had done volunteer work with children in this neighbourhood in conducting weekly art activities in a small park where toddlers played, seemingly unattended by adults, among discarded needles and beer cans. Marshal is a well-known and successful Native playwright and theatre artist and had experience in dealing with this situation as an artiste working with disadvantaged youth.

He seemed calm and collected on the drive to the school. He no doubt expected something similar to what I was envisioning, but seemed more comfortable with the approaching storm. As we neared the school area in his small, well-used car, we started to notice children strolling in the direction of the school, mostly dressed in loose dark clothing, black or dark blue jackets with jeans piled up around their oversized shoes. Their clothes were in tune with the times but were obviously well-worn as if they had endured several winters. The houses in this neighbourhood seemed older, some stood a kilter, some with overgrown grass. The streets in general had fewer cars and the ones that were parked on the potholed street had an aura of repair. We pulled into an asphalt parking lot that also seemed to double as part of the playground. As we got out nearby children shouted something, "Hey!..." maybe they said hello, maybe they cursed at us, either way it didn't feel unfriendly. We had entered their world, a micro culture existing within a larger, dominant and far more affluent society. We climbed the steps of the small four-story brick schoolhouse; it looked like a structure built in the 1950's or early 1960's. The wood was old, the floor creaked, but it was clean.

Negative Effects and Creative Environments

The retelling of this experience brings with it the reasoning and hopes of the many practitioners who embark on such projects world-wide whether short-term or long-term in nature and ultimately whether successful or failing to achieve their intended goals. It can be imagined there are few who would step into this arena if lacking in sincerity of their intention to assist disadvantaged youth. Notwithstanding such optimism, one of the pressing questions arising from studies of intervention programs for at-risk youth is that

of concern over ill effects that have been recorded by researchers like Dishion (1999) whose longitudinal study indicated a clear and significant negative effect in the grouping of at-risk youth, a practice that is widespread and continuing. The results indicate an increase in negative risk-taking behavior that seem to stem from peer influence due to group dynamics created by the very institutions meaning to assist. Dishion is clear in cautioning, however, that this does not mean that all intervention programmes are flawed and futile and that many are in fact successful in their goals. What it may indicate is that peer influence in these types of programmes needs to be taken into consideration and counteracted or addressed in a way that diffuses the possible negative outcomes of such categorization. For an overall examination of the field in which arts programmes as treatment exist, Cahill (2008) gives an intriguing overview of the multiple directions and concerns of different disciplines and researchers.

A section pertinent to our example comes in *Advice from the Dramatists* (Cahill, 2008), where concerns are raised as to a negative reinforcement that can occur when “a well-meaning drama may inadvertently glamorize a behavior it purports to stand against, for example sexist or deviant behaviour”. It is suggested by O’Neil in Cahill (2008) that naturalism constrains exploration and that surrealism, allegory, parody or other stylistic modes be used to control dramatic elements while providing a protective distancing for the participants. This is similar to the approach used by Marshal in our school in the hood, where the development of the drama stemmed from a mythological story, The Legend of Sedna, whose plot contains complex and ambiguous elements of violence, desire, betrayal, fear and rebirth out of tragedy. The structure provides anonymous positions for the youth to occupy, perform and if they wish, to hide while still being able to put creative effort in and receive acknowledgement. The disturbing and entirely relatable themes of the legend not only acknowledged aboriginal culture in the form of storytelling they also reflected the life experience of the vast majority of the population of the neighbourhood. Mythology is often ambiguous and mysterious; meanings are tenuous at first even while demonstrating the continuum of the complex and sometimes horrific reality of human interrelationships.

Within the realm of the arts there is the capacity to allow the human consciousness to inhabit a surrogate space where events may echo the participants own experience yet allow for passages of escape into alternate envisioning of possibilities. This may be why practicing artists and teachers working with the arts and youth insist that exposure to a creative environment is a potentially life changing form of empowerment. Like myth the power of the arts is often manifested through its ambiguity and subtle realizations of self-agency (Cahill, 2008) Richard Laurent, a Haitian artist living in New York, along with filmmaker and photographer Kevin O’Hanlon joined Haiti relief organization Life For The World to organized and executed a project a month after the devastating 2010 earthquake. They shipped canvases, paint, brushes and volunteers to an orphanage where they facilitated a process oriented arts classroom, in a roofless structure with homemade tables amidst

the rubble. In the commentary of the artist, reflecting on his belief about what such an experience gives to children, he relates the following:

“Art is like a thought, like a thought that you create in your mind...that’s what’s important to us here is to help these kids learn that with art, with the mind, with the thought... is where life gets created from.” (O’Hanlon,K. 2010)

This type of sentiment often surfaces in the views of those who understand that there are specific environmental conditions and facilitation approaches that are necessary for such an effect to flourish. Unfortunately the majority of education facilitation embodies characteristics that are known to inhibit creative exploration, experimentation or the valuing of individual difference and preferences. The very out-sidenedness of out-of –school arts programmes may be its own advantage where the expected concerns of students within the conventional school system over grades, test scores, retention, punishment, fulfilling of their parents or guardians expectations can all be drastically modified or bypassed completely (Shel,T.A., 2007).

Caring and the Non-Judgmental

This releasing of children and youth from the usual imposed judgments that they are subjected to for much of their formal education can be viewed in terms caring. In Shel’s (2007) *Caring Teacher and Pedagogy of Caring*, a caring teacher is defined as someone who sees themselves in relation to their students and humanity. They strive to help students see themselves as part of humanity through demonstrating critical and self-reflective behavior. They humanize their students by getting to know them personally and understanding their personalities and life experiences while guiding them in viewing each other with empathy. They maintain a positive environment where high expectations are articulated. A pedagogy of caring implies a space for growing morally, emotionally, socially and intellectually through dialogue and exploration as well as encouraging the ability to see from another’s perspective. A POC also induces the exposure of students to diverse ways of thinking and societies along with critical self-reflection and the inclusion of personal voices into curricula. These actions of a caring teacher and elements of a POC are often the same as approaches used by the artists and organizations referred to in our narrative. They draw on the accumulated knowledge of their teaching practices and reflections in attempts to create spaces where youth are empowered to value their own ideas and creative efforts, this is often the same goal that out-of school arts programmes for at-risk youth strive to create.

Artfoster: a Singapore Out-of-School Arts Program for At-Risk and Underprivileged Children and Youth

An example of a long –term programme can be found in Singapore in the ArtFoster School. Established in 2008 and a beneficiary of a Young Artists Fund, it's mission, identical to the Funds, is to ensure that no child with a strong interest and potential in the arts should be denied the developing of his or her talents due to a lack of financial resources. The fund encourages the development of creativity among the young and is essential in providing opportunities for disadvantaged children to explore their artistic talents and aims to develop their self-worth.

In being introduced to Artfoster, my first impressions were that the staff and environment immediately communicated their purpose: to serve children and youth. Even before entering the premises a buzz of activity is detected. Children with backpacks accompanied by their guardians pour out of the lift greeted by their friends who are loitering outside the glass front entrance. The lobby is vast for a charity arts school in land scarce Singapore. It has recently been emptied of most of its seating to make more room on the carpeted floor for parents and eager students of all ages waiting for their classes to begin and end.

The Director of the school, an actress, playwright and advocate for youth was someone I had known through the arts community in Singapore. The interview I had with her for the position of visual arts instructor was as exciting as it was brief. Neither of us had realized before that the other was passionate about the arts as a field of service for underprivileged youth. We soon found out we were like-minded about how to structure an arts environment that we believed would most benefit the students of the school. The common vision we began to negotiate was one where children would experience the arts at an advanced level and would be encouraged to explore their own ideas and preferences and be celebrated for their efforts and not for their being able to produce artworks to fit adult conceptions of excellence.

Approximately a year after I began teaching for Artfoster the Director approached me with an idea to form new programme that would be specifically designed for students in the existing visual arts classes that had shown themselves to be exceptional in their dedication and creative production. A class of ten was formed with the youngest being a pair of seven year old twins and the oldest being twelve years old. This would be an experiment. A specially funded grouping of exceptional young artists who would be guided and encouraged to develop their own creative directions for an entire year with the results of their efforts to culminate in a group exhibition at a prominent art gallery.

This opportunity was the culmination of my own experiences teaching art to children and in particular in working with this demographic. As artists the Director and I valued the creative process above the product and wanted to give the students full freedom to explore materials and concepts. After submitting our proposed outline to upper administration we encountered mild

resistance to our concept. The upper administration was worried that the final products of their efforts would not materialize and in the end negotiation was necessary. The Administrators wanted conventional canvas or paper works as a failsafe. We conceded by talking to the students about materials and offering them choice of canvas or paper size. The students were familiar and comfortable with these materials, however, it felt as if we were conceding too much and secretly I planned to allow the students to stray from traditional materials if their creative process lead them somewhere else.

Our core values however, remained the same, we upheld respect for an individual's authority on personal experience (Thorburn, K. & Hibard, S. 2008). Our approach would also include reflecting with the student on possible directions they could take their work, suggestions of possible techniques or approaches they might want to try, all based on their explorations of materials and ideas. It was set up as a working studio of artists more than as a classroom of students.

In reading the description of "using the arts in therapy as a way of helping to uncover an unimagined storehouse of inner richness- packages from life put away into the spare room of disconnectedness" (Thorburn, K. & Hibard, S. 2008) it seems that there is a clear relationship to what we were attempting. Our aim was to create a space where these youth could come to discover and trust the directions they decided upon and the chances and decisions they made in making and ultimately to use all of their experience to create, over time, artworks that were truly theirs and artworks that in the weightiness of their content and authenticity of their origins acted as proof of the capability, intelligence and value of these children and youth.

At the time we did not realize the theoretical underpinnings of what we were developing. The long history of research into creativity, child psychology on the value of creative play, the role of the arts in children's development, the benefits the arts hold for children, (Edwards, L.C., 2010) all confirmed our intuitions and experience as art makers and teachers working with children and youth.

What the arts have to offer to youth in these circumstances is a self-valuing paradigm shift. This subtle change in the way children and youth regard their own production has been noticed by artists and educators who work consistently with at-risk youth and with children and youth in general. This empowerment of children and youth in trusting their own creative choices and accepting that their own ways and thoughts are valuable is highly dependent on many factors that have been identified in studies on creativity and in child development.

This shift to a higher regard of the worth of their own ideas and efforts including trials and failures could seem insignificant to those from an already supportive environment where every aspect of life is reinforced by adult guardians, from home to school, who have clear agendas meant to engender success. This is simply not the case for many disadvantaged students. One such result comes from the United States in the study of the Summer Learning Loss phenomenon where the grades of economically disadvantaged students fall

dramatically after summer holidays unlike their fellow students with similar grades but from higher income families. The phenomenon, studied by Entwisle, D., Alexander, K., & Olson, L. (2000) among many others, confirmed that indeed the difference was partially in the supporting culture of the wealthier classes who imbibed to their children a clear sense of self worth and a feeling of entitlement to be heard and have questions answered, to be allowed to question authority, to always be attending some programme or camp of value to their education, this familial culture seemed to play a deciding role in the marks of students. What culture had we created at Artfoster and what are the elements of that creative space that helped or hindered students?

Questions in Serving Marginalized Populations

A reflexive mode of questioning the teachers experience of these two different yet related examples may reveal some of the ‘culture’ of these two institutions and the individuals involved. These factors bring a raft of questions to the surface that could be part of future studies on how to improve the effectiveness of arts programmes with at-risk and disadvantaged youth.

In both instances cited in this article I was an outsider, in the first instance I was a young, lower middle-class, white art student accompanying an experienced Native theatre artist into a predominantly poverty stricken, Native neighbourhood. Although my personal family history may have had many similarities with the youth we encountered, my having to enter their neighbourhood rather than living there, combined with my light brown hair, pale skin colour and gray blue eyes could not help but place me as a temporary visitor to their world. In the second example, once again I was a foreigner, I looked different, I talked different and as my students were not shy of telling me, I acted different than any teacher that they had ever had. Some pertinent questions that arise from these cases are:

Was my ethnic background and social status a barrier to my effectively working with these youth?

Was Marshal (the Native Theatre Artiste), by virtue of his shared cultural background with the youth we served, automatically more accepted by the youth and therefore better able to engage them in the programme?

What were the aims of the organizers of the programmes?

How did the organizers decide on the length of the programmes?

What impact did the programmes have on the youth participants, their teachers and other students not involved in the programmes?

Has any research or review been conducted with the students and teachers about their experience?

What effect did their final performances and exhibitions have on the beliefs of regular attendees of the galleries in relation to at-risk and underprivileged children and youth from?

What affect did the final performances and exhibitions of artworks have on the youth themselves?

What effect did the teacher student relationship have on the students and on my own beliefs about race and racism?

Many of these unanswered questions were felt viscerally while experiencing an environment, a feeling familiar to any new educator entering a classroom for the first time but significantly amplified in these cases by the gulf of poverty, social conditions and personal trauma. In looking at the role race and socioeconomic barriers play Hughes, C., Newkirk, R., and Stehnhem, P.H. (2010) emphasis that:

‘Adults’ need to increase cultural competence. Adults’ lack of understanding of how race and racism affect the lives of young adults can interfere with the development of adult mentors’ successful relationships with youth. Understanding the role racism plays in the educational and socioeconomic barriers that confront racially and ethnically diverse youth is critical to affecting positive change with youth.’

Clearly arts programmes that are developed to benefit disadvantaged youth, often consisting largely but not exclusively of minority populations, should take into account the role a lack of understanding of racism and prejudice on the part of adults in positions of authority may have on the effectiveness of the programme. Educators serving these populations should be provided training to counteract these often unconscious barriers. Newkirk and Rustein (2000) recommend several basic concepts that should be defined for participants in order for cultural sensitivity training to be effective. The concepts they define include *Prejudice, Denial, Internalizing Racism* and *Listening*. All are defined in terms of sensitizing the educators understanding of their own and thoughts and modes of interaction with youth. As with Shel’s pedagogy of caring they believe that effective educators need to get ‘to know students as individuals and the environments in which they live. They need help to understand a youth’s complexity...’ (Hughes,C., Newkirk, R., and Stehnhem, P.H. 2010)

Conclusions

Are there factors in the development and implementation of these two programmes that led to an environment that teaches children and youth to value themselves and each other? Can a creative space, designed to maximize creative exploration, automatically lend itself to the achievement of an intellectual space that will allow children to gain the many benefits the arts are believed to deliver? If it is possible to consistently develop an environment that achieves what art educators believe they have witnessed then these situations need to continue to be studied in earnest and the many factors that influence positive and negative outcomes be identified. In the field of early childhood education there is little doubt as to the benefits of properly trained teachers being able to facilitate a creative environment that allows children to benefit by supporting and encouraging their own natural stages of development and creative impulses. If the same benefits are attainable for the demographic under discussion in this paper, if it is possible, if it already exists, the proof of such an environments efficacy would well serve the community of those dedicated to providing opportunities for at-risk and underprivileged children and youth and may bolster support for such programmes that will ultimately benefit the children and youth they serve and the societies in which they are founded.

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