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The Practice of Teaching in K–12 Schools: Devices and Desires

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INTRODUCTION

For many years it has been my practice to ask the graduate art education students I teach what influenced their decisions to become artists or embark on a teaching career. Almost without exception, responses have focused on the words or actions of past teachers; comments—often idiosyncratic and delivered in passing—have “stuck” with a force that might well have astonished their originators. Even if not precipitating a future direction or career, most of us look back on the practices of favorite teachers with benign nostalgia. Indeed, whenever we think about education, we inevitably think in terms of the practice of teachers as the single defining quality that marks our school experiences. Yet, and perhaps surprisingly, the practice of teaching is the least researched and possibly the most polemicized arena of art education. This chapter, thus, will be concerned with the practice of teaching: the instructional work teachers do, the lives they lead in art classrooms, and what we expect of them.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Those of us who have made the journey from pupil to teacher know how complex is the context in which teachers operate and of which they are a part. The 20th century has witnessed a radical and far-reaching evolution in our conceptions of schools, schooling, and what teachers are expected to know and be able to do (Efland, 1990; Eisner, 1998; Greene, 1994). Beliefs about the nature and worth of artistic knowledge and practice, how children should be taught, and the use of evaluation and assessment in instruction are certainly different today than they were even 20 years ago. Since the advent of Sputnik 1, American schools have been subject to a stream of reform efforts that have almost equally inspired and inhibited change (Cuban, 1990; Eisner, 1983, 1998; Gardner, 1991; Greene, 1994).

We know, for instance, at least theoretically, that the practice of teaching does not consist of a generic set of pedagogical skills; it is a complex performance involving interweaving...
dimensions (Berliner, 1986; Bullock & Galbraith, 1992; Giroux, 1988; Jackson, 1990; Schon, 1984). We no longer look for the one best method, for even a brief scan through the literature reveals art classroom practices of some variety (Carroll, 1996; Tyak, 1974). Within the working lives of art teachers we find that concerns and practices of older and younger teachers are different, as these are honed by experience and informed by different perceptions of past and present (Galbraith, 1995; Kowalchuk, 1999). Similarly, demands confronting practitioners at the elementary and secondary levels are shaped by distinctive developmental needs, learning styles, and changing patterns of experiences outside school that youngsters bring to their learning (Burton, 2000; Eisner, 1998; Gardner, 1990). The practical insights, wisdom, confidence, and self-esteem of teachers are sharpened along gender lines as are the classroom experiences of the boys and girls they teach (Brewer, 1998; Collins & Sandell, 1996; Tuman, 1999).

In an effort to confront diversity and difference in the art classroom, and be responsive to public demand for high standards and accountability, conceptions of subject matter and how children learn subject matter have also changed radically. Other aspects of art teachers’ practices have taken on increasing importance in recent years as they have learned to work alongside professional practitioners in their classrooms and extended their attention to matters of collaboration both inside and outside their schools (Galbraith, 1995; Remer, 1996; Wilson, 1997). Such extensions have become more numerous, complex, and significant and thought to improve the quality of art teacher practice by grounding it within the socio cultural realities of particular school contexts. Given the variety of conditions that surround the working lives of teachers, it is, perhaps, not surprising that there is little across-the-board agreement on what constitutes “best” practice (Fuller, 1999; Luftig, 2000; Smith, 1987; Wilson, 1997).

**FUTURE IMPERFECT**

The growing pressures of a postmodern society have, to a great extent, precipitated a collapse of moral, aesthetic, intellectual, and pedagogical certainties. As the work of teachers has come under public scrutiny and as teachers have taken on new mandates and problems, the norms of practice can no longer be defined in the context of permanence, singularity, and isolation. Like contemporary reform itself, the practice of teaching takes on coherence only if seen in the context of possibility and shifting relationships between parts and wholes. Meaningful and realistic analysis of the practice of teaching, thus, requires us to do more than balance out the advantages and disadvantages of particular ways of doing things, or isolating aspects of the work highlighted by research findings. Contemporary practice exists in a climate of change and challenge, which plays out within what Eisner and others have called the “ecology of the classroom” (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Eisner, 1998). Yet, what do we know about the instructional practices of art teachers as they respond to the challenges of the modern world and the expectations of the contemporary classroom? For instance, how do art teachers conform to reform mandates, the imposition of standards, and what makes them dig in their heels and resist? For when all is said and done, if teaching remains central to the definition of what school and learning is all about, then research should have things to tell us about these issues.

**DEVICES AND DESIRES**

It is generally assumed that educational research will prove its legitimacy by offering new perceptions and stimulating improvements in teaching and learning. It is hoped that research findings will offer a more powerful knowledge base for practice including knowledge of subject matter, classroom management, pupil learning needs, and the pedagogy that teachers
bring to bear on their everyday work. The assumption is that better art teachers help give substance to a school curriculum and, in consequence, make better schools. However, research on classroom practice has been somewhat of a stepchild in the field of inquiry in art education (Carroll, 1996; Carroll & Kay, 1998). What research there is has been inconsistent, methodologically diverse, and offers less than a consistent picture of the field. Findings appear to indicate that teachers adopt a variety of pedagogical strategies responsive to specific contexts and assumptions about subject matter, and there is little consensus on the benchmarks of what constitutes good practice (Berliner, 1986; Carroll, 1996; Carroll & Kay, 1998; Eisner, 1983).

Even more dispiriting, perhaps, is that art teacher practice appears to be somewhat impervious to the kinds of changes researchers and reformists suggest. Recent reforms in schools and the articulation of national standards appear to have had a small effect on classroom practice, including the arts (Chapman 1982; Cuban, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Eisner, 1998; Sarason, 1990). Research findings, while generally promoted in the art education journals, rarely appear to permeate the classroom, even though research articles are usually buttressed with suggestions and implications for practice and policy. Several reasons are suggested for the disjunction between the claims of reformers and researchers and the practices of art teachers. For instance, much research is “top down” and carried out by investigators who have not spent a great deal of time in art classrooms; thus, they often ask questions and represent findings in terms that do not fit easily within the complex demands of art teachers’ everyday lives. Moreover, it is often the case that the questions and approaches of research are derived from theory rather than focused on practical questions of direct relevance to classrooms. Given that experienced teachers have worked to a level of security in their practice and assume the prerogative of their own personal ways of doing things, they often have little inclination to invest in the uncertainties of the new and different, however compellingly presented. Furthermore, until very recently, it was unusual for teachers themselves to be engaged in research on practice. Thus, the kinds of daunting questions that resonate most deeply with instructional practices have rarely been asked.

Recent experience tells us that although the desire to improve practice has been ever optimistic, at least among researchers and reformists, the devices by which practice might be improved have been somewhat elusive. With this in mind, this chapter presents trends in research on practices that will be examined for the insights they give us on the complexities and difficulties of art classroom life. Three major research trends focused on practices will be reported and their potential uses and limitations will be explored. Besides the general claims and constraints presented by each type of research, their implications will be further explored in light of what they tell us about how conceptions of subject matter, learners, and pedagogy shape the reality of art classroom events. It is important to note at this point that these three trends are not neatly compartmentalized, in that each is clearly and sharply delineated and singular in its concerns. There is much overlap here, because arguments and research findings appear and reappear within different interpretive frameworks. Thus, for the purpose of negotiating a minefield of complexity, the categories as delineated in the following sections simply highlight different aspects of this complex whole in order to help comprehension. In order to capture the various “voices” of the field in some fullness, a select group of projects has been chosen to stand as paradigmatic. Although limiting the range of the field, the virtue of depth in this instance is more advantageous than the kind of coverage the familiar listing of projects achieves.

**TRENDS IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING**

Research studies on the practice of art teaching may be categorized and, even, polemicized by their various purposes: by philosophical, psychological, or sociological orientation; by various conceptions of subject matter; by pedagogical practices; and by research methodology itself.
Because the purpose of this chapter is not to promote one purpose or methodology over any other, three rather broad categories of research on practice will be explored; I will call these the speculative-theoretical, the inferential-empirical, and the descriptive-case study.

It seems reasonable, as an opening gambit, to begin with the most broadly based research tradition of the field. Framed by particular viewpoints linking art, learning, and instruction, the work of Chapman, Gardener, Csikszentmihali, Eisner, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and that of the more recent groups of theorists who form the growing fields of visual culture and critical pedagogy, offers a wide-lens view of what counts in instruction in the field. Each researcher and groups of researchers interweave a complex set of dimensions buttressing their assumptions and claims from experiences within their own teaching, scholar, researcher, and practitioner lives. From within these speculative-theoretical frameworks, researchers and reformists offer both a trenchant critique of the problems besetting art classroom practice and provide compelling suggestions for change.

THE SPECULATIVE-THEORETICAL POSITION

Enlightened Citizenship

In her ground-breaking book, Instant Art Instant Culture (1982), Chapman argues for art education as critical to enlightened citizenship in a democratic society. Her critique of contemporary practice draws upon an extensive review of national surveys carried out between 1977 and 1978, which cumulatively revealed youngsters graduating from schools with little or no instruction in art, and what study they had undertaken was largely confined to studio practice. Set against this picture, she argues for continuous in-school art education provision K–12, with art as core for all pupils and a curriculum that affirms creativity, imagination, and reflective thinking about art. For Chapman, the romantic view of the child as natural artist, adept at “doing” rather than at “thinking” about art has been a root cause of less than rigorous instruction. Thus, she argues for a practice that goes beyond studio experiences and which integrates the study of fine and popular arts of the cultures of Eastern and Western worlds. Learning gained from the study of others, Chapman envisions, both challenges the mind and offers important and useful knowledge to youngsters as their lives stretch beyond schools.

To accompany this more rigorous and comprehensive art education, Chapman foresees teachers who are broadly knowledgeable in the visual arts and more fully insightful about their role as guides to learning. Here she emphasizes art classroom instruction that is, “efficient, powerful, and representative of opportunities and issues in art” (p. 152). As central to instruction, teachers must recognize the experiences that pupils draw upon outside schools and be able to expand upon these experiences linking them to broad views of cultural practices. For Chapman, instruction in visual arts must respect the integrity of the discipline and be a primary responsibility of the school and the art teacher:

Authentic reform does not lie in the direction proposed by various advocates who favor more emphasis on making art as the essence and end of arts education, or incidental instruction to be offered by artists and community agencies, or more use of the arts as tools for improving learning in other subjects, or more condensed and abbreviated instruction in the guise of “related art” or “interdisciplinary” arts courses. It is precisely this catch-as-catch-can orientation which has taught school administrators that the arts are not worthy of inclusion in the curriculum on a par with the sciences and humanities. (p. 25)
Education for Understanding

Echoing many of the concerns of Chapman, about the practices and provisions of art education, in his book *The Unschooled Mind*, Gardner (1991) takes up the theme of what he terms “education for understanding.” Referenced to education in general, including the arts, Gardner looks to research findings that point to the inability of students to master the learning that schools expect of them. In both the arts and sciences youngsters learn skills by rote, which they then cannot apply to new and different contexts. This inflexibility in thought, Gardner argues, derives from instruction that is not rooted in the intuitive or “unschooled” learning that youngsters bring with them to school and which underpins more traditional and disciplinary expertise. Neither is it rooted in instructional practices informed by concepts, knowledge, and skills derived from deep understanding of the various disciplines of schooling. In short, although the mind of the unschooled learner is often naïve, and stereotypical, it nonetheless needs to be regularly and repeatedly recognized as a critical grounding for richer and deeper knowledge.

Gardner also points to school curricula which prize coverage over depth of instruction and fragmentation over wholeness.

Developing and interweaving his central themes, Gardner argues that teaching for understanding in the arts involves creating and responding to symbols through which critical cognitive, reflective, and perceptual capacities are acquired. Youngsters need to work in-depth and over sustained periods of time, focusing on central problems within the discipline, problems derived from deep insight of the capacities exhibited and operations carried out by masters of a domain. Like Chapman, he argues for instruction related to the reality of youngsters lived experiences such that they are enabled to take multiple perspectives on concepts, issues, and ideas and link their growing insights to specialists in the field. Parting company from Chapman, somewhat, he privileges the role of practice as the central specialization of the discipline. He points to the work of Arts PROPEL as exemplifying an educational approach designed to enhance understanding, one that:

> involves the mastery of the productive practices in a domain or discipline, coupled with the capacity to adopt different stances towards the work, among them the stance of audience member, critic, performer, and maker. The “understander” in the arts is one who can comfortably move among these various stances. (p. 239)

The ability to take multiple perspectives, which Gardner envisions as the hallmark of the flexible, adaptive mind and as critical to understanding, needs to be supported by an instruction that offers many and different opportunities for reflective examination. Good instruction, he suggests, should incorporate self assessment, assessment by peers, teachers, and outside experts, and should also include ongoing and extensive portfolio work.

Creativity: A Fundamental Human Capacity

One of the traditional and enduring leitmotifs of art education is that it promotes creativity which is an essential source of meaning in our lives. In his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996) Csíkszentmihalyi summarizes 30 years of research on the lives of creative people from the arts and sciences. To say that a child or adolescent is creative, he argues, is much too simplistic; nor, he suggests, is creativity a commodity that can be taught explicitly. Creativity arises from a synergy, an interaction, produced by deep knowledge of a symbolic domain, personal gifts, dispositions, and insights, and the recognition that is accorded by experts in the field who acknowledge and validate creative efforts. He argues that creativity is a fundamental capacity without which human culture would not have emerged and without which it will not survive.
Among the traits that are important to cultivate through instruction, and which define creative action, are what he calls opposed tendencies of curiosity and perseverance. In the best circumstances, interest and curiosity emerge early in development stimulated by childhood experiences, a supportive emotional environment, exposure to many different opportunities to explore and discover within the symbolic domain, and high expectations.

So the first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of curiosity and interest, that is in the allocation of attention to things for their own sake. On this score, children tend to have the advantage over adults; their curiosity is like a constant beam that highlights and invests with interest anything within range...With age most of us lose the sense of wonder, the feeling of awe in confronting the majesty and variety of the world. Yes, without awe life becomes routine. Creative individuals are childlike in that their curiosity remains fresh even at ninety years of age; they delight in the strange and the unknown. And because there is no end to the unknown, their delight also is endless. (p. 346)

Creativity, a sense of wonder and awe, blossom in an environment that encourages both solitude and gregariousness and in which certain gender role flexibility is permissible. Echoing many of the themes of Gardner, he affirms that children need to be able to work alone, dig deep into a knowledge domain, and reflect on and incubate ideas. Similarly, they need also the challenges of different viewpoints offered through interactions with others. Although youngsters need in-depth knowledge within a domain, they also need opportunities to stand outside and explore ideas from the perspectives and skills of other domains. Opportunities to overflow the limits of a given domain, Csikszentmihalyi argues, is one of the most important instructional benefits that schooling has to offer. Conditions that foster creativity include appropriate in-depth training, high expectations, provision of resources, recognition by mentors, hope along with opportunities to exercise and display creativity, and rewards from experts in the field. Above all, creativity blossoms within what Csikszentmihalyi calls the “flow” experience, when the maker is enabled to dig deep, get lost, and, ultimately, find wonder and intrinsic enjoyment in an activity itself.

Personal and Shared Meaning

In his book The Kinds of Schools We Need (1998), Eisner interweaves a two-pronged view of the field: one directed to the need to redefine much of what passes for art education practice, and the other directed toward the kind of research needed to enlighten practice. Drawing upon earlier writing, he argues that artistic learning contributes to an expanded conception of literacy in that it both develops the ability to construct personal meaning and makes sense out of forms of representation created by others. Along with Gardner, Chapman, and Csikszentmihalyi, he envisions an art education directed toward the fundamental need for students to acquire competencies in the domain through exercising cognitive, affective, and sensory capacities. He sees expectations for arts learning frustrated by a limited view of activities of the mind, a fragmented curriculum, instruction unrelated to the realities of children’s lives, and ignorance of the challenges of contemporary culture.

Eisner envisions many of the travails of contemporary instruction as offering potential challenges to research. However, along with other writers, he points to the small influence of research on art instructional practices and student learning outcomes. Along with Jackson (1990), he argues that life in classrooms is much too complex to be viewed from any single perspective and that research should be tied more closely to what he terms the “ecology of the classroom”. Art education has for too long applied typical social science research paradigms to its problems, accepting results that offer only partial or limited views of practice. Such
singularity and fragmentation of findings are ultimately unable to “take account of the unique particulars with which the practitioner must deal”, thus, these findings are rendered redundant (p. 5). Here, he argues that research on practice should not only take a more ecological view of life in classrooms but also must take a broader view of knowledge, a more cultural view of mind, and a multiple view of intelligence.

For Eisner, practical implications for teaching impinge on art teachers’ abilities to acknowledge the cognitive character of artistic learning; engage pupils in multiple forms of representation involving integrated learning; and use a variety of evaluation methods calibrated to specifics of art learning and not borrowed from other more quantitatively based disciplines. Beyond classroom practice, Eisner argues for “a finer and wider net through which the processes and outcomes of educational practice can be understood and appraised” (p. 108). He finds hope in what he calls naturalistic inquiry, illuminative evaluation, responsive evaluation, and his own educational connoisseurship. He quotes Gage (1978):

Scientific method can contribute relationships between variables taken two at a time and even, in the form of interactions, three or perhaps four or more at time. Beyond say four, the usefulness of what science can give the teacher begins to weaken, because teachers cannot apply, at least not without help and not on the run, the more complex interactions. At this point, the teacher as an artist must step in and make clinical or artistic judgements about the best way to teach. In short, the scientific base for the art of teaching will consist of two-variable relationships and lower-order instruction. The higher-order interactions between four and more variables must be handled by the teacher as artist. (p. 197)

What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do

The desire to specify purposes and practices in education has been a dominant strand of American education for almost an entire century. Much criticized in the art educational literature for prescriptiveness, uniformity, superficiality, and mediocrity, the Standards movement has, nonetheless, made a vast sweep across the nation’s school systems. Thus, in a different voice, but nonetheless-critical to the conversation about highly accomplished practice in the art classroom, is the booklet What Teachers Should Know and Be Able To Do produced in 1988 by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). This document sets forth five standards exemplifying accomplished practice, which remain still as a cornerstone for the expectations of teacher practice in the arts and in all other subject disciplines. As they stand, however, and although presented as “standards” these exhortations to good practice might, perhaps, be more properly read as a set of “criteria” or “guidelines” open to a good deal of individual and contextual interpretation. Indeed, the writers of the document recognized that any enumeration of expectations actually conceals the complexities, uncertainties, and dilemmas inherent in the work teachers do. But, read simply as criteria or guidelines to good practice, what is surprising is the degree to which the writers of the SE Standards highlight many of the deeper concerns of the speculative theorists. For example, the writers suggest that:

• Teachers should be committed to students and their learning as exemplified in practices that demonstrate equitable treatment of learners and recognition of diversity along with a broad array of insights into development and culture.
• Teachers should know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students. Accomplished teachers are expected to have a rich understanding of their disciplinary knowledge, how it relates to other disciplines, and how it is applied to real-world settings. They are, as a consequence, able to develop the critical and analytical capacities of their pupils, create multiple paths to learning, and enable pupils to pose and solve problems.
Teachers should be responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. They are expected to employ a variety of instructional techniques, maintain a disciplined learning environment, set norms for social interaction, and be able to assess the progress of individuals as well as that of whole classes.

- Teachers should think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. They are expected to model those virtues and capacities they seek to inspire in their students. This calls for a range of capacities such as curiosity, tolerance, respect for diversity, and appreciation of cultural difference. In addition, teachers are expected to be able to draw on knowledge of development, subject matter, instruction, and understanding of their students to make principled judgments about sound practice.

- Teachers should be members of learning communities. Here, the Board stresses professional collaboration on instruction, curriculum development, allocation of resources, and an ability to work with parents.

The NBPTS writers did not intimate whether or not resources would be available to schools in order ensure parity in the accomplishments of the Standards; nor did they indicate the kinds of flexibilities of interpretation and applicability they had in mind, or how teachers were to be educated to fulfill the mission of the standards. However, in seeking to encourage new levels of professionalism in practice, the writers acknowledged both the tensions between current realities and emerging ideals and the need to carve out multiple paths to meet new certification standards.

Critical Pedagogy in a Visual Culture

A growing disenchantment with traditional trappings of art education over the past 20 or so years has produced a litany of criticism focused on instruction (Efland, 1995; Eisner, 1998; Neprud, 1995). Writers have noted the limitations of teacher-centered instruction, the preservation of the Western cannon as a model for style and subject matter, use of prescriptive rules for criticism and analysis, exclusion of diverse ways of knowing and experiencing, and fragmentation of the curriculum. In short, art educators have been seen to be out of step with the fast-paced, visual technological world beyond schools, a world that defines the realities of their pupils’ lives. Outside art education, writers such as Bakhtin (1981), Bachelard (1964), Ellsworth (1997), Giroux (1981, 1988), and Greene (1978) have given intellectual sustenance to a growing cadre of adherents within. Two interrelated streams of concern form the substance of their proposals. The first has sought to widen the conception of art to include all instances and artifacts of visual cultures (Duncan, 2001; Freedman, 2000); the second focuses on the nature of encounters with visual cultures and makes recommendations for pedagogy and instruction (Betts, Fisher, & Hicks, 1995; Clark, 1998; Desai, 2000; Efland, 1995; Geahigan, 1998, 2000; Smith-Shank, 1999). The two streams are interactive, each informing the other in terms of theoretical position and practical application.

Adherents of both streams point out that most of us live in an envelope of visual culture including advertisements, graffiti, movies, fine arts, and the myriad productions of digital technology. We indeed live in a visual world designed not so much for creature comfort but to maintain a healthy economy and support systems of power. More than this, perhaps, the visual has become central to the creation, and dissemination of knowledge and to the construction of meaning. Visual artifacts are constitutive of beliefs and values that are historically and politically determined and socially situated and which should not be studied in isolation. Critical pedagogy promotes examination of such beliefs and allows for questioning of interest groups such as government, church, and other vehicles of institutional control. Engagement with instances of visual culture involves opening up vantage points and inviting questions that
go beyond traditional norms. Here, the points of view and experiences of traditionally underrepresented voices from diverse cultures, sexual orientations, and physical capabilities become part of the larger conversation about how the world can be known.

Having layered the potential playing field, upon which no instance of visual culture is privileged in its own right, school based instruction opens up visual inquiry to multiple vantage points and a process of interrogation. In a similar vein, school and classroom hierarchies, once deconstructed, become open to authentic collaboration and collegiality. In order to explore the widest range of possibilities in learning, critical pedagogy offers non-rule-bound, participatory instruction, engaging the co-construction of knowledge among pupils and their teachers through careful listening and open dialog. This way of approaching both personal creative acts and engagement with the works of others calls for a considerable depth of study and sifting through alternative explanations and perspectives. It also involves critical and reflective capacities honed to the many ways in which identity, knowledge, value, and subjectivity are formed as a consequence of living in given political, economic, and aesthetic environments. The role of the teacher, in this instance, is that of a highly knowledgeable member of a community of learners.

Commentary

Taken as an ensemble, the works cited so far represent multiple vantage points on art education practice held by some of the leading writers in the field. Written at different points in recent times, and from different perspectives, the only consistency they hint at is inconsistency. There are some underlying threads, however, that interweave the various viewpoints. All agree, or intimate, that much needs to be improved in the world of art education practice. They see definitions of subject matter to be either too narrowly drawn around practice or too fragmented and broadly inclusive; they see an ignorance of the realities of pupils’ lives both in and outside the classroom and in pedagogical practices that are impervious to change. They argue for the following: instruction that is flexible and that engages multidimensional knowledge of subject matter; insight into multiple ways of learning, difference, and diversity; the acknowledgment of the realities of youngster’s lives and the demands of their cultures; ability to employ a variety of instructional and assessment techniques; and a willingness to transcend disciplinary boundaries and work collaboratively with others. Although opening our eyes to new possibilities for practice, such theories and speculations also come with limitations in that they have boundaries that exclude almost as much as they include. Left unstated by all writers are the specific practices that inform their critiques and those which they would offer for improvement. Just what are the topics so central to the discipline? What are the dimensions of overlap and connectedness to other disciplines? What is the relationship between “subject matter” and “developmental needs?” If we are to replace the fragmented curriculum, what form should an alternative take? Moreover, while there is much talk about “ecology” and “interaction” the precise mechanisms by which the various dimensions of instruction might be energized to produce a more articulate and better informed practice are left largely unstated.

THE EMPIRICAL-INFERENTIAL POSITION

What do teachers do when they teach? This seemingly simple question, as we have seen already, masks a complex of contradictory answers. Moving closer into the art classroom, responses come from a variety of sources: from surveys and demographic data of instructional practices and their outcomes, from empirical studies of specific features of arts learning, from research into the transfer of arts learning to other subjects, and from descriptions of specific programs that seek to promote certain types of instructional strategies. All such research-based efforts
give rise to important inferences about practice even when, as we will see, they do not address specifically the instructional backgrounds of their subjects. Together, the data from these kinds of studies take us closer into actualities of art teachers’ work.

The kind of research included here employs a social science paradigm and has mostly, but not exclusively, relied on scientific or quantitative methods. Often carried out by university art education faculties, these surveys and studies tend to focus on factor analysis of single, or several variables, chosen as pivotal to instruction. The populations of young people under study are depicted usually as representative of the population at large; thus, findings are amenable to generalization. Such studies are revealing and often claim correlations among variables or, more cautiously, hint at the presence of significant relationships among variables. Within this type of research, investigators tend to stand outside and distance themselves from the phenomena under study in order to minimize the contamination of personal subjectivity.

Surveys

Since 1969, The National Center for Educational Statistics has been engaged in continuous assessment of student achievement. Assessment of visual arts in American schools began with the 1977 National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) and was taken up again 2 decades later in 1997. By far the most extensive survey of youngsters’ accomplishments in the arts to have been carried out for 20 years, NAPE examined the artistic abilities of a nationally representative random sample of almost 3,000 eighth graders. Exactly one half of the sample reported that they had taken, or were taking, art in school during the current year. The tasks that youngsters were asked to undertake included those designed to assess knowledge and skills in creating and responding to selected artworks. In the creating block, youngsters were asked to make a self-portrait, a collage, a design, and a three-dimensional piece, after viewing selected works of master artists. A factor analysis of items included in the exercises revealed that there was no significant difference in the accomplishments of youngsters who were currently studying art and those who were not. Although the writers of the final report suggested that instruction had a negligible effect on the overall outcomes, nonetheless pupils with higher response scales were more likely to have studied art. On the creating segment of the test, only 6% of pupils received scores that the judges thought to be effective or adequate. Eighty-three percent of the work produced in the creating segment was scored as uneven or minimally adequate. Eleven percent of the pupils, thus, created work that was found to be unacceptable. Overall, a total of 94% of pupils failed to demonstrate even moderate creative abilities, although almost 50% of them reported being enrolled in art classes (Persky, Sandene, & Askew, 1998).

Similar results were evident in the responding segment, which focused on skills of analysis, description, and interpretation. For instance, only 29% of students could describe three ways in which Raphael created a sense of near and far in a Madonna and Child painting, and only 14% of youngsters could explain how Beardon created contrast between interior and exterior space in a collage. In addition, only 4% of students could write an acceptable essay linking explicit aesthetic features of artworks to interpretive meaning. The NAEP data revealed that experience in writing, accompanied by opportunities to work in three-dimensional media, positively impacted responding scores (Persky, Sandene, & Askew, 1998).

Other results from the NAPE survey indicated that portfolio activity, opportunities to exhibit art work, and out of school art activity were positively related to performance scores; that there was some measure of overlap in the creating and responding scores; and that museum visits, opportunities to talk to peers, and specialist art facilities impacted positively all results. In a secondary analysis of the original NAPE findings, Sabol (2001) found considerable regional variation in both creating and responding scores and also suggested that the data revealed combinations of variables such as portfolio activity, extracurricular art activity, and museum
visiting which contributed either positively or negatively to the scores (Persky, Sandene & Askew, 1998).

There has been much criticism of the NAPE and other such standardized tests (Burton, 2001; Eisner, 1998; Greene, 1994; Sabol, 2001; Siegesmund, Dikert, & McCulloch, 2001). Concern has focused on the limited population studied, appropriateness of items to curriculum goals, narrowness and fragmentation of the scoring rubrics, and emphasis on following rules. Interestingly, the instructional implications of the NAPE results are highlighted in another survey focused explicitly on the art classroom practices of secondary teachers. Burton (2001a) investigated the quality and quantity of instruction in secondary public and private schools. He surveyed 177 teachers on their favorite teaching and classroom motivational strategies. In general, the survey showed that teachers focused on studio practice and favored working one on one with pupils, teaching mostly through step-by-step demonstration, showing examples, and lecturing. Most teachers favored working with a variety of media, developing technical skills, and learning how to apply the elements of art. In closing their lessons, and in their evaluation practices, teachers tended to be highly subjective, offering praise and showing pleasure in accomplishments based on direct observation of work, attitude, and general performance. According to their own reports, the teachers gave less focus to discussion, open ended questioning, reflection on practice, collaboration, field trips, learning about art history and criticism, and using technology. In contrast to suggestions made by other respondents to the NAEP data, learning and assessment derived through the use of art exhibitions and portfolio work were not priorities for the teachers included in Burton’s survey.

Much of Burton’s survey data confirm an earlier study that looked at instructional practices in Canadian high schools (Gray & Macgregor, 1991). This study also found a strong tendency toward studio instruction, step-by-step teaching, with a focus on elements, technical details, one-to-one advising, monitoring, and critiquing. In another study on teacher profile and preference, carried out 10 years later, Brewer (1999) found that out of 141 art teachers he surveyed, 67% had no master’s degree. Asked if they would like to engage in further study, there was strong interest in taking studio courses and only moderate to low interest in taking courses in art education, art history, and criticism.

Formal Instruction

Because studio-based instruction appears to dominate the field of art education, what kinds of instruction are engaged in and to what ends? A wide range of research has spotlighted studio practice, mostly focusing on problems and possibilities inherent in handling various media. Investigators have examined capacities in drawing (Brewer, 1998; Burton, 1983; Hafeli, 2000; Tuman, 1999; Smith & the Drawing Study Group, 1998; Willatts, 1992), in painting (Amorino, 1999; Louis, 2000; Stokrocki, 1990), in ceramics (Brewer & Colbert, 1992; Graziano, 1999), and in working collaboratively with museums and artists (Anderson, 1997; Bresler, DeStefano, Feldman, & Garg 2000; Moore, 2002; Remer, 1996; Williams, 1996). Although investigators have also examined an array of studio topics, such as representation of space, memory and observation drawing, manipulation of elements, inclusion of features, and the impact of gender on style, comparatively little research has focused on the direct effects of instruction on studio abilities.

For instance, in a study carried out in 1999, Brewer examined the thematic and observational drawings made by 167 third graders and seventh graders, equally divided among those who had and had not received art instruction. In an echo of the NAEP findings, the presence or absence of art instruction was not clearly etched in the results. However, where art instruction impacted most strongly was in relation to gender and grade level. There was a diminishing trend in drawing achievement among the girls in the study on both drawing tasks. Brewer notes
the startling fact that in one of the research settings it was necessary to explain to a group of third graders that an observation drawing meant to “look, see and draw.”

The results of this study capture a general data trend that not only points to differential abilities between boys and girls in drawing tests but also suggests a general decline in drawing abilities with age. This reflects the oft-quoted U turn in artistic abilities, whereby most youngsters’ capacities for drawing decline at the end of elementary school, leaving those with special gifts and talents to follow a stream of ongoing development (Gardner & Winner, 1982). When seen in the context of prevailing instructional practices, however, such results appear to echo teaching that focuses on technical skills, manipulation of formal elements, and a model of art embedded in the style of Western realism. Put simply, this model outcome is thought to require more of youngsters than the natural talents of childhood are able to sustain. Moreover, looked at from the perspective of an instruction based in another set of assumptions about development, artistry, and style, the outcomes can be perceived quite differently (Burton, 1998). For example, if adolescent drawings are examined for the questions and curiosities they pose, and the graphic possibilities they explore, this offers a very different picture of intentions and skills than do drawings calibrated to the canons of a post-Renaissance Western model. Studies by Amorino (1999), Burton (2000), Hafeli (2000), and Salander (2001) suggest that during the adolescence years a split emerges between youngsters’ ideas about subject matter and their ideas about materials causing a temporary imbalance and tension. However, these researchers argue that this dislocation is a necessary and normative feature of ongoing artistic development and should not be interpreted as artistic decline. Similarly, the oft-noted decline in girls’ studio abilities might also be attributed to instruction focused on the manipulation of fragmented elements and technical skills directed toward Western styles of realism. As compared with boys of the same age, girls whose thinking is perhaps more relational, holistic, and whose subjectivity informs conceptual insights, may find such instruction inhospitable to their personal needs and goals (Tuman, 1999).

The notion that research data can be alternatively represented, and changed assumptions about learning in art can cast outcomes and accomplishments in a new and richer light, is reflected in another study by Siegesmund, Dikert, and McCulloch (2001). These researchers re-administered the collage-creating and responding block used in the NAPE 1997 survey, but they re-designed the assessment in relation to the instructional goals of art teachers of the pupils to be tested. They developed the scoring rubrics of responding (addressing the problem posed), attending (shaping and identifying emotional responses to visual relationships), exploring (identify perceptual details), and relating (construct meaning). They also thought to give youngsters smaller paper to work on and more time to complete their work. In an interesting yet telling sidelight, the authors mention that the rubrics for the study developed by the teachers did not regularly appear on the curriculum frameworks for the art instruction they were expected to follow which placed heavy emphasis on skill acquisition and mastery of content. In other words, they noted a gap between the formal curriculum documents and the learning objectives that framed teachers’ individual instruction. In brief, the data from this study, like the NAEP test, indicated only modest artistic achievement; however, they did offer a richer picture of the several capacities involved in creating and responding whether scores were high or more modest. In this study, exploring, attending, and relating emerged as dimensions of an ability to recognize and manipulate combinations of visual relationships in the construction of meaning in art.

Transfer Practices

Yet another perspective on instructional practice originates from studies that have examined evidence for transfer from art learning to other subject disciplines (Caterall, 1998; Erikson,
1997; Fisk, 1999; Perkins, 1989). Although the issue of transfer is, at best, problematic both as a research question and as a desirable outcome of arts instruction, results from such studies nonetheless offer important insights for teachers. If teachers think they are teaching for transfer, there is some evidence to suggest that they focus their teaching rather differently than if they believe they are teaching uniquely for artistic improvement. The outcome of teaching for transfer is usually measured in terms of its impact on other subject disciplines. Here, evidence for instruction resulting in higher order thinking, affective insight, increased perception, and enhanced creativity is usually sought. Teachers who teach for artistic outcomes alone, however, tend to focus more on manipulation of elements, techniques, and abilities to be discerning in judgments about artistic form and its quality and meaning.

In a complex investigation designed to estimate the impact of an arts infusion program on creative thinking, academic achievement, locus of control, and arts appreciation, Luftig (2000) studied 615 youngsters in grades 2, 4, and 5. Youngsters in a control group were engaged with the activities of Project SPECTRA, which offered experiences in making art, observing art and creative processes, critiquing art, learning art in historical and cultural contexts, learning about artistic materials, and integrating the arts into other subject disciplines such as science, math, and reading. Luftig’s data suggested that creative thinking and originality, as measured by the Torrence Test of Creativity, were facilitated by involvement in the arts, as was resistance to premature closure among second-grade and fifth-grade grade pupils. There were moderate effects of arts learning reported on reading scores and, intriguingly, boys from the control group performed significantly better on mathematical tasks than did girls.

In perhaps the most complex study to date, Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles (2000) sought to determine whether cognitive skills such as higher order thinking had an effect on learning and thinking in general as well as on other subject disciplines. They speculated at the outset of their study that certain capacities, or ways of thinking, might be situated within the arts whereas others may have more general, across-discipline salience. They began their study by compiling a taxonomy of potential instructional outcomes in the arts derived from a careful but wide-ranging review of the art education literature. Included in this listing were focused perception and inquiry, reflective questioning, construction and layering of relationships, organization and appraisal of meaning, insight into alternative perceptions, imagining new possibilities, and multisensory learning. They administered a battery of tests, including the Torrence Test of Creativity, to 2,400 pupils from grades 4, 5, 7, and 8, from 12 schools. They also collected observational data and narratives and examples relating to the impact of arts learning from non-arts-subject-matter teachers.

In essence, the data from this study offered a picture of thinking in the arts, wherein a set of cognitive competencies including elaboration, creative thinking, fluency, originality, focused perception, and imagination grouped to form constellations in pedagogical contexts that demanded an ability to take multiple perspectives, layer relationships, and construct and express meanings in unified forms of representation. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the most positive scores in the data were associated with youngsters who had received art instruction for considerable periods of their schooling. Intriguingly, the study also revealed that the lowest test scores were associated with art curricula that were formalized and centralized. In general, the study did not offer clear evidence of transfer, or point to specific effects of transfer on other disciplines, although the data did suggest that the same constellation of competencies emerged in other subject disciplines when they called for the juggling of divergent perspective and layering of relationships. The writers of the report speculated that the relationship between learning in the arts and learning in other subject disciplines is interactive and involves ways of thinking that have general salience across the curriculum.

Common sense continues to tell the expert practitioner that engagement in the arts has an impact on youngster’s motivation for school: how they develop and manipulate imagery; how
they perceive and think about their worlds; how they access personal and shared meaning; how they work with others; and how they think in ways not encouraged in other subjects. Overall, the arts make possible the organization of sensory responses as these are marshaled in service of cognitive and expressive outcomes. There is very little good evidence that teaching art for instrumental outcomes that benefit other disciplines has any positive or lasting effect and may, in the long run, redound against the kind of rich and unique instruction needed to promote outcomes special to the discipline itself (Winner & Hetland, 2001).

**Thematic Projects**

In addition to surveys and studies of instructional practices calibrated to teaching given styles or concepts of art, the past 20 or so years have seen the emergence of a number of instructional programs linked to specific philosophical, curricular positions and practices and conceptions of artistry and arts learning. Looked at carefully, some of these programs such as the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) and Reading Instruction Through the Arts (RITA) are designed to impact learning in other disciplines; whereas other programs such as the Central Midwestern Regional Education Laboratory (CEMERAL), Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), the Lincoln Center Institute (LCI), and Arts PROPEL are designed to overcome curricular fragmentation and enhance integration within the discipline.

Taking its credo from the work of Barkan (1955, 1962), Chapman (1982), Smith (1987), and Eisner (n.d.), and from the results of various empirical studies and surveys, DBAE, like its forerunner CEMERAL, was a response to growing sentiment in the field that studio practice was demonstrably a limiting focus for arts learning, particularly at the secondary level. The push for a more academic base for art education during the early 1980s, following the dismal results of the 1977 NAPE, was associated with needs to broaden instruction to include experiences in art history, art criticism, and aesthetics, which were seen to enlarge the scope of human awareness and be valuable not only to those students gifted in the practice of art but also essential to those who would be future audience members. There was, thus, a rejection of the centrality of “child art” and of the practices that promoted creativity and self-expression in favor of basing instruction on representative ideas drawn from the disciplines of art: art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art production (Day, Eisner, Stake, Wilson, & Wilson, 1984). In order to create DBAE classrooms, both specialists and classroom teachers were offered inservice training in instruction in all four modes of the discipline. The practice of DBAE grew rapidly at all levels of schooling and became popular, because it served to support the more academic claims of art education at a time when the push for excellence in all forms of schooling was strong. In its initial form, DBAE required instruction in all four “disciplines.” However, as it evolved, a less formal and fragmented set of practices emerged in which there was more interaction and integration among instruction across the four disciplines.

Not surprisingly, in a profession strongly committed to the centrality of instruction in studio practice, DBAE was regarded as a dissipation of the discipline. Many arts educators claimed that their instructional practices already engaged historical, critical, and aesthetic concerns, but were more holistically interwoven as they arose as natural concerns of practice. Other critics saw DBAE as promoting an essentially passive and conservative instructional response and an art education based in the Western cannon, offering little room for individual creativity and expression on the part of both teacher and pupil. Yet others saw the fragmentation of art education into four disciplines as an unwarranted watering down of instruction to meet the conveniences of the academic timetable (Burton, Lederman, & London, 1988; Clark, 1998, Collins & Sandell, 1988). Although not unmindful of some of the problems associated with instruction in DBAE classrooms, particularly in the hands of inexperienced teachers, thoughtful proponents such as Chalmers (1981), Hamblen (1987), McFee (1988), and Smith (1987) note...
that DBAE not only offers critical avenues to learning but also can be extended to encompass multicultural and global concerns in art education.

Arts PROPEL, like DBAE, constituted an effort to go beyond the exclusivity of practice and offer pupils formal and conceptual knowledge about the arts (Gardner, 1990). The project, as it developed in some of Pittsburgh’s public middle schools and high schools, sought to create rich learning environments where students could “easily and naturally oscillate among different forms of artistic knowing” (p. 44). Originally designed to assess the growth of artistic intelligence, it became clear that students needed opportunities to work intensively with materials and ideas, if such assessments were to be well founded. Instruction included a focus on production or the making of works of art; perception including the discrimination of important features; and reflection on the meaning imbedded in artistic works, both those made by students themselves and those made by others; these three components were considered central to all arts education. As a means of melding the instructional components, PROPEL offered domain projects, or explorations of concepts and practices deemed central to a variety of art forms; the process portfolios, or collections of ideas, initial drafts, works in progress; written responses to and critiques of work of others. The process portfolio also constituted a forum for conversation and the assessments of benchmarks in learning. The fundamental belief of PROPEL is that historical, critical, and aesthetic considerations should arise as a natural response in pupils’ own artistic work. Although PROPEL underscores the work of many excellent art teachers, Gardner nonetheless throws down a gauntlet for all teachers to rethink instruction along more rigorous and demanding lines:

This approach seeks to build on what we know about the different streams of learning. . . . there is much evidence that on their own students do not connect material learned one way—say, as a craft skill—with that learned in a notational system or in a formal body of knowledge. There is every reason to expect that the same dissonance will occur in the arts. By explicitly fusing these activities together as much as possible, we hope to reconfigure artistic learning into a model of how forms of knowledge ought to be synthesized across the curriculum. (p. 45)

Arts PROPEL has not been subjected to the kinds of critical reviews directed toward DBAE. Perhaps because PROPEL has never attained the wide sweep across the nation achieved by DBAE, its measure and depth have not been extensively tested in a range of different settings. Like DBAE, however, the success of Arts PROPEL has relied on teachers being able to deliver the appropriate instructional content in ways that nurture and support pupil learning. Arts PROPEL with its focus on idea development, and the synthesis of broad-based knowledge in art practice can, perhaps, be seen to lean more heavily toward the specialist-artistic needs of secondary pupils. DBAE, on the other hand, with its clear focus within the art disciplines, and its stress on sequenced instruction, can be seen to appeal more generally to practitioners of K–12 education.

Commentary

There is widespread agreement among art educators on the importance of specifying levels of achievement and content standards if only to meet the demands of concerned schools and policymakers. The strength of studies and surveys that offer empirical evidence, or clear and demonstrable outcomes in arts learning, have intuitive appeal in a time of escalating demands for accountability. Although helpful, however, one needs to exercise caution over making causal links from research findings to instruction, however appealing. Most studies leave out of their introductory materials, detailed information about instructional practices, goals and objectives that underpin their findings; they also omit discussion of the kinds of developmental
abilities and experiences that contextualize their subjects lives. In most cases, however, these omissions do not prevent writers of studies from offering implications for practice or drawing conclusions about artistic development at the conclusion of their papers. Classrooms are complex places, and even many well-conducted experiments have little of what Eisner calls ecological validity. When claims of generalizability accompany outcomes, they have intuitive appeal as models for practice; yet, read in isolation from their instructional context, they may be seen as arbitrary to the values, interests, and aspirations of diverse groups of learners and practitioners.

What we can learn from such studies and surveys, however, is the degree to which they reveal practices that are a long way from the aspirations of the more speculative theorists in the field. The NAEP results together with other formal empirical studies lend credence to the small effects of art instruction on children’s lives. They suggest fragmentation within conceptions of subject matter and also within art classroom practice. Whether this is actually an artifact of the norm-referenced methodology used in many surveys and studies, or looking in the wrong places, or is an actual reflection of much instructional practice, must wait for further research. Clearly, research methodology borrowed from other traditions such as the social sciences may well parse out the very practices and outcomes that hold centrality in the discipline. Studies that have looked for transfer have begun to grapple with what it means to do this kind of research in complex art classroom settings. Similarly, thematic projects offer insights into fundamental purposes and rationales against which practices can be viewed.

THE DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY POSITION

An even closer look at life in art classrooms comes from the relatively few studies that have sought to capture the messy, often unpredictable and idiosyncratic practices of individual teachers. These studies have attempted to look non judgmentally at classroom practices and, unlike more quantitative studies, have not tied their observations to outcome measures (May, 1993). Like other research activities, this more “grounded” route to knowledge and insight is not new, and we have in our literature some telling accounts of teachers’ lives and practices, some constructed by participant observers (Amorino, 1999; Anderson; 2000; Beittel, Matill, Burgart, Hincaid & Steward, 1961; Degee, 1975; Duckworth, 1996, 2001; Duckworth & the Experienced Teachers Group, 1997; Jackson, 1990; McFee, 1968, Swann, 1986), and some by teachers themselves (Marshall, 1970; Richardson, 1946; Robertson, 1963). The insights afforded by such narrative accounts of classroom practices, composed from the perceptions and experiences of the various players, are vivid, truthful and, sometimes, uncomfortable especially when things go astray. Those who undertake such classroom-based, case study inquiry, are often self-identified practitioners interested in describing practice with the clear purpose of increasing understanding, rather than producing generalizations about practices and outcomes. These researchers adopt a close-up view of classroom life by attempting to capture language, gesture, movement, and verbal exchanges, as teachers interweave insights about pupils, subject matter, pedagogy, and engage in the negotiations and counter-negotiations that, of necessity, take place in teaching and learning encounters.

Getting Closer

In 1996, the National Art Education Association Commission on Research invited a series of briefing papers on critical issues in the field. In response to the briefing papers, the Commission established 8 task force groups and charged them to carry out research within their interests. The Task Force on Student Learning (TFoSL), comprised 20 professional practitioners from
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schools and colleges on the east coast of the United States, chaired by Judith M. Burton of Teachers College Columbia University. The TFoSL chose to examine student learning in the context of classroom practice. Taking cues from Bruner (1986, 1996), Coles, (1989), Jackson (1990), and Witherell and Noddings (1991) about looking at classrooms holistically and about the critical insights to be gained from narrative accounts, the TFoSL collected data by way of classroom videos, observational notes, formal interviews, and from more freewheeling conversations with teachers and pupils. In order to understand more clearly why teachers engaged in particular kinds of practices, they were invited to view a video of their classroom activities and reflect on the underpinnings of their thoughts and actions. A range of art activities was included in the study from elementary painting to middle school ceramics and drawing to museum visits. The research took place in schools and museums within the home sites of individual researchers. The populations studied included both public school and private school and special-needs pupils.

In general, the research group’s early discussions were fairly freewheeling and ran to 5 or 6 hours with breaks. Videos were stopped and back-tracked, members made written descriptions and kept notes on the conversation as attention moved from the video presentation to the discussion and dissection of what had been seen. Initially, group members focused their attention on teacher pupil interactions attempting to identify how teachers were “reading” pupils’ art-works and responding to their classroom behavior. The researchers also noted how the teachers used their insights as a basis for reviewing or re-directing instruction. As the research proceeded, it became clear that there were three salient themes emerging from the data. Looked at closely, these themes took the form of characteristic input variables that involved contextual setting, teacher responses, and pupil responses, each of which conditioned classroom interactions. Moreover, although the group found that characteristics appeared to nestle one within the other, each was distinguished by an array of output indicators that captured more directly how the teachers thought about content, learning, and pupil development.

The first characteristic to command attention was that of the contextual setting established by the art teachers’ orientations to one or other or a combination of views about art education. In turn this orientation appeared to shape the manner in which pupils were invited to enter the learning process. The practices identified by the study group included activities such as focus on materials and making, focus on art concepts and making, focus on looking at artworks, focus on art techniques, focus on the experiential life of pupils, and focus on modeling or demonstrating ideas for pupils to exemplify.

As the research team looked closer, they found that some teachers adopted different motivating or motivational strategies from lesson to lesson, often combining strategies in one lesson, whereas others adopted a consistent strategy across all their teaching. However, the strategy or strategies chosen to invite pupils into the lesson then appeared to determine clusters of indicators such as classroom interactions and language use between teachers and pupils and among pupils; student engagement in reflection, attitudes toward enquiry, and willingness to move into the unexplored and unknown. For example, the team found that:

...in practice, a teacher might invite a class to begin considering work in a particular material, moving their attention gradually towards consideration of specific artistic conventions, and encouraging a willingness to move into the unknown. (Burton, 2002)

The second characteristic identified by the TFoSL involved the responses of the teacher, and these nested within the framework of the contextual setting established at the outset of the lesson. Thus, moving into their chosen instructional strategy, teachers played out the drama of learning through the responses they made to youngsters as they worked. The indicators here were grouped under the following headings: encouraging exploration, posing reflective
questions, promoting inquiry, inviting imagination, repeating pupil statements as confirming, eliciting ideas, making meaning out of complexity, giving directions, listing things, telling about process and expected outcomes, and negotiating conflicting perceptions and desires. For example, the team observed that:

...the verbal responses of the teacher who began her lesson by inviting pupils to work with a particular material and who moved them toward exploration of the unknown, circles around her class promoting inquiry, reflection, and making sense out of complexity. (Burton, 2002)

The third characteristic to emerge from the study involved initiating actions of pupils themselves. This initiating behavior involved both verbal and physical actions such as signaling the need for help or advice, interacting with each other on behalf of learning needs, and adopting various strategies to accomplish their ends. The amount of pupil interaction during the lesson and type of discourse used in this interaction appeared to be shaped by the way the teacher modeled such activities throughout the lesson. For example, if the teacher used the phrase “tell me about your work” as part of her repertoire of responses, pupils were likely to pick this up and apply it when making inquiries about the work of a peer. In addition, the TFoSL noted especially that the younger children in the study engaged in parallel discourse whereas, as they got older, youngsters’ conversations were increasingly interactive, mingling art and social talk. Often young children would tell stories or dialog at length with each other over work considerations, or would work on each others’ paintings or clay pieces as helping strategies. Younger children engaged in more direct and physically active initiating behaviors while older youngsters initiated an array of different types of verbal invitations and requests or, in contrast, displayed avoiding behaviors. For example:

...in the lesson referred to above in which pupils were exploring new ideas about materials and artistic conventions a great deal of the classroom discourse among pupils revolved around looking at each other’s works, sharing ideas and discussing possibilities. (Burton, 2002)

This kind of close analysis of classroom practice helps identify critical dimensions and features of practice and suggests some ways in which they cluster as teachers carry out their art instruction. Other researchers are now taking even closer looks at the clustering effects of teacher actions and responses, examining topics such as the nature of exemplary practice (Alexander, 1980; Anderson, 2000; Carpet, 1986; Stokrocki, 1986; Zimmerman, 1991, 1992), discourse analysis (Krug & Cohen-Evron, 2000; Smith-Shank, 1999), the impact of different ways of thinking about subject matter (Amorino, 1999; Hubbard, 2001), students critiquing one another’s work (Barratt, 1996), and students making judgments about their work (Hafeli, 2000; Wolf, 1988).

Two examples of close-up, rich, descriptive case study research reveal much that is important about art classroom practice. For example, Hafeli (2000) points out that pupils form their own personal perceptions on the work they do, and these can differ significantly from those of their teachers. In a study carried out in 1998, Hafeli sought to uncover the different avenues of approach adopted by pupils and their teachers as they attempted to make a fit between judgments about artworks. Taking a close-up view of the instructional practices of two middle school teachers she found that acts of resistance and negotiation characterized pupils’ responses. Although sometimes pupils acquiesced to suggestions by their teachers, often situations arose in which pupils perceived contradictions between the teacher’s expectations and their abilities to achieve them, which resulted in a clash of aesthetic preferences. Similarly, Siegesmund (1999) sought to capture the complexity of pedagogical practice in a classroom where cognitive curriculum was employed and cognitive outcomes were desired, both pursued
through a concern with aesthetic knowing. Through a close examination of one pupil teacher interaction around a drawing newly transferred to a canvas, Siegesmund notes the strategies by which the teacher assists the youngster to think through his task. The teacher helps the young man to stand back, to take a more distanced view in order to break through his preconceptions; he also models and gives permission for the youngster to exercise a range of sensory responses. More importantly, perhaps, he honors the youngster’s own responses even when they conflict with his own and, in so doing, he makes a connection with the young man through a shared concern for the work.

Commentary

These more “close up” views into classrooms represent yet other vantage points on the practices of teaching. Here, we encounter the teacher as the mediating variable in classroom life and in pupil learning. Taken as a whole, these studies show how art teachers assume responsibility for making sense out of an incredible array of information, combining and juggling thoughts about pupils and their diverse needs, fluctuating attitudes, and varied purposes. We encounter teachers making judgments and remaking them in the context of the fast pace of art-classroom life and different perceptions about artistic accomplishments. Outcome variables, of the kind encountered in the more quantitative studies, here assume a kind of partial relevance as they take their place in a larger and more complex pattern of actions.

Notwithstanding the pitfalls of this kind of research—not least of which are those dealing with vast amounts of data in different forms, calibrating research schedules to classroom timetables, and the inevitable interjection of subjectivity—it still get us closer to the nub of instruction. Seen as an outgrowth of classroom practice itself, such research studies can play a critical role in teachers’ professional growth. Opportunities to reflect on their own practices may be, in fact, more congenial to teachers as an impetus to professional development than the imposition of standards or exhortations of reformist art supervisors. Making transparent how teachers translate their knowledge of subject matter into forms of practice that do or do not support youngsters’ learning might be the subject of future conversations about conceptions of subject matter itself. Whether such studies are made by participant observers, or are action based and teacher led, they nonetheless promise much to our insights about, and possible improvement of, practice.

Looking Forward

Most of us would like to believe that research is useful to those engaged in the practice of art education. As Eisner (1998) points out, though, change in practice emanating from new views of subject matter, learner, and instruction more often precedes rather than follows the findings of research. It may well be that lists and litanies of strategies for excellence in instruction have little to say to experienced practitioners and may be problematic when imposed upon the inexperienced. As Schon (1984) points out, the experienced teacher develops elaborate schemas of instruction and insights into classroom events, and this occurs as knowledge about teaching is constructed and reconstructed, as ideas once held as true are reconsidered and reformed over time. Teachers develop repertoires of theories, practices, knowledge and values that influence how situations are defined, what is noted, and what kinds of questions are important to ask and what decisions are critical to make. The bulk, and best kind of teacher learning, comes from the everyday decisions teachers are forced to make in the real contexts of their teaching lives.

What we perhaps learn from studies that reflect on the practices of art teachers is that there are many vantage points and little consensus. Few studies have been replicated, and almost none of them are longitudinal, so that we have brief but vivid glimpses into art classroom
lives but little consistent and dependable data. There remains considerable dispute about the subject matter teachers are expected to teach; whether subject matter is derived from studio practice or from the constitutive disciplines; whether it is confined to the traditions of fine art or extended to embrace a more all-encompassing visual culture; whether it derives from the formal study of elements or from the life experiences of young people; or whether it is an intermingling of all vantage points, and, if so, what are the interconnecting threads? Very few studies that look at practice, either explicitly or implicitly, begin by staking out the developmental abilities and needs of the youngsters who are their subjects; nor do they set their subjects in the context of the classroom or their out-of-school lives. Instruction, thus, emerges as a set of activities involving the arts that are applied to young people, rather than engaging them at their own level and on their own terms. Notwithstanding contemporary calls for dialog, discourse, and constructivist learning, pupils still appear to be instructed on a one-to-one basis, through lectures and demonstration. Despite a premium given to creativity and imagination, youngsters are still expected to accomplish predetermined or standardized ends often modeled by the teacher or outside arts agencies. In spite of the call for diversity and respect for difference, there appears to be little tolerance for the truly divergent and different in the art classrooms of most American schools.

Although it is important that we research art-classrooms as complex ecological settings and envision teachers standing at the confluence of multiple dimensions of thoughts, insights, actions, and outcomes, it is nonetheless important to take a closer look at some of the fundamental dimensions from which practice is fashioned and put in place, and the supports that are needed to ensure professional excellence.

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