

Dr. Christine Davis, Editor

## UNDERSTANDING AND SUSTAINING CHANGE IN ART EDUCATION\*

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### Introduction

Family legend has it that over 75 years ago in the rural South as my great, great, great aunt Helen Victoria (named for the queen) lay on her deathbed, the minister began to inquire about the readiness of her soul for the afterlife. When queried, my aunt stopped all conversation by replying to him "Get away from here. I am as good as I am going to get." Too often we find ourselves lying on the deathbed of a failed reform effort and pass it off in much the same manner. We fail to understand the change process. We fail to realize the sheer human effort required for success in educational reform. We fail to understand that those affective aspects of change are critical to the success of reform in art education.

### The Need for Reform

When the *South Carolina Basic Art Skills Poster* (South Carolina Department of Education, 1985) and *Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools* (Getty Center for Education through the Arts, 1985) were released, I felt that my day as a real educator had finally arrived. As a second-year teacher, my enthusiasm for a methodology that I thought would make my subject area a viable part of the school curriculum overcame my inexperience and naïveté about reform movements in education. As Barkan (1955, 1962), Eisner (1972, 1979, 1988) and others noted, art education needed a structure to become an academic discipline. Poor teaching methods, dependency on the expressive factors, and lack of sequencing and assessment techniques had hampered the establishment of art as part of the curriculum (Eisner, 1988). I felt that limitation as an art teacher and wanted to contribute to a better instructional model. Over the next fifteen years, I planned and plotted with others of like mind to improve the status of art education in my school, district, and state. In retrospect, I found myself in the middle of a reform effort that, though steeped in vision at the outset, lost meaning as the implementation process evolved. Many of the same types of problems cited by Eisner in 1988 exist today. For reform efforts to succeed, art educators have to be aware of what needs to change, how to make the change, how to sustain the change, and how the change will affect us as participants in the process. Otherwise, without an understanding of the change process and how to make it work for us, we will be adopting Aunt Helen's philosophy and be only "as good as we are going to get."

### Reforms We Need and How to Embrace Them

My recent observations as a change agent, participant, and researcher in a small rural Southern school district in South Carolina have confirmed the need for improvements in the areas of instruction, professional development, assessment, and teacher support (Gunter, 2000). For discipline-based art education (DBAE) and all its many modified forms, including the *National Visual Arts Standards*, (National Art Education Association, 1994), to work, teachers must be trained in all aspects of aesthetics, art production, art history, and art criticism. Teacher education programs, teacher institutes, and recertification programs need to be designed to address teacher inadequacies in the components of state and local frameworks for art curriculum.

Although South Carolina pioneered efforts in art teacher institutes, more art specialists need to be involved in continuous professional development for quality instruction to become systemic. Concerns about curriculum content, instruction, and assessment can be all addressed through appropriate professional development. However, training in the theory may not necessarily mean training in the practice, particularly for new teachers.

As the first state to mandate elementary art instruction in 1977, South Carolina phased in art education opportunities at all grade levels by 1984. Teachers completing their art education degrees today have not known of a time without art in the schools. Those entering the profession are not versed in the historical efforts of state and local reformers for art education. Young teachers need to develop a sense of the historical and become aware of the hard-fought battle to place art in the schools. Art teacher induction through professional development and strong mentoring programs is needed for our changes to become institutionalized and to empower young teachers to create meaning as art educators and make the reform effort his or her own.

Student, teacher, and program assessment is critical to the next phase of art education reform. These efforts are perhaps the most controversial and most difficult to embrace. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) arts test report released by the National Center for Educational Statistics in 1999 raised many concerns about the structure, use, and value of arts testing. However, according to Day (1998), NAEP has provided a framework for art assessment and a system to assess art on a large scale, promote art as an integral part of the curriculum, promote national standards for art education, and advocate for the need for art instruction. Fullan and Miles (1992) note that so often change fails because of faulty maps. Art educators need to embrace assessment for our students, ourselves as practitioners, and our programs to determine our strengths and weaknesses in order to provide an *un-faulty* map of change for the real art educational landscape or the real problems at hand.

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It is the area of teacher support where I have noted the most need for reform or attention in art education. The structures for art teacher support are key to curriculum development, instructional improvement, teacher induction, teacher empowerment and retention, and sustaining the change effort. Teacher support encompasses a range of physical and emotional structures that include guided and self-directed professional development, advocacy, consultants, adequate funding for programs, and grants to fund curricular innovations. One possible solution to these problems can involve the use of art coordinators in the reform efforts at the local and regional level, to bring about and help sustain change. With decentralization, downsizing, and retirement, art coordinator positions have been disappearing in South Carolina at a time they are most needed in terms of helping sustain reform. The disappearance of the position of art coordinator in the rural district I studied brought about increased isolation, increased stress over workloads, and a general sense of despair to all art teachers in the study. An art coordinator can provide help in forming partnerships with arts organizations and community businesses and agencies to promote art education and provide professional development opportunities.

### How Change Can Affect Us

As art educators active in the reform movement, we marveled at the potential for success for DBAE. Success as we defined it involved acceptance of art by the academic community as a legitimate branch of learning. I think back to the advances in the use of perspective during the Renaissance. Art was elevated from a craft to a professional subject because a rational “system” could be ascribed to it that required skill and mathematical prowess. The artistic skill of perspective drawing and the quest for legitimacy took over the lives of artists such as Paolo Uccello and Piero Della Francesca. Art educators are still trying to legitimize art today and the process has become exhausting. Concerning this Fullan (1997) noted: “Despite the consistency and specificity of research findings on the impact of collaborative work cultures and professional learning communities, we do not seem to be gaining ground on educational reform. Understanding these successes as charged with emotion and hope infuses them with more meaning, and may make them more memorable and attractive” (p. 227). He also notes two problems with change efforts that are often overlooked but not without effect on the reform movement: “1) the growing and deepening alienation among teachers; and 2) the balkanization and burnout of passionate reform-minded teachers” (p. 217).

The human effort needed to try to implement a DBAE curriculum turned passion into dispassion for the art teachers in my small rural Southern district. As veteran teachers, we were at odds with a system and power structure that had let us down in our teaching efforts because of a loss of a coordinator, increased workloads, and inadequate funding. The hope that we had in the early days of our careers had wilted. In our zeal we became a balkanized subculture and accepted no resistance or questioning of our methods or madness. We then fell prey to “burn-out.” New teachers to the system were running a greater risk of being alienated from a curriculum that was designed to liberate and empower them. The lack of training in theory and practice and the lack of historical reference to state and local art educational development had left them to try to implement a curriculum that in their minds had little or no meaning.

### How to Sustain Change

Strategies are needed to support art curricular change and provide for growth in students and teachers alike. Some tactics for promoting meaningful reform include these:

- Unite and fight for the support structures that we need to achieve substantive, not symbolic reform. These support structures including professional development, adequate funding, and coordination of services and efforts by a qualified coordinator.
- Lobby for the professional development that art educators need to improve curriculum and instruction thereby impacting student learning. Art educators need knowledge of assessment techniques, curriculum integration, and framework content including art history, art criticism, and aesthetics.
- Expand the arts reform community to include parents, community members, arts organizations, businesses, and industry to counteract isolation, alienation, and balkanization. Above all else, embrace individuals and organizations with different ideas and strengths to promote diversity, cooperation, collaboration, and interaction.
- Invent special support structures or mentoring programs for beginning or new teachers to provide them with a historical connection to the curriculum and its development and implementation. Demonstrate how the theory can be put into practice and offer beginning or new teachers the opportunity to construct and expand the meaning of the curriculum.

What all this means for art education is that as art educators we have to stop saying “We are as good as we are going to get” and move on to the next level—clear evaluation of our reform efforts and the cultivation of the more affective properties of change to counteract alienation, isolation, and burn-out. This perspective can invigorate the change process and serve to humanize curricular reform efforts. As Fullan and Miles (1992) noted “Being knowledgeable about the change process may be both the best defense and the best offense we have in achieving substantial educational reform” (p. 752).

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