

Why Elementary Art Teachers?

by

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With the attention being given this year to art education at the elementary level through the NAEA's declaration of "The Year of Elementary Art Education," questions naturally arise concerning what the status of elementary art education really is, what is the curriculum being taught at the K-6 level, who is doing the teaching, and what are children learning about art. These are important questions which should be widely discussed throughout the profession because they directly impact on the future of art education in its entirety. After all, what children learn about art in the elementary school largely determines what they can learn in their secondary experiences, and what is taught at the elementary level is certainly basic in deciding what should be the nature of the preparation of teachers who carry it out. Without such a discussion and debate about the quality and content of elementary art education, we overlook what is perhaps the most essential element in the whole complex of art education.

One of the questions about this issue that has most frequently been asked in recent months is one which relates directly to the NAEA goal that art should be taught by certified art teachers at all levels, K-12. Repeatedly, I hear people (usually, though not always, laypersons) ask why it is necessary, at the elementary level, for art to be taught by specialists who have their certification in art? Why is it not appropriate for a generalist elementary teacher to teach art? In every other subject in the elementary curriculum, goes these persons' rationale, the generalist is considered qualified and is expected to do the teaching and has, in fact, been doing a pretty good job of it for generations. What possible argument will support the position that art must be taught by a specialist, when other, perhaps even more "difficult and important" subjects such as science and math and reading and writing, can be appropriately taught by a classroom generalist?

This is a very important question, and it seems to me there are at least two kinds of responses. The first calls

upon the combined expertise and experience of a group such as the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching As A Profession, which throughout its report issued in 1986, calls for strengthening the quality and content of teaching and identifies a variety of specific ways in which that mammoth task can be accomplished. To quote only briefly from the report,

"Prospective elementary teachers take a substantial number of courses in education, secondary teachers only a few. The result is that elementary teachers have relatively little exposure to the subjects they will teach and secondary teachers very little preparation for the act of teaching the subjects in which they have majored ... Teachers need a command of the subjects they teach and a grasp of the techniques of teaching those subjects, information about research on teaching, and an understanding of children's growth and development and their different needs and learning styles ... Elementary teachers need ... solid undergraduate preparation as much as secondary teachers. Elementary and secondary teachers impart our common culture, heritage, and values to our children. It is terribly important that they be fully prepared for this task. Elementary teachers are typically responsible for a much wider range of subjects than secondary school teachers, but this cannot excuse a less than rigorous grasp of the material for which they are responsible. Elementary teachers must be able to demonstrate a substantive understanding of each subject they teach. This may mean that elementary teachers will have to organize themselves differently and teach fewer subjects."

It seems to me that these comments suggest there are reasons to question whether our faith in the success of elementary classroom generalists with the teaching of science and arithmetic and reading is well-placed; if it is not in these subjects, how effective can it be in art, for which they are even less well prepared?

My second response to the question about the need for certified art teachers at the elementary level is one based on common sense and a basic understanding about elementary teaching. When a classroom teacher begins his or her preparation to teach, let us say arithmetic, he or she enters that first college level "math methods" class with probably a minimum of 14 to 16 years of experience in recognizing, interpreting, manipulating and understanding numbers. Using numbers has been a part of nearly every day of his or her life, and although the level of expertise in doing that might be low, it does exist. Thus, even at the earliest stage of teacher preparation, there is a substantial degree of number-knowledge that forms the basis for learning how to impart that information to children. Once this teacher is in the classroom, that long-held number-knowledge and new-found teaching methodology is further supported by an extensive variety of textbooks, workbooks, bulletin board materials, and curriculum guides. And the help does not end there - every other teacher in the school is informed about numbers and how and what to teach in arithmetic, and they are always there to question when the going gets tough ... there is even a principal who also knows a lot about arithmetic who can be called upon for help. Finally, there is no school in which there is not an extensive testing program, just to be sure what should be taught is being taught.

It would be possible, of course, to describe exactly the same kind of sequence of background/training/support system testing for each of the other subjects the elementary classroom generalist teaches ... except for art (actually, this is true of any of the arts, but here I am concerned only with the visual arts).

That same prospective classroom teacher has, in all probability, had *some* art experiences in his or her own elementary education. What might that background be? Perhaps one hour every week or two from a specialist, augmented by "coloring" activities from a classroom teacher; but probably this pattern was not consistent throughout elementary school, and so the total art experience (of *any* kind) might luckily have been three or four years of 18-36 hours per year (which works out to 54-144 hours) ... if that's all we brushed our teeth, they'd fall out. Formal home experiences to support those meager hours? Probably nil. Now it is possible, of course, that our prospective classroom teacher has had art in junior or senior high school, but realism suggests that the maximum of that might have been one semester in a general art course at the seventh grade level.

It is with this kind of background our classroom teacher enters his/her first (only) art methods course (if such is even required): one semester in which to provide all of the experiences that in other subjects this same

person has nearly a lifetime of formal everyday experience. And to that expectation add an understanding of children's art materials and processes, methods of sequencing experiences for effective learning, familiarity with the history and importance of art in human existence, the ability to raise important questions and issues about the role of art in our everyday lives, and perhaps something about the potential power of communication through non-verbal symbols. Now soon this prospective teacher is in his/her own classroom. There are no art textbooks, no art workbooks (coloring books and ditto sheets don't really count, do they?), no curriculum, no other teachers who know much more; there is even no principal who knows how to help. And, alas, there is no testing program that could be used to guide what should be taught. Is this likely to result in a quality art education for the children? Does this teacher have any chance at all to provide children with visual sensitivity or aesthetic awareness?

Perhaps I overstate the description just a little. Of course there are elementary classroom teachers who are wonderful teachers, visually sensitive, knowledgeable about art and what children can learn from it, and who will provide excellent experiences and a superb art education for children. But unfortunately they are few. My own children didn't have any like that even though they attended schools in a district with a good educational reputation; in my nearly 30 years of teaching freshman drawing at the college level, at least 90% of my students didn't either.

We don't know, of course, whether a certified art teacher in every school will always result in a quality art education program, but we can be sure that the chances are going to be a great deal better than if the classroom teacher must carry the burden alone.

As the Carnegie Report says, "*This may mean that elementary teachers will have to organize themselves differently and teach fewer subjects.*" When they do that, there will not only be the recognition of the need for the art specialist, but there will be the place and the time.

Our task through the NAEA is not to create jobs for art teachers. Rather, it is to make known in as clear and recognizable a manner as possible, the need for quality art education for all youngsters, and to point out that the most effective way to accomplish this goal is to provide teachers who are the best trained and most knowledgeable in all of the subjects they are teaching.