JoLLE@UGA
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 1 Spring 2013

Editor
Lindy L. Johnson http://jolle.coe.uga.edu

The Arts to Encourage Multiple Perspectives and Promote Social Justice

Limor Pinhasi-Vittorio, LIMOR.PINHASI-VITTORIO@lehman.cuny.edu
Lehman College, The City University of New York (CUNY)

Sarah Vernola, SVernola@ByramHills.org
Byram Hills High School, Armonk, NY

Abstract

This paper presents the use of the arts and aesthetic education in a graduate literacy course for in-service and pre-service teachers followed by a description of how one graduate student implemented her learned theory in the high school classroom in which she taught. The core theory of the paper follows the assumption that aesthetic education elicits the imagination, and thus encourages multiple ways of interpreting and learning text. As such, the article invites the readers to view imagination and aesthetic education as active steps in creating awareness toward empathy and promoting socially just classrooms and practices. In addition, this article describes the implementation of one graduate in-service teacher's learned knowledge of aesthetic education into her own high school English classroom in an attempt to raise awareness for social justice.

Please cite this article as: Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (2013). The arts to encourage multiple perspectives and promote social justice. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], *9*(1), 54-72. Available at http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/The-Arts-to-Encourage-Multiple-Perspectives.pdf.

The graduate literacy class was quiet, except for the usual excited whispers of new students. This was their first class of the semester, and most of the students had seen me only once or twice during advisement hours. The students sat around three large round tables, waiting for me to start the usual formal introduction of the course and of myself. I told them that I was going to sing the blues. My statement came as a shock, as the students' eyes widened; they appeared to be perplexed, and a few students asked quietly, "Is this a literacy class?" Assuring the apparently confused students, I asked them to be patient with the process. I sang, with my untrained voice, *61 Highway* by Mississippi Fred McDowell (1964), revisited by Guy Davis. As I was singing, I noticed smiling faces. Some students even moved their bodies to the sound of the words. Soon after, I played the actual song, this time with the words of the song distributed.

> "61 Highway"
> Well, that 61 Highway is the loneliest road that I know
> Yeah well that 61 Highway is the loneliest road that I know
> She run from New York City, run right by my baby's door. (McDowell, 1964)
> [Three more stanzas were shared]

I guided the students to describe the images that came to their minds; "What do you see?" I asked and then added, "What did you imagined as you heard the song?" I was curious to see how different or similar the images based on the song would be. Although all the graduate students heard the same lyrics and melody, many of them held different images in their mind. One student said that she pictured a woman stranded on a secluded highway; another shared that she saw an old black man sitting and playing the guitar; a different student envisioned a man waiting in a bus line on his way to visit his wife and children, while another student created an almost complete story about a heartbroken woman, who was traveling to find her love. Each listener had different associations with the melody depending on their own life experiences and knowledge, and thus each one imagined or created a different story in their minds. Some reacted in disbelief when they heard completely contradicting images than what they envisaged. Those reactions, in a sense, opened the conversation about the importance of accepting multiple perspectives, and we started to talk about the role of imagination and empathy in opening the awareness toward social justice. Experiencing the blues was a good beginning to demonstrate that each person brought different vantage points to one story and, as result in one class, one story might become multiple stories.

Using music as segue to the literary text was deliberate; I postulated that there would be more acceptances of the multiple interpretations and views with music, rather than with the standard text, particularly in a literacy classroom. The idea behind this activity was to gain awareness of different ways of understanding a text, while at the same time, to create new meaning as the graduate students listened to and read the lyrics. Throughout years of experience and systematic data collection, I have discovered that the optimal way to achieve a meaningful interaction with a text is through the use of art, the physical experience, and the making of art/poetry/music.

After the students' discussion of the blues, they appeared to be more relaxed; they were smiling and leaned back in their seats. I noticed they were ready for part two of the assignment: **creating art.** They were asked to write about themselves, in any form they felt comfortable (poem, prose, or paragraphs). After five minutes of writing, I asked the students to share their work with the

students sitting at their tables. The groups' task then became to write a blues piece using what they had just written and read. This piece served as a tool to introduce all members of the group to the rest of the class. I was aware that this assignment could be challenging, as the students needed to rewrite their personal introductions and turn them into a collective introduction that would include, to some extent, parts of the stories of all members of the group.

As they worked, some of the students were smiling and leaned their bodies forward while conversing and sharing their writings. Others sat back in their chairs and were looking at their writings, and others were looking at the ceiling. After fifteen minutes of group work, all the students were interacting with one another. Taking additional risk, I added the last piece of instruction: they were to turn their collaborative writing into a blues composition (which they were then asked to perform). Sounds of disbeliefs once again echoed in the room: "I don't know how to sing?" and "I'm not artistic." Regardless of their protest, within five minutes, all of the groups were engrossed in the creative process of re-writing their own pieces and intertwining them with those of their colleagues.

While they were working on this added assignment, I observed them closely, and I noticed the change in their facial expressions; the students were smiling, giggling, and laughing at times. Their performances in and of themselves were fantastic, and as I looked at them, I reflected back on Maxine Greene's vision (2001): "Imagine…teachers…immersing themselves in music, theater, visual art, and dance" (p. 3), and I could not help but to smile. This was the first assignment of the graduate course *Literacy Based Literature*, and my students were already able to "immerse themselves in music" as they were able to imagine and recreate jointly the introductory pieces about themselves. This was our first interaction with the idea of moving beyond the personal experience, beginning to see the perspectives of other individuals, and developing awareness of the importance of imagination as a key element in developing empathy in an equitable and just classroom.

Introduction

Many teachers strive for an equitable and just education system. There is an urgency to make sure that our students are motivated and, as a result, are able to acquire meaningful literacy skills that will continue to help them later in life. As a literacy professor, I make sure that in the graduate literacy classes that I teach, we read and discuss the importance of going the extra mile in an attempt to ensure that students are acquiring literacy skills. These literacy skills will enable students to read proficiently, to write proficiently, and to question the text (Massa & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009; Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009; 2011). In class, we examine the significance of promoting critical questions, as students are taught to use their imaginations, and to see and understand perspectives other than their own. Finding ways of implementing our beliefs in educational environments, which often do not value the importance of the arts, can be a difficult thing to do; thus, in the graduate classroom, we invite the students to imagine, create, and think differently from how they usually would have thought. Allowing multiple perspectives to enter the classroom is one step in creating a more just classroom, because we try to imagine what someone who is different from us may think or how that person understands the world.

In order to create this critical process, my students and I used the arts and aesthetic education as integral parts of our class. As described by Maxine Greene (2001), aesthetic education is the

encounter with the arts that "engage[s] the learner's imagination to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 112). Unfortunately, the arts have come to be viewed in schools as what Greene terms a "fringe undertaking" or "additive" (p. 7), rather than viewed as a core experiences for students. It has been tradition for reading and writing instruction in schools to be confined to print, excluding other forms of literacy, which excludes those students who may learn better through them. This matter becomes even more pivotal as literacy class instruction today centers on measured performance, and the teachings are geared primarily toward studying for the test. As a result, the teaching is highly controlled, void of creativity, and without valuable learning spaces that are dedicated to innovative thinking (Egan, 2005; Light, Calkins & Cox, 2009).

It has been proven that children who were engaged seriously with varied arts experiences over periods of time were found to be "…more confident and willing to explore and take risks, exert ownership over and pride in their work, and show compassion and empathy toward peers, families and communities" (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000, p. 248). Furthermore, it was found that learners in art-rich schools tended to enjoy sharing their learning with others and had a higher academic self-image than children whose art experiences had been sporadic (Burton et al., 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2008).

To approach literacy education in a way that incorporates the arts, visual literacy, and creative writing (such as poetry) can open new ways of thinking and challenge current beliefs and norms. Using aesthetic education in the classroom may promote diverse ways of thinking, and as such, has the potential to be used as a tool for social justice. Social justice, as it is viewed in this paper, is the development of awareness and the understanding of empathy toward different people and situations far removed from our own that eventually may lead toward action in helping others (Freire, 1970; 1971; Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2011).

The study in the graduate classroom followed a qualitative ethnographic model (Brice-Heath & Street, 2008; Glesne, 2005). The reconstruction of the graduate and the high school courses was through ethnographic methods, such as systematic ethnographic observation, transcribed focused conversations, and collections of artifacts (such as student work, including different samples of writing and art making that was done during class). The inquiry emerged from the teacher-educator classroom:

- What was the interplay of the arts and aesthetic education in developing my students' imagination in relation to literacy and the text?

The above question provoked the following two questions:

- How did imagination and the integration of the arts impact the students' awareness of empathy, social justice, and critical thinking as they read the texts?
- Did this course impact the way my students taught? And if yes, how did they use it in their classrooms?

The creative class work opened the conversation of the interplay between aesthetic education, imagination, literacy, and using this ongoing conversation in the classroom and beyond.

First, I provide a theoretical framework, informed by a literature review, where I connect the significant roles of the arts and the imagination in the promotion of critical thinking and the awareness toward socially just classrooms. Afterwards, I share a description of some of the focal activities that took place during the graduate literacy class, as well as the students' writing, following by a viewed performance in Lincoln Center. Finally, I include the experiences of my in-service graduate student from her high school placement. This section was written from her perspective, as she transferred and applied her learned knowledge of aesthetic education into her high school English classroom.

Theoretical Framework

As a teacher educator, I witnessed the ongoing efforts of my colleagues and students to provide a quality education to all children. This goal would be difficult to achieve in most schools, due to the increasing demands for high test scores, and due to decreasing resources and teacher freedom that have resulted in classrooms ruled by rigorous instruction (Garan, 2004; Greene, 1995; 2001). As class instruction has centered upon measurable performance, valuable learning spaces that develop imagination and creative thinking have been taken away, and the use of the arts as tools for teaching have declining continuously. Nonetheless, the interplay of the arts in the reading classroom is imperative for providing students opportunities to explore their own imaginations, to discover the multiple ways of understanding a literary text and ultimately, to develop awareness of social justice issues.

When discussing social justice, it is imperative to understand how it is used in this paper. The awareness of social justice is the ability to see beyond what appears to be. It is the process where we are imagining what others might think and feel; it is looking at people in their uniqueness and individuality. Toward that end, we "must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead" (Greene, 1995, p.10).

Multiple Ways of Understanding; Awaking the Imagination and Opening the Conversation

I venture into this paper with the assumption that all of us have the capacity to imagine. The only thing we need to do is to awaken our imagination or to allow it to develop further (Egan, 2005). There is a call in our schooling and classrooms to learn to facilitate this innate ability through reading, creating, and playing. Yet, prior to undertaking this challenge, there is a need to understand the significant role of personal imagination in the act of reading the text and the world.

In our classes, the imagination fosters the reader's ability to envision that a text may possibly hold more than one perspective or one way of understanding. The imagination gives the learner the tool, not only to visualize the text, but also to imagine what a different person may think, believe, and feel. Our imaginations encourage us to develop empathy:

> It is what enables us to cross the empathy spaces between ourselves and...others…[I]magination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (Greene 1995, p.3)

The imagination is a tool that encourages the reader to see that there is more than her own vantage point from which to enter a text and "to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (p. 28). The imagination provides access to a text's unseen possibilities.

Greene (1995) explains that "the learner must approach [the literary text] from the vantage point of her or his lived situation, that is, in accord with a distinctive point of view and interest" (p. 31). As readers tap into their imaginations to the extent to which they grasp another's world and cultivate multiple ways of seeing, this can be viewed as a segue toward equalizing education and promoting social justice. Social justice in the essence of developing awareness and empathy toward others; where the "others" may be people or situations that are far removed from the students' lives. Through the awakening of the imagination via various texts, the reader can develop the ability to read beyond the written words, and read the "word and the world" (Freire, 1970; 1971). Creating spaces for promoting social justice in this sense goes beyond the serious issues of inequality and poverty. Many children in elementary schools today never have the chance to experience or experiment with different aspects of the arts. They are obliged to follow a script curriculum that only addresses partial aspects of the learning process. Thus, it is pivotal for the teacher to understand how to use the imagination in education to lead to greater flexibility in teacher thinking and to the ability to create a change in the curriculum. One of the steps in facilitating this change is creating spaces that invite imaginative conversations, projects, and activities.

A meaningful learning that calls for immersion within the text and opens the door to unseen places, emotions and experiences is learning that can provide the reader with the feeling of empathy toward others. It is not simply decoding the text, but rather reading to achieve "an understanding of the object that the author talks about; the reader knows the meaning of the text and becomes co-author of that meaning. The reader then will not speak of the meaning of the text merely as someone who has heard about it. The reader has worked and reworked the meaning of the text; thus, it was not there, immobilized, waiting" (Freire, 1998, p. 31).

Our classes follow Freire's (1970, 1971, 1998; Freire & Macedo, 1987) and others' (McDaniel, 2004; Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009, 2011; Shor, 1999) ideas on the development of reading and critical literacy, in which the learners read the word and the world. As such, the reading of the literary text is a way to read the universe, and through the examination of imagination at large, the reader gains the ability to see unseen possibilities. It is the gift to create meaning from the environment and envision: "What if?" This gift can guide the learner to understand the complexity of our world. This type of reading has the potential to invite the imagination and the development of critical conversations amongst learners.

It is the imagination which may allow us to think extraordinary thoughts and become creative. We may even challenge the statuesque in our society, seeing as we can imagine an alternate state. Subsequently, it is the imagination which may give us the tools to develop critical thinking and have a better grasp of social justice issues. Through a particular way of using the text, the imagination, and the arts, one can create pathways to the development of social justice awareness and understanding of the other. To this end it can create what Greene (1995) calls, "utopian

thinking"; thinking "that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world" (p.5).

The Viewing of Art and Art Making in the Classroom

In the graduate class, we were continuously involved in experiencing the arts—music, dance, and visual arts—as creators, as well as observers. Through these experiences, and by using their imagination and creativity, the students generated new possibilities. The process of creating and viewing art is explained by Dewey (1934) as the "beholder's" process to perceive an artistic work. Dewey described that "[t]o perceive a work, the beholder must create his own experience" (p. 54). The beholder [viewer] essentially must undergo thought processes similar to the artist. Just as the artist chooses his or her palette, medium, and images to create the work of art, the beholder recreates the art "according to his point of view and interest" (Dewey, 1934, p. 54); after all, "without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art" (Dewey, 1934, p. 54). Therefore, the act of viewing art is not a passive experience, but one mired in active and conscious meaning making.

While Dewey's comment discusses the role of perceiving a work of art, Greene (1995) takes this further by discussing the role of participating in the *creation* of art as multiple events that constitute the aesthetic experience. She explains "that participatory encounters with paintings, dances, stories, and all other art forms enable us to recapture a lost spontaneity…[We are] made aware of ourselves as questioners, as meaning makers, as persons engaged in constructing and reconstructing realities" (1995, p. 130-131). The great importance of viewing and creating art is what Greene (2001) describes as "ways of developing a more active sensibility and awareness in our students" (p. 8). If teachers can succeed in doing this through implementing the arts in the classroom, perhaps these students can then "come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic world" (Greene, 2001, p. 7).

Unlike the traditional instruction where students are expected to give an evaluative response based on some formal knowledge such as "I liked it/I didn't like it," the "deep noticing" approach replaced the evaluative response by describing what *it* is. This is accomplished through the process of "Noticing Deeply" (Holzer, 2007), which in its simplest terms is a process of guiding students to look (or listen) carefully, to see beyond the surface. Thus, the art, like the work of literature, allows for multiple understandings of the literary text, avoiding judgment and promoting acceptance. Holzer (2007) describes aesthetic education as "a continuous experience with a work of art over time, mediated by a particular form of individual and group inquiry" (p. 4). This belief is grounded in Greene's (1986, 2001) philosophy of aesthetic education, which values a sustained involvement with works of art through the use of the senses and the imagination. Sustained engagement is seen as essential to fostering deep understanding of works of art and what they have to teach.

This achievement through aesthetic education has implications for literacy instruction: teachers can empower and enable students to draw on their own imaginations and to create their own meanings of a text. By validating students' own thinking and imagination, the students may learn that although their understandings and perceptions are different from their peers, the difference does not discredit their own interpretations. Aesthetic education at large, which is in particular

the viewing and the creation of art or the literary text, can encourage teachers and students to imagine beyond a single way of knowing or reading a text and instead welcome the possibility that multiple meanings exist.

Utilizing Aesthetics in the Classroom

The Literacy Graduate Classroom: A Teacher Educator Perspective

As a teacher educator who teaches graduate literacy courses for in-service and pre-service teachers, my focal point is to awaken the imagination of my graduate students through aesthetic education, and to develop critical thinking skills and empathy, as the students read literature geared toward children and young adults. Infusing aesthetic education in our literacy class is done on three levels:

1. Reading selected texts that discuss and theorize aesthetic education, as well reading children's and young adults' literature that includes different social, cultural, and political issues;

2. Experiencing the making of art through the following art activities: collage, drawing, painting, poetry writing, music, and dance in the classroom; and,

3. Viewing and responding to the work of art, whether it is music, theater, dance, or visual art. None of these aspects is taught in isolation, and all are strongly connected to and interrelated to one another.

The class meets seven Saturdays per semester for six hours' duration. Each six hour class consists of two parts: part one is devoted to discussion of the required textbooks, articles, and specific novels. The second half of each class is designed to incorporate the viewing and creation of art as entry into children's and young adult literature. The graduate students are typically asked to work collaboratively to convey an idea about a text or to manipulate a perspective of the text using almost any type of art—a poem, picture book, sculpture, painting, and, at times, incorporating music and/or dances with their interpretations and analyses. The integration of "the arts" into the classroom is done in two ways; one is through art-making, and the second is through viewing a live performance of dance, music, theater, or visit to a museum. The latter part is carried out through the participation of several professors with the Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) Teacher Education Collaborative in aesthetic education for the Arts.

For over thirty years, LCI has been known for its work in the arts with public school teachers and students, as well as with college professors and teacher candidates. LCI focuses on aesthetic education (understanding and appreciating a work of art) rather than arts education (art historical references within the context of art production). Infusing aesthetic education in the literacy classroom allows the students to transform their thinking and their responses to literature. The following is an example of a way my that students were immersed within the aesthetic experience as they were watching a live musical ensemble at Lincoln Center.

Visiting the work of art: Writing a narrative to Oriente Lopez. One of my beliefs of developing a meaningful aesthetic experience is to watch a work of art up close, in person. During one semester, I chose to take the class to see Oriente Lopez's "Viajes en un Mundo Nuevo" [Travel to a New World]. The music ensemble was an original composition of Oriente Lopez, a Cuban émigré. Prior to the performance, I met with a teaching artist from Lincoln Center ,and together we constructed a planning session for the graduate students, focused on the importance of being open to multiple ways of understanding a text, and in particular, imagining a narrative behind music. With the help of the teaching artist who came to my class a few days prior to the performance, the students were introduced to various musical instruments and discovered how a single instrument can create different effects, depending on the way it is being used or played. Students were divided into four groups to create a musical piece and to perform it afterwards.

A week after the workshop, the students met at Lincoln Center to view Oriente Lopez's work of art. For some, it was their first visit to Lincoln Center, and for others it was their first time seeing this type of live performance. Prior to entering the music hall, I asked the class to try to write down whatever they visualized as they listened to the music ensemble. As we left Lincoln Center, the students shared with me their unique experiences. All of the students wanted to share their images; some students wrote simple descriptions, and other students created a very developed story line. Some students were very specific in their descriptions; for example, one student wrote:

> The vertical waterfalls (rattle and rainstick: piano) reflecting light contrast with the dark, lushness of the Cuban tropics (strings piano), punctuated by the calls of colorful birds and insects (percussion instrument). Abundance. A sense of harmonic peace. Yet—the thunder hints at political turmoil (cymbals). The boy is now man, reflecting on the home he is about to leave (piano, strings)…

This student was specific in her selection of musical instruments to depict what she envisioned in her mind. Her writing provided the reader a clear image of what she saw: the waterfall, its shape and color. She situated her story in a specific setting that she was able to create by using her imagination as she listened to the music.

Other students focused more on the narrative:

> A young man is dancing and having fun with his family, all of a sudden something has changed. He's running away from danger. He discovers a new place, it is a fun and interesting place but very different from where he has come from….He wants to go back home but he can't, it's not safe…

Another student created a story line with a very specific scenario. The description of the man in her account is intimate; she reveals his feeling as he runs away from danger. Different students wrote of different events; while the student in the previous example visualized the journey of an immigrant. The following example shared a different, personal narrative:

> The entrance of the music brought me to a sad place where a loved one is lost. Love lost, like a woman who is looking for her way. The woman cannot be with the one she loves but is forced to travel through and find moments in her life that are "upbeat." …Sometimes through this musical adventure the woman seems to want to find her way, but she can't.

One student wrote a poem, naming it "Crash," focusing more on feelings that emerged from this music ensemble:

> "Crash"
> She sings to me. I can hear her voice over the crashing of the waves. In the distance, the moon lights up the surface of the water and it looks like glass. I gaze out my window and watch and wait.
> And, I wait,… wait, …. wait…
> I've been waiting all my life for this moment. Sometimes, I think I hear her sweet gentle voice above the noise of the city crashing down on me. My heart starts to race and
> Thump…Thump… thump…in my chest
> It's so loud, it resonates in my ears until it's all I hear. The city the people all fade into the water…

The images that arose from the work of art varied for different students, yet in almost all of the stories, there was a clear narrative and story that emerged, and only the type of event was different. In most of the pieces, particularly in the four examples, students noted a calm opening tone, which was interrupted by an emotional crescendo that eventually returned to a less intense tone. Each student brought a personal experience to the music, and thus different images emerged (Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995). For example, in the first instance one student mentioned that the sense of harmonic peace is interrupted by thunder, hinting at "political turmoil," and later I conferred with this student, and she shared with me that she has personal knowledge of Cuban history and that she took into consideration Oriente Lopez's heritage.

This student's historically influenced interpretation is starkly contrasted with the piece "Crash," a poem whose narrator self-reflects and reveals her inner thoughts. These contrasting examples demonstrate how each participant had a unique transaction with the work of art, and as a result created different events. Further, it is safe to conjecture that the same work of art could provoke the creation of different narratives for the same person at different times of his or her life (Rosenblatt, 1994). Sharing the various stories is important since it creates the awareness of different perspectives, which can bring into light the connection between imagination and empathy.

Creating these opportunities for teachers to visit and experience the arts encourages them to bring *their* experiences and understandings of the role of imagination back into the classroom, and particularly into literacy instruction. A rich literacy experience can be developed through integrating aesthetic education into the curriculum. Yet, in order to provide students the optimum aesthetic experience, teachers need to be provided with the opportunity to experience the text and the arts in an aesthetic manner, prior to teaching it to their students. Watching a performance that

is followed up by activities and the ongoing classroom readings helped the students in my class to "transform their learning into innovative classroom teaching that recognizes perception, cognition, affect, and the imagination as ways of knowing" (Greene, 1995, p. 3) and as such, facilitated the awareness of empathy.

The development of empathy through the arts and literacy is a primary goal of the course. An additional method to attain this goal is through hands-on experience, where art-making and literacy intersect.

Making Art in the Classroom

Art making is an integral part of our sessions; it is a different way of processing and expressing the transaction with children and young adult literatures. Each art assignment is designed to focus on various elements such as themes, pattern, tone, setting, point of view, and characters. At times, we build on and add music and dances to the collages and paintings. The addition of music and dance adds excitement and illuminates the concepts and multiple ways of understanding the text. Yet, each assignment is unique.

One particular class assignment asked students to recreate the story from the point of view of an object within the story. To prepare them for this assignment, they needed to imagine the unimaginable; the students selected an object from the classroom and wrote from this object's point of view. Then, the students read each of their pieces and had to guess what object was represented. The exercise allowed them to be flexible in imagining what might seem to be an impossible task. For that week the students read the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2003), which tells the story of a high school girl who is unable to deal with having been raped the previous summer. In response to their assignment, one group of students chose to write from the perspective of a Maya Angelou poster that hung in a closet where the main character hides and finds safety. The students wrote a poem imagining what Maya Angelou's image might have said to the protagonist:

> "The Caged Bird Sings"
> Ahh, girl!
> Scream! Open your mouth!
> Hit, punch, kick!
> You've come too far.
> Like your trees
> You've grown
> Don't let him
> At you
> Again.
> Take care of yourself
> Like you care
> For this room.
> Be a caged bird no more.
> That's it!
> Here they come.

Finally…
See what
Happens
When you
SPEAK!

Images 1 and 2: Art work created by the graduate students about the book *Speak*, from the perspective of Maya Angelou's poster.

In the poem, the students were able to recreate the feeling of the book; they imagined what the poster in the protagonist's room might have said. They were able to use the information from the book and build on their own interpretations with their own authentic voices. They were deliberate in their craft, as they singled out one word and used capital letters, adding an exclamation point to accentuate the urgency of "speak."

Another group chose to explore the perspective of a tree. The students wrote a poem:

Don't speak the truth
Broken branches of an empty tree
Alone in the sadness
That engulfs me
Hollow spaces
Where love should be
Don't speak the truth
And watch another die
Rotting branches of all

I deny…
Quiet Desperation.

Image 3: Art work done by graduate students about the book *Speak*, from the perspective of the tree.

This group of students used the standpoint of the tree to illuminate the distraught state that the protagonist was in. In order to capture the intense feeling of emptiness, they chose to use images of the tree such as "broken branches of an empty tree," "hollow spaces," and "rotting branches." They were able to provide the images and feelings as viewed from an outsider's (the tree's) point of view, as they added a harsh critique of the protagonist's silencing: "don't speak the truth / and watch another die." Although the group took the outsider stance and criticized the protagonist's inability to speak, they also showed empathy toward her as they conclude their poem with "Quiet Desperation."

These presentations highlight the students' process of exploring the protagonist's internal conflict, while imagining another's point of view. Looking at both the art projects and poems, it is evident that each group chose to write from a different perspective. Each point is relevant and significant and yet different. While in the first two art presentations the students created three dimensional replicas of the protagonist's room, accentuating Maya Angelo's poster, the latter art presentation depicts the tree. The students embedded the poem in the tree, in the shape of lips, indicating the avoidance from speaking. The important part of the process is acknowledging their different perspectives while going back to the text and re-examining the readings. While one group wrote and centered on what the protagonist should do, that is, "SPEAK," the latter group chose to focus on her inability to speak, her "Quiet Desperation." Once again, this choice is rooted in the object they chose to represent.

These critical thought processes occur when students are required to take agency and create meaning through aesthetic experiences. Greene (2001) reminds teachers that "children…must make their own use of what has been taught…this is the way authentic learning takes place: children go beyond what they have been taught and begin teaching themselves" (p. 137). This type of active thinking and participation support the goal of engaging children in critical thinking; in raising questions; in seeing things other than what they initially thought, as they are imagining.

The impact of the class pushed beyond its assignments and class dates; it compelled several students to further explore the arts, imagination, and aesthetic education in their classrooms. One student in particular furthered her interest and incorporated the subject into her thesis, investigating how visual arts could be used to stimulate high school readers' interest in canonical literature. She wanted to understand further how art could help students connect with and understand literature, while promoting awareness toward empathy and social justice; how aesthetic experiences could enhance literacy development. This part was written exclusively

from the student perspective, so that it would be an authentic representation of her experience. It was essential that her voice is heard, particularly when she shared how she transferred her learned knowledge from the graduate classroom into her own classroom. This part is relevant for teacher educators and in-service teachers as they build lessons that integrate the arts and social justice into their curriculum. The following is her shared story about her work in her high school classroom.

Utilizing Aesthetics in a High School English Classroom—A Teacher Perspective

Following my experience in Professor Pinhasi-Vittorio's course, I was motivated to pursue my thesis in the area of aesthetic education in the literacy classroom. I was eager to perform the qualitative research with my tenth grader students to examine how aesthetic experiences might help them connect with canonical texts. My unit study of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain seemed the ideal curriculum, as it is a novel that students have difficulty relating to, both emotionally and socially. Usually this text breeds reluctance and frustration toward the reading experience, despite its social application. Another issue that was considered was the ethnicity of my students, who were mostly of European descent, and who might struggle to understand the circumstances that the character Jim finds himself in as a slave. I was hoping that by exposing students to art that demonstrated the reality of the racist, cruel setting of the novel, students would be able to empathize with Huck's own plight and struggle to understand right from wrong, the nature of friendships, and his own loneliness.

My lesson plan involved a slide-show at the very beginning of the unit depicting 19th century photographs of slaves, contemporary renditions of slavery in America (Feelings ,1995) , and 19th century artistic, stereotypical depictions of African Americans (Handler & Tuite, 2006). Students were instructed to write a single-word reaction that came to mind for each image viewed. After viewing the slide show, students shared their responses to the slides and discussed their findings in small groups. Students were asked if they noticed any patterns emerging in their responses as a group, and then shared those with the class.

The slideshow images elicited emotions and engagement in students as evidenced by both non-verbal and verbal cues. The room was completely silent as they watched the slide show. The students seemed engrossed by the imagery. Some students were unable to fulfill the writing component of the task; it appeared as though they were paralyzed by the graphic images, with no attention paid to the paper in front of them. Two specific images that captured students' attention were Feelings's (1995) paintings that depicted the anguished, naked slave wrapped in chains, and a child corpse held lifelessly by a mother in the hull of a slave ship. Strong engagement with the visual art was further indicated through sounds students made in reactions to certain images, including groaning and sudden intakes of breath. The sounds and verbal responses to the most graphic picture—a photograph of a slave's back scarred from whipping—indicated that even in a quiet, safe viewing environment, students were moved to a physical response. It appeared as though students were actively participating in the subjects' pain as they began interpreting and understanding the implications and experiences associated with the images they were watching.

The whole class discussion revealed that the students experienced both compassion for and connections with those they saw in the images. The compassion that they felt seemed to dissipate

the gap that existed between this violent moment in American history and the students' own present. Responses to the slides, which were audio taped and transcribed, often included descriptions of what the subjects of the images felt, suggested in comments like, "you could see his pain" and "loneliness." These words indicated that students empathized with the depicted African Americans rather than objectifying them. One particular student indicated that he felt "shame" as he viewed the photograph of torn skin on a slave's back. The images, in some way, evoked a sense of personal responsibility, and the student became a part of the experience he viewed. The impact of the students' empathy gained from the work of art became even more evident in his post-unit journal entry: "[*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] opened my eyes about slavery and how things used to be for black people. Some of the pictures we saw I felt sorry for the slaves."

His emotional experience, similar to my own in the graduate class, was driven by the work of art. The art was used to elicit the imagination of the participant, since one can have a sense of empathy through imagination. In both situations, my students and I had to imagine the possibility of an experience outside of our own, and by doing so, we understood the perspectives and feelings others.

In addition to having students view the slide show of images, I asked students to choose one of the visuals and to write in their journal as one of the people within the picture. My rational was to push students to imagine and to connect with the subjects in the photography even further. Students quickly chose among the images, and with no hesitation, they began writing. The responses overwhelmingly utilized empathetic verbs and descriptions that imagined how the subject of the image suffered. The following are two excerpts from two different students who attempted to truly speak from the standpoint of a slave:

> It's hard to sleep when your body is attached to a chain. I feel like an animal. What do they think of us? Do they think we are dogs and we need collars?
>
> The chains around my ankles and ropes tying my wrists aren't the only things holding me down. It's fear of the white man's whip.

These two journal entry responses revealed unconventional thinking and understanding that went beyond the scope of the provided image. The first journal response demonstrates an effort to capture the demeaning attitude caused by the physical and emotional hardships. The student is very straightforward and compares the condition of the slave to a chained animal, a dog. In the second excerpt, the student depicts not only the physical chains that bind the slave, but imagines the feelings of anger, helplessness, and fear that are generated from the physical violence. Students' responses reproduced and imagined various aspects of a slave's life through their interpretations of their aesthetic experiences with the images. Students could now approach the novel equipped with a new, empathetic perspective, which would, possibly, deepen their understandings of the text. The development of empathy achieved through the arts and the text allowed me to open a conversation concerning social equality.

Conclusion

Using the arts as an integral part of graduate classes was a critical tool in the development of the imagination in the literacy course. Developing imagination is an elementary component in literacy growth and particularly in the development of critical thinking. By creating opportunities in which students *are not* "boxed in" in their classrooms as mandates by state law, and by pre-packaged curricular and testing practices, they are allowed to imagine different possibilities and to accept different interpretations, understandings, and views of others. Unfortunately, when students are thinking out of the box, they often are not recognized for the value of their thinking. Thus, taking an active part in this process toward developing awareness for empathy and social justice, teachers and schools are encouraging the learners to think of "what if" and inviting different ways of viewing into the classrooms.

The work in the graduate classroom impacted the in-service and pre-service teachers' pedagogies and their applications of aesthetics in the classroom. Transacting with a text, making art, and watching a live-performance of a work of art all encouraged the participants to be engaged authentically in the learning processes entailed in aesthetic education in the classroom. The aesthetic experience draws upon layers of understanding and critical thinking; the act of creating artwork captures various meanings and ideas in literature, forcing students to place themselves in alternative perspectives, to create new, imagined worlds. The key element in the construction of multiple ways of understanding a text or an art lies within the ability to imagine. Thus, there is a need to consider imagination and its function "to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995 p. 28). The imagination allows students to develop a sense of empathy as they imagine the world through an alternate lens, which can open the doors of their minds to new possibilities. When students come to embrace that multiple meanings and perceptions exist in texts, they may take their understandings of the text and/or the art a step further and apply it/them to their own lives, which can create meaningful and personal transactions. In both classes, the graduate and the high school literacy classrooms, the students were part of the aesthetic experience and were able to create, to think, and to imagine beyond the literary text.

When looking at the graduate student's effort to incorporate the arts into her classroom, it is evident that she used her imagination and critical thinking as she re-invented her curriculum in an effort to arouse the interest of her students, and she was able to increase interest and to evoke empathy for a topic that was far removed from the students' own experiences. The visual representation allowed them to take a different vantage point and to imagine.

As a teacher educator who is dedicated to the promotion of social justice through the arts, I have discovered that exchanges of thoughts and ideas in meaningful collaboration with our students, their students, and their peers promotes imagination development, supports envisioning possibilities (Gulla, Pinhasi-Vittorio & Zakin, 2009), and encourages questioning the world and the word. For, "…the classroom situation most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness is the one in which teachers and learners find themselves conducting a kind of collaborative search…" (Greene, 1995, p.23).

References

Burton, J.M., Horowitz, R., & Abeles, H. (2000). Learning in and through the arts: The question of transfer. *Studies in Art Education, 41*(3), 228-257.

Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York, NY: Minton, Bach, & Co.

Egan, K. (2005). *An imaginative approach to teaching.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Elliot, J. (1987, June). Educational theory, practical philosophy and action research. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 35*(2), 149-169.

Elliot, J. (2001). Making Evidence-based Practice Educational. *British Educational Research Journal. 27*(5), 555-574.

Feelings, T. (1995). *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo*. New York, NY: Dial.

Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* Westport, CT : South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury.

Freire, P. (1971). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York, NY: Seabury.

Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as Cultural Workers - Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (D. Macedo, D. Koike & A. Oliveira, Trans.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Garan, E, M. (2004). *When politics, profit and education collide.* Portsmouth, ME: Heinemann.

Glesne, C. (2005). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* Boston, MA: Pearson.

Greene, M. (1986). The spaces of aesthetic education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education. 20*(4), 56-62.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education.* New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Gulla, A., Pinhasi-Vittorio, L., & Zakin, A. (2009, April 29). Exploring relationship between aesthetic education and writing across the curriculum using poetry. *Across the*

Disciplines: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Academic Writing, 6. Retrieved April 29, from Http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/gullaetal2009.cfm.

Handler, J.S., & Tuite, M.L., Jr (2006). Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. *Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in America: A Visual Record*. Retrieved March 27, 2007, from http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php.

Heath S. B., Street, B., & Mills, M. (2008). *Ethnography; approaches to language and literacy research.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Holzer, M. (2007). Teaching and learning at Lincoln Center Institute. Retrieved October 31, 2008 from http://www.lcinstitute.org/wps/PA_1_0_P1/Docs/494-TALCI.pdf.

Lincoln Center Institute (2005, Summer). *National educator workshop: Teacher education collaborative professional development.* New York, NY: New York.

Massa, J. & Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (April 2009) Critical Literacy Development in Action. *Theory in Action, 2*(2), 45-61.

McDowel, M.F. (1959). *Highway 61*, revisited by Guy Davis.

McDaniel, C. (2004). Critical literacy: A questioning stance and possibility for change. *International Reading Teacher, 57*(5), 472-481

Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (2009, April) Inviting Social Justice through literacy: creating a change using the critical questionings and using the language of power. *Theory In Action, 2*(2), 19-33.

Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (2011). Changing our perception: Using critical literacy to empower the marginalized. *Theory in Action, 3*(4), 122-135.

Rosenblatt, L.M. (1994). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy? *Journal for pedagogy, pluralism & practice, 1*(4). http;//www.lesley.edu.journals/jppp/4/shor.htmla

Smith, F. (2002). *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Twain, M. (1884, 1985). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York, NY: Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.

Wallace, M. (1998). *Action Research for language teachers.* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Winner, E & Hetland, L. (May/June 2008). Arts for Our Sake School Arts Classes Matter More than Ever- But not for the reason you think. *Arts Education Policy Review, 109*(5), 29-32.