



# Aesthetic Education and Masked Emotions: A Model for Emancipatory Teacher Preparation

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## Introduction

According to Maxine Greene (1988), aesthetic education is “integral to the development of persons-to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development” (p. 7). Gardner (1973) like Greene presents the arts as a cognitive tool necessary to fuel the human developmental systems including how we see, feel and make new ideas within our imaginative core. When confronted with a painting, or piece of music we open “ourselves as perceivers to the work, entering into it kinaesthetically, we free ourselves to grasp it in its vital fullness and complexity” (Greene, 1988, p. 13). Greene (1988) asserts that aesthetic experiences provide us with a window to encounter the arts conscious that “we are in the present as living, perceiving beings becoming aware that there is always, always more” (p. 16). Eisner (2002) views the arts as transformative and a necessary process for critical cognition and cultural growth. Aesthetic education may be utilized as a primary method for teacher education programs that view the development of the teacher’s imagination as a primary aim. According to Greene (2001):

Aesthetic education, then, is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what there is to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way as they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience, new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened. (Greene, 2001, p. 6)

The purpose of this paper is to present the developing sense of self that pre-service teachers experienced through an aesthetic entry point, the 9/11 mural by Graydon Parrish entitled, *The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy* (see Figure 1). Pre-service teachers explored the psychosocial theories that Erikson (1963) outlined in the course text by Woolfolk (2008) while viewing the 9/11 mural. Greene’s (2001) research on aesthetic education and Perkins’ (1994) research on visual thinking structured and supported the aesthetic experience, thereby providing a foundation to begin thinking deeply about the psychosocial theory of Erikson when facing the expansive allegorical mural by Parrish. The museum arena in which the mural was displayed provided a community space for pre-service teachers to think critically with one another. According to Jeffers (2003) the

museum as community, then, conceives of knowing and learning as a process of human relationship. This process also implements the museum’s mission, which is to empower students and teachers to make meaningful connections to art and each other through dialogue and discourse. (p. 117)

This kind of structured aesthetic experience can be key to an emancipatory form of teacher preparation.



## **Aesthetic Education in Teacher Preparation**

### **The Psychology of Visual Thinking and Community Reflection**

Aesthetic education utilizes powerful works of art in which to exercise visual perception or visual thinking. The visual thinking process unites the viewer's intellect and intuition while meaning is made (Arnheim, 1969, Gardner, 1973, Perkins, 1994). "Visual thinking is the ability of the mind to unite observing and reasoning in every field of learning" (Arnheim, 1996, p. 119). Nikitina (2003) directs our attention to "the integrative aspect of art" thereby "connecting the self with the social world, and providing a space to reflect on the meaning of other experiences" (p. 56). According to Eisner (2002), viewing a work of art

provides students with the challenge of talking about what they have seen, gives them opportunities, permission, and encouragement to use language in a way free from the strictures of literal description. This freedom is a way to liberate their emotions and their imagination. (p. 89)

From within the critical aesthetic experience among the pre-service teachers in the museum, a community of thinking emerged as personal experiences were shared while viewing the 9/11 mural. An intimate sense of empathy evolved as pre-service teachers listened to each other's stories. The 9/11 mural, as the aesthetic entry point, provided the armature for a community of elementary pre-service teachers to share and shape new possibilities, ideas and realities. Eisner (2002) states:

The imagination, that form of thinking that engenders images of the possible, also has a critically important cognitive function to perform aside from the creation of possible worlds. Imagination also enables us to try things out-again in the mind's eye-without the consequences we might encounter if we had to act upon them empirically. A culture populated by a people whose imagination is impoverished has a static future. In such a culture there will be little change because there will be little sense of possibility. (p. 5)

Jeffers' (2003) research on aesthetic education views the museum as an alternative space in that a sense of community among the pre-service teachers supports multiple realities and perceptions in relation to the art and personal experiences are shared for the community to engage in critical and empathic listening. Jeffers (2003) presents critical criteria for an alternative aesthetic space and states:

The listening community also must be a diverse one in which a spectrum of voices can speak and be heard. Different perspectives, interpretations, and criticisms must be shared and creative conflicts (that lead to new discourse and new knowledge) must be engendered. Through these activities, the diverse community will succeed, both in facilitating learning and in protecting against group orthodoxy and dogmatism. (p. 117)

### **Aesthetic Process**

Pre-service teachers participated in a visual thinking process within the museum sitting in front of the 9/11 mural. The devastated 9/11 landscape within the painting, with children playing, captivated the thinking of the pre-service teachers inspiring them to think critically regarding Erikson's (1963) research on trauma during a child's development. The 9/11 allegorical mural provided an aesthetic landscape for the pre-service teachers to enter, one in which their imagina-

tion could roam and wander igniting memory and making meaning—uniting the present and past with the future. Fenner (2008) argues that an aesthetic experience is not complete unless the imagination is actively engaged. The aesthetic experience thus becomes “individual and particular” through the imagination and experiential activation of the memory (p. 45).



Figure 1. Graydon Parrish, *The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy*, 2001-2006, oil on canvas, 214 x 78 in., New Britain Museum of American Art, Permanent Collection [Online image] Retrieved March 20, 2009 from <http://www.nbmaa.org>

### Masked Emotions Revealed

As pre-service teachers viewed the 9/11 mural visual data was collected and recorded based on their personal histories, beliefs, emotions and perceptions in relationship to the 9/11 mural images and Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial theory of development. The aesthetic experience activated the pre-service teacher’s imaginations in an authentic fashion thereby connecting Erikson’s theory to current events and challenges faced in the educational arena. Pre-service teacher’s discussions and reflections portrayed how trauma impacts the development of a child. One pre-service teacher stated, “I recognize the fact that I will be in a position to influence (I hope it will be a positive influence) students during times of emotional stress” (focus group notes, September 18, 2007). When confronted with the mural’s symbolic imagery and in conjunction with children’s development as related to cultural memories and life experiences another pre-service teacher revealed:

This has affected me in a way that I didn’t think it would. When 9/11 first happened, I was a sophomore in high school and didn’t know anyone that lived or worked in New York, so I didn’t really feel as though I was directly affected. I never really talked about it with my family or friends because they really didn’t seem to be affected by it either. All I remember is my dad talking about how he disliked foreigners. Then when looking at the painting that expressed so much emotion of those who were directly affected that opened my eyes to all of the others out there. It was then that I started to think about the affect that it had on not only the people directly related but also the children and the questions they would have about it. (focus group notes, September 18, 2007)



The concept of the *mask* children and teachers “wear” to hide trauma was highlighted as a potential theme. Initially the entire class created the idea of the mask after visually thinking about the blindfolded twins standing at the center of the mural (see Figure 1). The pre-service teachers decided to design masks to symbolize how humans protect or hide their true selves from trauma. Educational psychology theories were discussed in relationship to the theme of the mask and the 9/11 mural. In a sense, while viewing the mural, the pre-service teachers were “breaking through to new horizons of sound and feeling—beginning, just beginning to suspect what still lies beyond” (Greene, 1988, p. 17). One pre-service teacher shared a reflection after viewing the 9/11 painting and stated:

September 11<sup>th</sup> tore some people apart, and put others together. Although the pieces of the Constitution are shredded, the Constitution’s importance in the history of America will never die. And through it all, through the debris and fog, you can see the faint light of the Statue of Liberty. Although you may need to look hard to find it, it is still burning bright—a shred of light and hope for the future of America. (focus group notes, October 2, 2007)

During the mural discussion pre-service teachers recalled personal moments they experienced when the 9/11 tragedy occurred and revealed feelings regarding the affects of the 9/11 trauma. As pre-service teachers they wondered how they might have discussed the event with children in their classroom. Greene (1988) believes that “in a sense coming in contact with a work is like meeting another human being” and acts as the “ground” to lay our “necessary stories” upon (p. 16). Once the pre-service teachers completed their aesthetic experience in the museum they collectively decided to design a performance to represent their personal stories and beliefs. The next section will describe the aesthetic process the pre-service teachers participated in and the symbolic poetry created.

### **Designing an Aesthetic Performance for a Museum**

This section will describe the process students encountered in developing a dramatic performance using movement, masks, music and poetry in front of the 9/11 mural in the museum. Throughout the shared experiences while designing the *Masked Emotions* performance, the pre-service teachers reflective and imaginative realms were ignited to problem-solve an interpretation regarding the 9/11 mural and Erikson’s psychosocial theory of human development. What message as pre-service teachers did they want to share regarding a child’s development? Overwhelming the pre-service teachers agreed that the loss of innocence, when impacted by trauma, was identified as the central theme to be explored. A storyboard was developed in relationship to cultural and social development of the pre-service teachers when growing up in the USA. Who are we as a nation? What was at risk after 9/11? How are moments with family shared when faced with a tragic event? A paradigm evolved as pre-service teachers juxtaposed the loss of innocence with the hope in the future. One pre-service teacher invited her five-year old sister to participate as the symbol of innocence. Another pre-service teacher asked her middle-school son to play his oboe, a deeply haunting sound of a child learning, uniting the various collaged poems and performance movements. One pre-service teacher shared thoughts after viewing the 9/11 mural and stated:

I see my little cousin Chelsea actually as the little girl to the left of the portrait; she is shaped and looks just like her hair and all. Then we have the young girl who has a blindfold on, but the older man is holding it maybe to hide the fact her

parents are gone, but he has his mouth covered because he doesn't want to tell her. (focus group notes, September 18, 2007)

Eisner (2002) supports the power to release the individual perceptions and voice exposed through an aesthetic experience stating:

the opportunities to speak or write...are not only ways to describe what has been seen-though they are surely that; they are also a way of searching in order to see. The opportunity to talk about a visual field is also to imply a need to have something to say. (p. 89)

Pre-service teachers read their reflections and their symbolic poetry (see poetic collages one, two, and three) after visiting the 9/11 mural and completing the visual thinking exercises. In small groups pre-service teachers discussed, compared and analyzed potential themes and created artistic strategies so that the identified themes might be symbolized in a dramatic performance. The following photo (see Figure 2) illustrates three pre-service teachers connecting to one individual representing the Statue of Liberty. Seated below are masked pre-service teachers (see Figure 2). The performance unfolded to represent a specific theme that amidst tragedy people reach for hope, hope in the symbol of our lady of liberty.



Figure 2. The Statue of Liberty: Pre-service Teachers Design Masked Emotions Performance.

The *Masked Emotions* performance was an entry point for pre-service teachers to experience aesthetic education thereby revealing their potential and reflective intelligence (Perkins, 1994) to use their imagination. Johnson (1993) states that imagination is the capacity which allows us both to experience present situations as significant and to transform them in light of our quest for well-being. Imagination is a means



for going beyond ourselves as presently formed, moving transformatively toward imagined ideals of what we might become, how we might relate to others, and how we might address problematic situations. (p. 209)

Greene's (1988) theory parallels with Johnson (1993) and places great emphasis on the development of an empathic imagination through aesthetic experiences. "Imagination is not only the power to form mental images, although it is partly that. It is also the power to mold experience into something new- the power-by means of a sympathetic feeling-to put oneself in another's place" (Greene, 1980, p. 30).

Pre-service teachers thought deeply regarding the USA tragedy represented in the 9/11 mural and the traumatic impact on a child's personal experience. Symbolic language developed to create poetic statements that captured the 9/11 tragedies. For example, in the first poetic collage below, the pre-service teacher describes the horror he feels when viewing the 9/11 mural as a place where "silent screams rule":

*Images violent and disturbing, but clean  
Silent screams and pain from invisible wounds  
Smoke, gray and ominous, covers the sky  
Obscures the distant city  
Glow of flames not seen  
One plane rises while another falls  
Toppled buildings in the shadows of buildings untouched  
A bed of flowers for an old man dying  
The constitution lies in ruin  
All rising, sweeping upward to the center  
Where silent screams rule.*

The symbolic imagery within the painting is silent yet provokes the intense feeling of agony thus a sense of screaming within the pre-service teacher's mind. The scaffolding and layering of imagery the pre-service teacher describes elaborately depicts the cognitive analysis of the murals symbolism.

The second poetic collage represents a pre-service teacher looking toward the future with a sense of hope in contrast to the first collage that expresses the immediate destruction and despair of the 9/11 tragedy:

*An island on a sunken city  
Drowned in tragedy  
Filled with pain and hope  
A background of desolate buildings  
And wreckage and smoke  
A lady of liberty stands out of the water  
Dim, blurred, and small  
Her torch still stands  
High and bright  
A beacon of hope.*

The third poetic collage contrasts a continuum of human development, from innocence to despair, from blindness to clarity, which moves to an abstract and complex analysis of life's tragedy:

*A world that moves...*

*From law and structure to flower of mourning.*

*From innocent children to broken adults.*

*From a world of blind children to adults who can SEE.*

These three poetic collages may be viewed as the development of reflective thinking toward critical analysis of the pre-service teachers initial thoughts and reactions towards the 9/11 mural (see Figure 1). Thus the cognitive and affective realms, the intellect and the intuition (Arnheim, 1969) united to form three highly expressive poetic works (see poetic collages number one, two and three).

According to Nikitina (2003), "there are many theories of meaning of arts teaching in education" (p. 56). Nikitina concurs with Siegesmund (1998) "that teaching art is about educating "reasoned perception," which takes us to a realm of "feeling, sensory concepts, and exquisitely varied forms of human representation that give us insight into what it means to be in, relate to, and comprehend" (as cited by Nikitina, 2003, p. 56).

Aesthetic education opens a cultural and social arena providing a space to be reflective among shared experiences with others. Dewey (1934/1980) stated that, "the first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art" (pp. 345-346). According to Dewey (1934/1980) aesthetics including poetry and paintings among other works of art give our culture "a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress" (p. 346). Greene (1993) asserts that, "we all need to recognize each other in our striving, our becoming, our inventing of the possible. And, yes, it is a question of acting in the light of a vision of what might be—a vision that enables people to perceive the voids, take heed of the violations, and move (if they can) to repair" (pp. 219-220).

### **Pre-service Teacher Voices**

After the completion of the *Masked Emotions* performance one pre-service teacher shared the following thoughts in a reflection:

I was able to take risks. Masked Emotions was a model for me. It was really significant that we were part of a big community. We made the puzzle complete. I want my students to feel that. I felt worthy. I could contribute to someone else's experiences and someone else's learning. It takes courage to take risks. There is potential that you have to unleash. It was not a material reward. It was contributing to society—that was the reward. It made me feel we can all reach higher ground. One person standing next to me is feeling something completely different. This helps people see their way out of situations and being actively involved around people—it brings out hope and wonder. The Masked Emotions Performance created an intimacy—you are able to back away and see your class as a community. It has grounded my decision to be an elementary classroom teacher and impacted my educational philosophy. (personal notes, November 6, 2007)



A second pre-service teacher implemented a mask-making activity within the language arts program during her urban field experience the following semester, after her experience in the Masked Emotions aesthetic experience. She shared the following thoughts and felt compelled to express that the participation in the aesthetic performance brought out a sense of hope and wonder within her.

I decided during my field experience to have my fifth grade language arts class make masks and to write identity poems and stories about the masks. I walked into a classroom that had weak classroom management. I needed to create an environment conducive to caring for each other. To see your hands in plaster makes an aesthetic difference. Every aspect (of the aesthetic experience) teaches everyone. There was an appreciation for everyone. The kids felt privileged and appreciated to interact like that (touching face as if making a mask). Children are still developing and want to take risks. If we take risks at a mature level (referring to Masked Emotions Performance)-just think about what our children can do. They are becoming more conscious and aware of their actions-I wanted their identities to shine and to build confidence and a self-concept in them. (personal notes, March 4, 2008)

### Conclusion

Three aspects of aesthetic education were developed as a model for implementation into teacher preparation. A great work of art such as the Parrish 9/11 mural was selected having a social message utilized for visual thinking to analyze a significant event in American history. Secondly, pre-service teachers wrote poetry inspired after viewing the painting. The visual thinking process revealed emotions and memories contributing to critical thinking and the development of poetic symbolic language. The last part of the model involved the pre-service teachers constructing a dramatic performance of mask, movement, poetry and music to represent critical themes that emerged from their aesthetic experience with a great work of art.

Aesthetic entry points elicit reflective discourse and critical analysis thus making critical thinking visible by pre-service teachers (Tishman, Jay, Perkins, 1993). Aesthetic education is critical in the preparation and development of pre-service teachers in revealing emotions and beliefs regarding how children learn. Aesthetic education provides experiences and entry points to critically challenge preconceived bias and stereotypes that pre-service teachers initially bring to method coursework and field experiences. In a way the aesthetic experience acted as an *emancipatory possibility* (Greene, 1988) for the pre-service teachers in that their thinking was made visible and voice released within a community setting. Greene's (1988) passionate voice for the importance of aesthetic education raises the urgent need for aesthetic experiences in education as "the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation, will help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might someday attend" (p. 132).

If pre-service teachers are to one day become participants in radically transforming public schools then it is imperative that they are working together to transform themselves and "mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality that they seek to transform (Freire, 1997). This idea is reflected in the following pre-service teacher reflection:

Sharing this work with the rest of the class taught us things about each other...some of us have overcome stereotypes and hardships, or that some of the students have moved around a lot during school years. All of these things that we have learned about each other helped us come together as a class. We were no longer a group of



random people, but one unit made of individuals who all understood each other.  
(focus group notes, December 4, 2007)

Freire (1997) argues that we must also fight for the freedom to create to be truly free and presents Fromm's (1956) theory that humans must have "the freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture" in order to fully become (as cited by Freire, 1997, p. 50). The pre-service teachers participating in this study had not previously encountered aesthetic experiences as part of their teacher education program.

The pre-service teachers witnessed transformative thinking as a community preparing to one day to teach in the local public schools. A sense of awe, sensitivity and awareness developed as the pre-service teachers understood the importance of the child's search for identity and sense of self as critical to teaching children.

The museum experience was a platform for the pre-service teachers to exhibit their learning and personal voice. First, the pre-service teachers evolved into a community of learners sharing ideas and working together. Secondly the pre-service teachers developed a deeper understanding of their self-concept as teacher and awareness of each other as a community. Finally the pre-service teachers revealed in their reflections a sense of social imagination (Greene, 2001) that can be used to promote change, teach significant historical lessons and express individual voices.

The pre-service teachers will be the next generation of teachers to confront current curriculum pedagogy that restricts freedom and diversity in America's public school system. Greene presents the urgency in education to rethink current curriculum and to create curriculum towards becoming fully human:

It would appear to me, in an emerging society marked by a rich range of differences that restrictions do indeed have to be brought within reach so that persons of all sorts can come together to change them. There must be a deepening consciousness of the plague and the need for healing. There must be a confronting of the contradictions, the instances of savagery, the neglect, and the possibility of care. We require curriculum that can help provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become. We want to see in their multiplicity linking arms, becoming recognized. We want them in their ongoing quests for what it means to be human to be free to move. (Greene, 1993, p. 220)

Pre-service teachers discussed the rare instances they experienced any type of aesthetic education practiced out in their fieldwork in elementary classrooms. The pre-service teachers wondered why few classroom teachers were employing aesthetic methods in their teaching methods and felt strongly that aesthetic education impacts critical thinking. One pre-service teacher stated:

If you were to implement this project into an upper elementary school classroom, the response would be impeccable. The children would respond to this type of thinking and analyzing. It would be beneficial to learn about how the September 11th events impacted others. (focus group notes, December 4, 2007)



As presented within this study aesthetic experiences provided individual pre-service teachers a framework to develop similar experiences within their fieldwork within elementary classrooms thus supporting evidence that these aesthetic experiences transfer impacting educational critical pedagogy. If curriculum in America's public schools is to be radically changed critical transformative methods and strategies must begin with pre-service teacher preparation.

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