Middle School Students' Empathy with the Environment Throughout a Critical Place-Based Art Program

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As ecological concerns continue to escalate and art education theorists seek to respond to postmodern calls for an art education engaged with the real world, theorists have advocated for the "greening of art education" (Inwood, 2008. p. 58). Over the past two decades, ecologically-responsive art pedagogies have emerged in the form of the Ecological Vision (Graff, 1990), community-based environmental design education (Neperud, 1995), ecological stewardship in art education (Lankford, 1997), an art education of place (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993), ecological design for transformative education (Gradle, 2007), eco-art education (Inwood, 2008), and art education informed by a critical pedagogy of place (Graham, 2007). A critical place-based art pedagogy centers art education directly within place, in the local context and content. It makes connections between students and the community, students and the environment, and students and schooling as it encourages students to critically and creatively engage with local social, ecological, economic, and political issues. This pedagogy operates through an ecological paradigm, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things. Empathy can facilitate these connections and, thus, is an integral component in the development of such a paradigm. Art, with its capacity to convey emotion, spark imaginations, and connect viewers in an embodied empathy, may be an ideal medium for helping students develop and expand that empathy into an increased consciousness for all living things. The field of critical place-based art education offers bright promises for impacting students' ecological attitudes but lacks research. My dissertation study examines how middle school students in a critical place-based art education program demonstrate empathy with the environment.

This ongoing study employs a mixed methods case study approach. The mixing of methods allows for an expansion of the phenomena under investigation to include students' pro-environmental orientations (ecological paradigms) in addition to their experiences of empathy with the environment. Consequently, this study asks: How do middle school students demonstrate empathy with the environment throughout a critical place-based art education

program? How does participation in a critical place-based art education program affect students' pro-environmental orientations (ecological paradigm)? Which aspects of a critical place-based art education program, if any, contribute to students' sense of empathy with the environment? Why? Through these questions, I seek to understand students' experiences and the influence of a critical place-based art education program.

Theoretical Framework

Greene (1995) described how the imagination has the power to break through familiar definitions and distinctions that divide, to facilitate empathy, to expand our consciousness, to envision alternative realities, and to begin the process of working toward a better world. Greene's (1995) conception of the social imagination described these powers applied to the social world. Although the imagination is needed to bridge the social boundaries that isolate us and to work toward a better social order, we should not neglect its potential power within an ecological context, where arbitrary boundaries between humans and living things exist that need to be bridged and new ecological realities need to be constructed. An ecological imagination is needed. In discussing the ecological imagination, I recognize my conception overlaps in many important ways with the ecological imagination called for by ecological education theorists (Jardine, 1998; Judson, 2010; Karrow & Kentel, 2007; Payne, 2010). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have focused on a conception of the ecological imagination, which is largely an adaptation and expansion of Greene's idea of the social imagination, and is designed to respond to our need for a better ecological future.

The ecological imagination calls for a new mode of education: education that embraces the arts as a way to conceive of new ecological perspectives, other ways of being in relation to the Earth, better ecological alternatives, and new dialogues about our role in the world. Through a critical place-based approach, art education becomes a means of awakening the ecological imagination—opening the world to new possibilities, new critiques, and, most importantly, new acts. This pedagogy has much in common with Graham's (2007) art education informed by a critical place-based pedagogy. Like Graham's pedagogy, it represents a critical pedagogy of place within the discipline of art education and includes the same components of natural history, cultural journalism, and transformative education. While they share essentials, my pedagogy differs in its reliance on the ecological imagination as a theoretical framework and in its approach to critical education. This distinction is important because the ecological imagination plays such a key role in my conception of this pedagogy, in particular within the critical component where the imagination is released to affect change.

Methodology

I approached this study through a pragmatic paradigm, a paradigm particularly appropriate for researching a topic defined by connections as it involves the dissolution of traditional

boundaries between induction and deduction, subjectivity and objectivity, context and generalizability, and mind and matter. Through this paradigm, I embraced both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a mixed methods case study. I strove to understand a single bounded system—a 7th grade introductory art class at a public middle school in the southeastern United States—and, as such, aimed more for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena rather than for generalizability to a range of contexts. Using one of my own classes as a teacher researcher has provided me with a high level of accessibility, which I hope will lead to additional insight. The case study was instrumental: the issue determined the case selection (Stake, 1995). Therefore, I expected that studying my middle school introduction to art class would be instrumental in understanding student experiences of empathy with the environment. My goal was to select a "typical" case, a case that in many aspects may be transferable to other contexts. The class that I selected represented a typical case in its inclusion of students from a range of socioeconomic levels and racial backgrounds within a traditional public middle school.

Greene, Benjamin, and Goodyear (2001) claimed that the researcher should determine the most important research question and then prioritize the qualitative and quantitative methods accordingly. Since the most important question in this study is a qualitative one, related to how students demonstrate empathy with the environment, and since I employed more qualitative research questions and qualitative methods, this study is qualitative dominant. Data collection began in January at the beginning of the course and will conclude in May toward the end of the course. As the data collection instrument for the qualitative methods, I will conduct drawing exercises, interviews, focus groups, observations, and student visual/verbal journal reviews to address the following topics related to Research Questions 1 and 3: 1) students' demonstrations of empathy with the environment during the semester, and 2) the aspects of the program that contributed to student empathy with the environment and how they contributed (if so). Research Question 2 is a more quantitative question. The quantitative variables related to this question are students' pro-environmental orientations, which will be measured through a survey, the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) Scale for Children (Manoli, Johnson, & Dunlap, 2007).

Pre and post drawing exercises were designed to understand how students demonstrate empathy with the environment. The drawing prompt asks students to draw a time they felt connected to the natural world and to describe the experience in writing on the back of the prompt. The verbal data will allow for a pre and post comparison that would be difficult with the visual data alone. My aim in comparing students' written descriptions of their experiences was to better understand how students' experiences of empathy might have changed since the beginning of the program, even if they were revisiting experiences that occurred previous to

the program. I will conduct post-interviews with select students for clarification of the visual and verbal data from the prompts and to obtain rich descriptions of their experiences.

Throughout the semester, I have been recording observations periodically in order to document how the curriculum and methods were implemented, to detail examples of students' empathetic behaviors and understandings, and to note possible influences on these behaviors. I have also conducted reviews of student visual/verbal journals throughout the semester to understand student experiences of empathy with the environment and which aspects of the program had most impacted these experiences. In order to understand which aspects of the program were most effective in facilitating empathy with the environment, I will also conduct two post-focus groups. To determine students' pro-environmental orientations, I will administer the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) Scale for Children (Manoli et al., 2007) with students both pre and post. It will provide an overall score indicating students' positions on a continuum between an anthropocentric and ecocentric orientation.

Preliminary Findings

Since data collection for this study is ongoing, only preliminary findings are available regarding students' demonstrations of empathy and pro-environmental orientations prior to the program and during the first month. Pre-surveys suggest that the majority of students began the course leaning slightly more toward an ecological paradigm than an anthropocentric one. Pre-drawing exercise responses ranged from factual accounts of their experiences to short descriptions of their appreciation for nature during the experience. Overall, the terse and limited empathetic responses in their written descriptions illustrate places for growth in students' abilities to demonstrate empathy with nature. Throughout the first month of the program, one place where many students were able to demonstrate empathy with the environment was through cultivating a radish plant. Students cultivated these plants from seeds and designed planters specifically for their growing plants. Students' behaviors toward the plants and many of their reflections in their visual/verbal journal entries intimated their concern and care for the health of their plants. As the course progresses, I expect to gain a better understanding of how these students demonstrate empathy with the environment and how the curriculum may contribute to these experiences.

Significance

While this study is designed as a case study in order to gain an understanding of a specific group of students within a specific context, ultimately, it aims to broaden our understanding of critical place-based art education. Through this understanding, we can determine the role and direction art education should play in helping students cultivate ecological attitudes. This study is especially relevant for art educators, community stakeholders, and administrators who seek to develop schools and curricula that are relevant to students and capable of producing

4

empathetic, ecologically-minded, active citizens who are capable of working toward social and ecological change in their communities.

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