

# Being a mentor, being a muse: The role of an art teacher in raising moral awareness through art

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## Resumo

O trabalho de investigação apresentado neste artigo baseia-se em anos de experiência de ensino no domínio da pedagogia da arte e da educação artística infantil. Durante mais de vinte anos, Ava Serjouie-Scholz dedicou-se à investigação e ao ensino no domínio da educação artística e aproveitou todas as oportunidades para realizar estudos e ensinar arte nas escolas, bem como a professores e pedagogos sociais, pois acredita que só podemos verdadeiramente fazer juízos e tomar decisões adequadas ou mesmo sugerir currículos de arte ou planos de aulas se tivermos experiência suficiente na implementação pessoal dessas sugestões. Muitas vezes, os professores debatem legitimamente que o programa de estudos é criado por quem não tem ou tem muito pouca experiência de trabalho numa sala de aula e não faz ideia dos constrangimentos que os professores enfrentam. Por isso, o facto de ter uma experiência de trabalho extensa e abrangente deu-lhe uma visão de todas as limitações, mas também de tudo o que ainda podemos oferecer para fazer de uma aula de arte uma experiência valiosa para toda a vida. Como professores de arte empenhados nos nossos objetivos, devemos isso a nós próprios e aos nossos alunos. Este artigo centra-se no papel da educação artística e dos professores na promoção da criatividade e da imaginação, melhorando a compreensão das artes visuais dos alunos, ao mesmo tempo que se envolvem em temas relacionados com a justiça social, a igualdade de direitos para todos e a promoção do respeito e da compreensão da diversidade cultural.

**Palavras-chave:** educação artística, criatividade, auto-expressão, educação moral

## Abstract

*The research work presented in this article is based on years of experience of teaching in the field of art pedagogy and child art education. For over twenty years, Ava Serjouie-Scholz has devoted her time to research and teaching in the field of art education and has taken every opportunity to conduct studies and to teach art in schools, as well as to schoolteachers and social pedagogues, as she believes that we can only truly make appropriate judgements and decisions or even suggest art curricula or lesson plans if we have enough experience in personally implementing those suggestions. Often, teachers legitimately debate that the syllabus is created by those who have no or very little experience working in a classroom and have no idea of the constraints that teachers face. Therefore, having extensive and wide-ranging work experience has provided her with an insight into all the limitations, but also into all that we can still offer to make an art class a lifelong valuable experience. As art teachers committed to our goals, we owe it to ourselves and to our students. This article focuses on the role of art education and teachers in promoting creativity and imagination, enhancing students' understanding of visual arts while engaging in themes that deal with social justice, equal rights for everyone and promoting respect and understanding of cultural diversity.*

**Key words:** art education, creativity, self-expression, moral education

## The role of the arts in education

The importance of art education has often unjustly been undermined when it comes to cutting budgets in school programs, and far too often underestimated as a fun subject in-between the more important subjects like maths or physics. Gregory (2016) mentions how, in 2008, after the recession, 80% of schools in the United States had their budgets cut off and naturally art programs were the first victim. This unfortunately is not the case only for the United States. Personally, as an art teacher in Germany I have also often had to manage to fit a whole curriculum in a single lesson per week, with almost 5 to 10 euros material money, per student, for a whole school year. Just a quick search and we often come across many articles and publications stating the budget cuts on art education, either in dance, music, drama or visual arts (Gregory, 2016). While teaching at high school more than often I was asked by colleagues why I have implemented strict rules and shouldn't art lessons just be fun. To which I always had to respond that art education has also got more to offer than fun. It is even more fun once you explore all that can be achieved through art and all that arts can offer.

The methods and the contents we choose not only have an impact on our students and their lives but also others around them and of course the society. A future doctor who has profited from a valuable art lesson, will later in life visit galleries and museums or invest in arts, a bus driver who has had a valuable music education at school or has learnt to have a good ear for music can just as well profit from his school creative education and even respect and have a deeper understanding for his child wanting to invest time and energy in creative subjects. Creativity is one important focal point in teaching the arts. Creative minds can learn to solve problems and find solutions. Art is far more than just mastering skills, it is the way we see, live and act. Art education can arouse students' interests in social and political matters and inspire them to take strides for what is right, but also teach them to use art to communicate the values they stand for.

Art education provides a multilateral learning environment that offers students unlimited skills, broadens their perspective, helps them acquire values, and provides them the opportunity to use their skills to achieve their goals. Hughes (2020) in his article *Art for democracy in crisis* states that "engaging political ideas is a potent site for growth, and the liberal arts studio can support this growth through the process of critique and group discussion." Hughes advocates that the vital point in this process is how a student's work is presented to others and how critical feedback is elicited. Luis Camnitzer, a conceptualist artist also states that art is a dialogical process, and the work is only fully completed as a result of that dialogue (1995/2009). While the critical discussion is mostly focused on adult education, I believe even younger students in primary

schools can be inspired to participate in dialogues and discussions about the artworks. By talking and inspiring even younger children to talk about artists and their work, the themes, the colours, the modes of expression we can help to improve and develop their critical thinking. As arts educators, we know how focal and important critical thinking is and how it promotes an art lesson from a mere possibility of developing skills to a creative and imaginative lesson and experience of intellectual self-expression. Providing the students with time, theme, and space to experience the work of great artists and to learn to observe and develop the skills to talk about them.

### **Striving for justice in Education system**

During my bachelors, I was required to participate in a 6-month internship in a primary school. Through my experience working with 4<sup>th</sup> grade children, I realised how precious and important those limited hours of art lessons are to children, when they can let themselves go and feel free in exploring their abilities and imagination, but apart from all, for some the only time to get proper support and guidance into cultural artistic education. Unfortunately, it is an established fact that children born into families with lower economical and financial status have less chances of having private tuitions, access to music and private artistic education or even access to any kind of artistic or creative learning environment. Ferguson *et al* (2007) already mention how even in rich countries like Canada the gap between the families has arisen, and this has a negative impact on the wellbeing of children from economically weaker families. They atone: "Children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers who come from more affluent families, as shown in measures of school readiness." (Ferguson *et al*, 2007). Even in Germany, poverty is still a big issue and, according to statistics, already in 2019, 1.48 million children under 16 lived in poverty in Germany (Niebler, 2021). A child's emotional and physical well-being, well developed motor ability, age-appropriate language skills, general knowledge, social knowledge as well as cognitive skills and competence reflect his or her ability to perform well at school of both academic and social level (Kagan, 1992). However, these are all influenced to a great deal by a child's experience at home. Treanor (2012), explicitly points out how poverty even before a child is born influences his or her life: "The negative impacts of poverty start before birth and accumulate across the life course and onto the next generation". Children born into families with lower income, often experience the negative impacts of poverty on their health, cognitive development, social or emotional development and educational development (Treanor, 2012). She points out different reasons, such as being born underweight, or mothers showing unhealthy habits such as smoking during pregnancy, or children having more often health issues of accidents as a child. Most of which will also influence their health and cognitive development later in life.

In her research, entitled *The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school*, Horgan (2007) justifies the role of education and school as a route out of poverty. She insists that: "Improving educational attainment is important for the individual child, but it is also vital if the goal of eradicating child poverty in a generation is to be met". Children trapped in poverty often grow up to experience the same financial situation as their parents. Sometimes they even take low paid jobs to help the family but then have less time for improvement in academic performance, they sometimes experience exclusion at school because they cannot keep up with the fashion trends or take part in leisure or after school activities. The fact is if school, education, kindergarten and nursery schools are and should be seen as a major way out of poverty for children born into low-income families, then it is of highest importance to improve the education offered in such an appropriate way that all shall benefit equally. The school system and curriculum should be reformed to provide equal opportunities for children from all different backgrounds, whether economical, religion, race, culture or physical ability. Treanor (2012) believes children should be given access to books or other educational materials.

Education and performance at school do not limit to scientific subjects or language skills, artistic education is also a very important factor in children's development, which very often is neglected in low-income families because of high costs, such as costs for arts material or cost of musical instruments, not to mention the costs of a private tuition. Lynch (2015) adds together a list of major benefits of art, developing motor skills, language skills, decision making, visual learning, inventiveness, cultural awareness and improved academic performance. An art education offers much more than the possibility to learn and develop skills or craftsmanship. It is a gateway to so many creative ideas, problem solving and most importantly to imagination as well as critical and intellectual thinking. Albert Einstein once said: "When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come close to the conclusion that the gift of imagination has meant more to me than any talent for absorbing absolute knowledge." He even adds that: "The greatest scientists are artists as well". Einstein was not just a prominent physicist, he also played the piano and the violin.

### **Art education: The world of creativity and imagination**

One of the greatest abilities of artists is to see or imagine or express things in ways that no one has thought of before. It is travelling the unknown path and coming out of it with an artistic creation that can open up a previously unknown experience or world for others. It is what the Dadas or van Gogh did in visual arts or great musicians achieve in music. We see this creative imagination all around us, in the works of great architects like Le Corbusier or Zaha Hadid.

## Elevating art lesson into an experience

So often art education is underestimated by people, because of their uncomfortable experience during an art class or art lesson. Often because an art lesson is reduced to nothing but a class for acquiring skills, such as learning to draw with colour pencils or to paint with watercolour. Far too often the motor skills even from the very young age become the focus and centre of a justified well planned art lesson. Students are forced to paint the same subject using the same materials, without trying to take their abilities and interests into consideration. Even artists have their favourite mediums, but in schools the syllabus is reduced to teaching a certain technique. The hours of creative education are reduced to strict instructions of material, whereas it could be evolved into moments of inspiration and encouragement. When teaching art I always think about Antoine de Saint Exupéry, he clearly shows us the way to create motivation is the doorway to inspire anyone to strive for something, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." And as important as skills are and as essential as they might be, it is not more important and valuable than having a great imagination and a problem-solving mind. A student which is confronted with a task requiring him to draw a still life will either get the job done to teacher's expectation or not but once we change the whole way, we give students a task in art and provide them with an atmosphere of learning and freedom of expression, the art lesson becomes an ocean full of the unexpected and every single work becomes an original piece of art.

One of the most focal points of art or creative activities with young children is to promote their motor skills, such as cutting with scissors or holding a pencil. So often a teacher would prepare pieces of paper with certain forms drawn on them and children are required to cut them out, here the child and his abilities are reduced to a productive machine, all his power of decision making, he is required to complete a task and produce a work in which he has had no part whatsoever. Theme, form, colour, material and even the size of the work are all determined by the teacher. The students are expected to produce a replica as close as possible to that of the teacher's work. Naturally the student who manages to produce a work with a more similar replica gets the highest praise. The image below (Fig. 1) clearly shows examples of art produced in regular primary schools in Germany, where so often creativity, and self-expression have no chance.

However, art education could be quite different if we prepare the room with so many different coloured papers, and material, old magazine, or wrapping paper, glue, wool, wood, stones, pearls and fabrics, coloured pencils, and paint; prepare everything in a way that students have a clear view of everything and give them a topic to think or talk about, like cars, or trees or a day in town, a walk in the woods or even a favourite song. Something that



Figure 1. Exhibition of artwork by children at a regular German primary school, self source.

interests them and gives them time to envision, as creativity needs time. With a group of primary school students, for example, just talk about cars and what they imagine a car could do and show them pictures of all the different cars, talk about which cars their parents have, or even trucks. Finally, just ask them to draw their magical car, a car that only they have and is like no other car, and then give them enough space and material to work. Give them a piece of cardboard where these beautiful magical cars should drive. So, the children can even prepare the background and now even if they want to use the scissors to cut their cars to glue on the background. This way, the teacher not only brings the children closer to the goal of developing their motor skills, but she also inspires them to think, to be imaginative, to envision something new, to ponder upon what they know and then take a step forward to create something new. It is much easier than we can imagine. Here, the “act of envisioning opens up new possibilities” (Holloway & LeCompte, 2001).

Children can learn to draw anything if we give them time, inspire them to try and teach them to observe what they want to draw. We know younger children draw what they know and later they learn to draw what they see. Through observation, they can learn to see things more clearly and even gradually learn to transfer the 3-dimensional form in front of them into a 2-dimensional form on paper. Drawing is a process. The teacher trying to guide her or his students while inspiring them to walk into the new domains trying new ideas, being creative envisioning new ideas, possibilities, experimenting new materials having no fear of failure for the way and process of creation is just as valuable as the result and adds to the rich fullness of the experience. Quinn (2010, p. 225) states:

*While the arts are elastic and generous, art education and integrating arts across the curriculum takes thought and planning, an understanding of the learners in one’s classroom*

and school, including the social context of their lives, an understanding of content and pedagogy, and understanding the conditions-constraints, opportunities, and possibilities of one's workplace. Teachers who build relationships with their colleagues and their teaching communities and are focused on and alive to their own learning, as well as the development of their students, will be able to see the opportunity that the arts provide, to not only engage all grounds for intellectual growth in their classrooms.



Figure 2. Girl, 6/7 years old, drawing her favourite animal, self source.

Rose loves horses (Fig. 2), she had always asked her elders to draw her one, but recently, instead of doing that, she was inspired to watch horses, to observe them and to try to draw them. She gradually learnt to draw a horse. She solved the problem on her own, by creating a schema which she could gradually improve.

And just as we can teach our students to develop their motor skills, we can teach them to imagine, to think creatively and even inspire them to use their creativity for moral or social issues. Art lessons can be a world of new experiences and themes for children, students and even adults. An art teacher is more than a mentor but a muse. The role of an art teacher in creating an artistic, inspiring learning environment should not be underestimated. He or she is the one who can impact students in many ways. An art teacher can plan and design her teaching to focus on the developing and improving motor skills, or to use the time to inspire the students no matter what age to think, to imagine, to design and to become active members of a society. She or he can be a mentor or a muse or both. An art lesson can be a possibility to learn skills or one to create a whole new world.

Raising children's awareness towards the environment and how we could through upcycling and recycling, and sustainability help the environment can begin as early as in the nursery



Figure 3. A group of preschool children drawing an underwater world, self source.



Figure 4. Artwork by a student in his last year of studies, Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source.

school. We can teach them about the underwater world, and how our mass production of rubbish is destroying the lives of underwater creatures and their world. Tell them about the pollution, show them pictures and videos and give them room and possibility to express themselves visually. Let them create together a sanctuary where fishes are safe. They can create their own fishes, they can work together in groups or alone (Fig. 3), but what is important is to let them be free and give them enough space to express themselves and discover their own abilities, interests, and ideas to communicate through art or even create new ideas.

Through upcycling, students learn to reduce the harmful effects of our living culture on the environment and creatively to produce artefacts or objects which they would need or create works of art. As examples of artworks by upcycling made by students with different ages, one may mention packaging from sweets used to make a vest (Fig. 4) or a lamp made with plastic soldiers and tanks on an old lamp to make a statement, an anti-war artwork. On the lamp is written: "Make art, not war." (Fig. 5)

The themes are unlimited upon which we can plan and organise a fruitful art lesson, the goal is not to set the skills in the focus but students' creative process and during that process, skills could be taught. "This capacity of art - to trigger more and new thought - makes it important for educators, but its potential is even more expansive; the arts provoke, and can open us to new and even surprising ideas". (Quinn, 2010, p. 226)

Quinn (2010, p. 227) mentions that Olivia Gude believes a strong art curriculum always has the characteristic of a social justice education; it will necessarily be multicultural, exploratory, and rooted in life experiences. Such is the following project which was organised for students in high school aged between 12 to 13, in Germany learning to make posters. According to the art curriculum students had to learn to

design posters. Now posters apart from being artistic must also be informative. Students had to learn to correspond with others the information they wanted to get through. However just designing a poster for anything or something would not have served the goal. The students needed to experience if their posters did serve their purpose.

The students were made aware of the difficult situations faced by children who are recovering from illness and spend a lot of time in hospitals, far from their families. Some time was spent talking about how parents were unable to stay with their children, due to illness or a long treatment process, and the cost of medication or travel for visits was sometimes an additional burden for families in a difficult financial situation. The students decided to raise money to donate to a children's hospital. To raise money they organised a bake sale and for the bake sale they needed to learn how to make posters (Fig. 6a). They needed to let other students in a school of over 1000 students know what was going on, why they were doing this and when. They needed to reach as many pupils aged 10 to 18 as possible. Their art was to become a tool to raise awareness, but also help them achieve their social goal.

These students managed to raise 1300 Euros, which they donated to hospitalised children with cards they designed for them. Afterwards, they became more aware of the principles of poster design and could devote themselves to designing posters for their favourite music groups or singers (Fig. 6b).

Social educators have a great responsibility when working with children of all ages and abilities, from caring for young children to working with children traumatised by war or abuse. Their training is broad and wide-ranging, not only in visual arts and crafts, but also in other fields including psychology or social studies. One creative way to help them understand and learn about



Figure 5: Artwork made by a student, Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source.



Figure 6: Posters made by students, Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source.

Figure 7: Poster about children's rights made by Patricia Granadeiro Roßmann a student at the Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source; Poster about children's rights made by Christina Pepoudi a student at the Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source.



children's rights was to inspire them to draw and create posters. According to the United Nations, there are 42 conventions on the rights of the child and it is the most ratified human rights treaty in history and has helped transform the lives of children around the world. However, unfortunately, we are still years away from making these conventions a reality for all children around the world. It is therefore a vital responsibility for all of us and the generations we form to learn to stand up and demand that leaders, governments and communities fulfil their obligation to implement children's rights (Fig. 7).

In the following images (Fig.8) we can see another example of work done by a pupil of the Maria Stern Academy for Social Pedagogy, Nördlingen: Laura Rösseler. She has creatively transformed an old bedside table into a wonderful play development game for younger children. An upcycling project that promotes the idea of sustainability.

In my almost 20 years of teaching experience and working as an art educator from pre-school children to adults, I have realised that we should not burden the students with what an artwork should look like, with our expectations, or with our interpretations. We should just guide them along the path of creativity, take them through a tunnel that no one knows what awaits them at the end, and then set as many different mediums as possible for the work at hand and let the student's imagination fly, because creativity needs freedom.

Arts education also can be a gateway to raising students' awareness of their role in making the world a better place. The arts can help educate creative minds who see and observe everything as resources for making something, to learn how to apply those resources in order to develop their skills and dare to conceive new ideas. As Brooks (1987) reminds us, art is not a soft and comfortable old shoe. Political and social themes not only deepen students' artistic experience, but also make it possible for them to create and design diverse

intellectual projects and artworks. Art can take us into the unknown, it is not easy and the path (the process of creation) is unfamiliar to us, but it gives us the possibility to experiment and try out new ideas, develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and our skills and discover new means of expression. It is therefore even more essential that schools and educational institutions provide children, regardless of their background, with the best possible education system and give them access to a high quality arts education.

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Figure 8. Bedside table that would be transformed into a game for children by a student, Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source; Bedside table transformed into a game for children by a student, Academy for Social Pedagogy Maria Stern, Nördlingen, self source..

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