CHAPTER 3

QUESTIONS AND EXPLORATIONS

1. What kind of approach(es) did your teachers use to teach art in the elementary classroom? Do you believe it was effective? How do you feel about art as a result of these experiences?

2. How do the ways that you were taught art influence your thoughts and feelings about yourself as a future elementary teacher teaching art?

3. How does your identity as a teacher intersect with other aspects of your identity? How might your students' identities intersect with your identity?

4. What parts of your identity do you think are the most important at this given moment? Why?

5. Does identity shift depending on time and context? Have you ever experienced such a change? What caused this shift?

6. How do our identities play into our role as a teacher?

7. How is sexual identity treated in our culture? In school settings?

In the Trenches

Ed Check

Ten Years of Elementary Teaching

I taught in a rural elementary school district for ten years. I commuted 120 miles (round-trip) to school each day. I was expected to teach 780 students a week at three schools from a cart. Twenty-eight art classes per week: on Fridays, I taught seven fifty-minute classes. I had one small closet/office to store art supplies at each school. At one school, I shared a closet with the music teacher.

Most of the faculty and support staff was female. There were six males among the three schools. Art, music, physical education, and library were considered "specials." Teachers normally left the classroom to correct papers or do lesson planning during this time. I dealt with over forty different faculty and staff personalities each week, some kinder than others. I also was responsible for weekly lunch and playground duties. I exhibited students' work at all three schools. Initially, I was responsible for providing backdrops for the Christmas pageants. I also scheduled annual field trips to a local art museum.
At the time I was teaching (1980–1989), these seemed like normal teaching conditions. Now, I gasp, wondering how I did it all.

My university art education really didn’t prepare me to teach art well. I learned strategies to “dumb-down” everything to elements and principles of design (Wachowiak, 1977). All my ideas for student projects came from books, and the student results looked like the examples in the books. I was told, “kids have short attention spans and can’t handle much.” My principal echoed that advice, as he required me to make sure that the kids took home a project every week.

My end-of-year evaluations stressed classroom management and control. My principal remarked how neatly a student had filled in a practice sheet for mixing colors. He noted that another student’s sheet was very messy and not good. What he failed to notice was that the messy student understood color mixing and the neat student’s sheet was incorrect. I noticed that children’s studio projects took on a mytho-poetic quality—they seemed more about pseudo-creativity, expression and imagination than anything real. And that fit perfectly into my principal’s notion of art: he wanted pretty childlike things hanging in the halls. It bothered me that much of what we did seemed merely to be filling in between the lines—whether we were painting or making animal sculptures. I felt that I wasn’t challenging the students. More importantly, I didn’t know how because I wasn’t taught how. Art was fun. It had little to do, in my opinion, with creating change or transforming lives.

My elementary school world was really an adult world with a kid’s look. Unintentionally, I treated my students as second-class citizens: rarely did I ask for their input. They were there to follow my directions. I made most of the decisions, and from what I can tell, did most of the work and learning. That’s what I regret about my teaching. I didn’t know that there were other ways to teach about art. As a result, many kids left their childhoods— the realities of them at least—at the school door. Because of that, there were art and life lessons that could never be learned in my classes.

I never really felt confident as an art teacher. Even though the other classroom teachers were impressed with what the children were making, I felt something was missing. I only knew how to make more of the same thing: more paintings, more watercolors, more collages, or more drawings. I tried expanding the art curriculum. I added art history, story-telling and writing. But the learning was still disconnected, detached from the real world. My principal kept pressuring me to produce weekly art products.

I engaged in shouting matches with my principal. I felt like I was being dumped on. I felt devalued and abused. I was constantly told my schedule was easy compared to the student contact time classroom teachers had. One way I took care of myself during those early years was to make art. I made wood collages using scraps from my dad’s shop. I started to attend state art conferences and even gave presentations. I also started working toward a Masters in Art Education. Though inconvenient, I took night classes. I treasured the time I spent with other artists. My thesis was about a disembodied aesthetic education model for teaching—just another way to distract from the real issues in my world.

I recall an advanced graduate oil class. I painted window scenes—interior landscapes looking to the outside. My instructor advised me to look at David Hockney’s work. I seemed to be striving toward a minimalist abstracted style, similar to Hockney. I found out Hockney was gay. It made me feel a little less isolated. This was the mid-eighties. It was ironic in a way, because a man I was dating had zero-conversed that summer.

I liked most of the people I worked with. Many of the classroom teachers disconnected art from the real world. They were afraid of art; afraid of their own art skills. They were afraid to do anything where they could not control the outcome. Every year, I consented to make life-sized body tracings for Mrs. White’s second grade class. This was an activity she could have done herself, but clearly she did not trust her students. She taped the finished images in the student’s seat for open house.

Another second grade teacher asked if I would construct a bulletin board with space ships made by her students. Consenting, to keep good faculty relations, I later asked some of her students to put together the display. Delighted, they spent four days thinking and designing the showcase. When the display was finished, it was obvious that second grade hands had constructed it. When their teacher saw the display, she was displeased.

What saved me during my elementary teaching years was that I continued to make art and I never tired of the students. They were amazingly resilient and inspired me. As I think back, I wish I would have let them make more decisions. Too much of my time was wasted on seating charts, discipline, delegating duties—not on making art and taking risks.

When I resigned my position to go back to graduate school full-time, I left behind a brand new art room that I helped design. It was a large room and even had a library corner. But I was exhausted. Teaching ten years had taken its toll.

Remembering My Childhood

I was born a second generation Polish-American, into a devout Polish-Catholic and working-class family in 1956. My mom’s education stopped abruptly at the eighth grade. She was forced to quit school to work in a factory to provide money for her family (circa 1930s). She became a homemaker and raised six children. My dad was raised on a farm and had a sixth grade education. He was a carpenter by trade and later in life bought out his brother’s small home building business.

As a child, I used to bike to my dad’s shop to drop off his lunch box. Though I loved building things with wood, I preferred the action and activi-
ties in our house. I hadn’t realized that at the time. I had chosen domesticity over adventure, femininity over masculinity.

I kept pretty much around the house. I especially liked being in the kitchen. I would help my mom with dishes, cleaning, baking, shopping and other chores. I especially liked it when my mom’s sisters would visit. They canned, cooked, and baked together. All three of them talked about their childhoods and relatives.

When I think about my formal childhood education experiences, the first response that comes to mind is rage. I’m still angry at my hometown school systems because little of what I learned and experienced worked for me as a gay kid from a working-class background. I was never taught much about my working-class background much less anything queer. Silence, misinformation, invisibility, and shame characterized the methodology and curriculum that I experienced.

When I was five years old, I persuaded my mother to borrow a neighbor’s brownie dress for me to wear. I biked all over the neighborhood. After that day, people in my neighborhood started to refer to me as “Nancy.” This discrimination would turn violent as I got older. As a result, I quickly learned to shutdown and withdraw. I disconnected for safety. I avoided anything that had to do with the feminine or female. These things were anathema to being a boy.

I loved to draw cityscapes. I constructed my own HO-scale city in my basement furnace room. I spent years down there creating architecture and stories. I also liked to play with dolls and cross-dress. I often played with my younger sister.

School reflected little of what was going on in my life or what was going on outside school. On the street, we were talking about kissing, where babies came from, and sex. In school, we talked about current events, but in a depoliticized and sanitized way. I figured out that school wasn’t the place to talk about what I was really thinking or feeling. Not seeing my reality mirrored at school, I became detached. Needless to say, school didn’t prepare me for the realities of my life: death, sex, disease, love, or work.

I did not have much art in elementary school. I recall my fourth-grade teacher not liking my salt map of the United States. I also remember Sister Mary Carla’s sixth-grade class taping large collages in the halls. Elementary school was neat, clean, and cold. It was where I learned to disconnect from my body (Foucault, 1979).

Graduate School

After teaching ten years at the elementary level, I got out. I tired more from the effects of the structures of schooling than teaching kids. I liked being around kids. But, I needed a more hospitable climate for my own interests

and my emerging sexuality. One colleague said she was glad that I found a way to get out. We often talked about the job abuse and fatigue we experienced. Graduate school provided me the opportunity to learn new information and teaching strategies. I was exposed to people and ideas that connected teaching and art to real life issues. I wondered, "Why wasn’t I taught this in the first place?"

I recall a life-altering incident in a graduate theory course. During class introductions the instructor introduced herself as a lesbian. She spoke about her struggle to integrate the personal and professional in her research and teaching. Caught by surprise, I introduced myself as a gay male struggling to connect my identities as artist, gay male, and teacher. I had never talked about sexuality in an educational setting prior to that. It was exhilarating.

From that moment on, I knew it was possible to incorporate my life into my teaching. As a teaching assistant, I experimented with various ways to include the students’ lives into learning about art. I requested non-art major students to develop a semester project that wove together political, personal, or professional interests that they chose.

My teaching started to evolve as a lively interactive process (Ellsworth, 1997). It was a work-in-progress. I took risks and experimented. I created semester work-in-progress projects. At the end of the course, we would present work done to date. One female student investigated the cultural and historical assumptions behind shaving and women. She wrote to various companies for information about ad campaigns and used a first-person narrative as her presentation format. Throughout her presentation, she shaved one leg. Many students were startled. I was too. We were all trying to make connections between her performance art and learning/teaching. It was serious, real, and exciting. Another semester, a male student talked about his interest in baseball architecture. He showed slides and compared and contrasted differences in baseball architecture throughout the twentieth century. Relying upon personal experiences, he used his visits to major ballparks every summer as a context for his investigation.

My changing pedagogy still belied the realities of my life. I continued to disconnect my body and mind. Sexuality was shaming and confusing for me. Talking about sexual identity issues was dangerous—inappropriate at best. I learned from the courage of my students. One female student shared her fears about doing her semester project about AIDS. She debated all semester if she would focus on AIDS as her topic. She was torn between talking about a subject that impacted her life and respecting the privacy of her fiancé’s grief (his brother had recently died of AIDS). She negotiated a respectful way to give her presentation and not offend her fiancé. She cried, retelling how she mustered the courage to confront her fiancé and her own fears and tell her story.

For my part, I volunteered at a lesbian, gay, and bisexual social resource agency and learned first-hand, how other marginalized people created meaning and sanity in their lives. In my dissertation, I was able to
examine disparate parts of my life—gay, aesthetic, and nurturer. I was supported by faculty and friends and, at least in theory, my dissertation and graduate school experiences provided me with the confidence to rethink ways to teach.

University Professor

Graduate school life was quietly brought to a halt with my arrival at a conservative university. In a way, I got slammed back into silence. I initially shut down. I second-guessed any impact I might have on students in such an environment.

I recall the first art education class I taught. Early in the course, I asked students to bring in some art and talk about it. It seemed like a great way to introduce ourselves and connect as artists. I decided to do the same. I explained how my art explored the tension I experienced between being a gay teacher and artist. I described the art heroes and mentors: David Wojnarowicz (1991), Suzanne Lacy (1985), Jonathan Silin (1995), etc. The class was silent. A few students dropped out. A few others suggested that my comments (i.e., my life) were inappropriate in an educational setting.

At first, I internalized the shame of that day—trying to infuse real life issues into the curriculum. And for some time felt I had disappointed my students. I later found out that my introduction was what some students had been waiting for—for years. They knew the power of art and truth-telling. They also sensed that there were other ways to teach and impact kids. What I continue to learn about teaching is that I rarely know when I am connecting with students and for what reasons. I owe it to myself to be as truthful as I can be. This does not mean that being myself and trusting my vision does not involve frustration, rejection, or isolation. It always has.

Later that first semester, we watched Common Threads, an award-winning documentary about the AIDS Quilt. I used it as a contemporary example of people dealing with important issues through the medium of quilt making. As we watched the video, I became physically and emotionally moved. During our break, I cried. I cried about the tension in the class, the loss of friends to AIDS, the difficulty of bridging the gap between school and real life, and the difficulty of being myself in class.

It was during the next semester that a student made everyone leave the art room as he prepared for his end-of-semester presentation—a performance piece critiquing the control and regulation of bodies in culture. Upon re-entering the semi-darkened room, each of us received a slip of paper with a writing. Dressed in white, he walked on the tops of tables, blindfolded at first, and without saying a word, gestured to individuals to read their sheets of paper. He made us repeat our words, first singly, then in groups. Then simultaneously. Toward the end, we were all shouting our verses.

He described his performance as his way to examine the silence of real truths in teaching. He critiqued what schooling had become for him—a loud silence. As we talked about the performance, we realized we had broken every rule usually enforced in school: talking softly, one person at a time, being courteous, etc.

Lessons for Teaching

I wish my undergraduate experiences would have exposed me to collaborative models of teaching and multicultural content. In spite of that, one issue remains constant to this day: the role of the elementary teacher is innately connected to the historical role of women in society (DeSalvo, 1989). By that, I mean patriarchy and misogyny. Women (and men) continue to be systematically marginalized at the elementary level. Teaching duties and responsibilities are disproportionately huge to the value this work receives in the culture and the pay. That's the reality I experienced and continue to see and hear from elementary teachers. The culture continues to ignore and abuse the vast majority of its elementary teachers. We need to address what we call "normal" teaching schedules at the elementary level. The current paradigm does not serve students or teachers well.

Within such enviros, control is one of the few ways to survive—that's what I found as a teacher. Unfortunately, that's what still exists. Recently, I visited a former student now first-year teacher. He was frank about his fears of not only being himself in a school culture that valued conformity and order, but his reliance on classroom discipline to stay sane.

This semester, I am working with a group of art education students who will be teaching at an at-risk and minority elementary school for ten weeks. The school has no art teacher. Already the students are wondering how to teach a lesson in forty-five minutes. How is that possible? I suggest there are ways but I am quick to remind them of the insanity of the situation. I encourage and challenge them to think of other ways to teach. The model I was taught and used as a teacher did not work for me and will not work for them.

So, we experiment.

Listening to students is an important part of my pedagogy. Saying my truths and witnessing to theirs helps build community and integrity (Felman and Laub, 1992). It is these interactive and interdependent relationships that have helped teachers survive in the classroom to this day. But we need to do more than survive. School should be a space where teachers grow alongside students as co-learners.

It has taken me twenty-one years of teaching experiences to realize how cultural sexism and misogyny get enacted in schools. High schools get more money. Art isn't important. One local elementary teacher teaches 480 students on a $200 budget.
I continue to struggle with personal ghosts, loss of control, success, failure, and fear. It's a long list. I recall that I was taught that a good teacher controls the classroom. That's how you get kids to learn. Yeah, that's also how you survive.

Teaching and life experiences have demonstrated to me that children and teachers learn best in supportive, safer and saner environments. But then, kids and elementary teachers are not considered important commodities in this culture. If they were, we wouldn't be having this discussion.

References


CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

1. How familiar is Check's description of teaching elementary art? In what ways, if any, does it resonate with your own experiences of art as a student or a teacher in elementary school?
2. In what ways does Check describe his early years of teaching? How effective was the approach that he took? For whom was such an approach effective?
3. What did Check come to realize was missing from his teaching? What did this lead him to do now in the classroom that he did not do before? What made Check discover these things?
4. What did Check do to make art more meaningful for his students and teaching more meaningful for himself?

5. How is Check's teaching like a work-in-progress? Would your conceptualization of yourself as a teacher change if you were to describe your teaching in this way?
6. Check describes the role of the elementary teacher as being connected to the historical role of women in society. Why does he make this connection? How does this idea affect your identity as a teacher?
7. What is the larger issue that Check raises with regard to elementary teachers and children?
8. How did Check's college students respond to his honesty about his identity as a gay teacher? How do you respond to people who may be different from you? How will that affect your performance in a classroom?

RESOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Debra Chasnoff. It's elementary: Talking about gay issues in school. San Francisco: Women's Educational Media, 1996. (78 minute long videotape.)

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network works to end anti-gay bias in K-12 schools through a network of 85 chapters. The aim of the Network is to create an affirming environment in schools for all students. (www.glsen.org)


Inclusive curriculum: The silent minority comes to the classroom is a curriculum guide produced by the Los Angeles chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network intended for grades pre-K through 12. (www.glsenla.org)


*Tackling gay issues in school*, produced by the Connecticut chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network offers a great deal of information on classroom activities, in-service workshops. It also includes a collection of fact sheets. ([www.outinct.com/glsen](http://www.outinct.com/glsen))