

Art Rooms: Sites of Empowerment and Success

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ABSTRACT: *Students in low socio-economic schools are over-represented in the group of students who leave school without a qualification. This paper derives from a study of New Zealand secondary art teachers' work in Auckland and North Auckland. The study examined art pass rates at year 11 in seventy low socio-economic secondary schools and showed that students are able to achieve at similar rates in art to medium and high decile schools. Performance at year 11 also revealed consistently higher scores in art than other subjects. The study sought to make visible the extent to which art teachers enhance this examination success by examining the beliefs, attitudes and reported practices of three highly successful teachers. The findings introduced and briefly elucidated in this paper draw from a data set of interviews identifying common teacher attitudes and beliefs.*

This paper derives from a study of secondary art teachers' work in decile 1-3 schools, which investigated the beliefs, attitudes and reported practices of three highly successful teachers ('Jack', 'Pete', 'Jon'). In New Zealand, little appears to be known about the beliefs and attitudes of teachers working in low decile schools who have a powerful influence on high student achievement yet it is within the processes of assessment and pedagogy, where beliefs and attitudes manifest themselves, that deep social justice issues lie (Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie, 2003). This paper attempts to promote a deeper understanding of how secondary school art teachers develop and conduct their work, and how they exercise their agency to motivate their Year 11 students to achieve highly within the secondary school assessment system.

A STUDY OF ART TEACHERS

This study was based largely on interviews conducted with the teachers and those familiar with their practice in three low socio-economic, multi-ethnic urban secondary schools, two in Auckland and one in Northland. Art teachers whose students gained the highest scoring national averages of Year 11 art results from the 2000 School Certificate examination were identified and an invitation extended to the teacher to be involved with the project. When compared over a five-year period to other subject results in their own schools with high participation in the School Certificate Year 11 examinations (i.e. English, maths, science, geography), art scores were again consistently much higher. The teachers who participated were all Pakeha men, aged between 40 and 50, and each had about fifteen years of teaching experience. The students

in the study largely identified as Maori, or as descendants of (or new immigrants from) Pacific Islands nations such as Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Nuie, Tuvalu, or Fiji.

From the nominated teachers a 'pod' of people who had knowledge of the three teachers' practice was also interviewed. One of these was the school principal, while the other two were nominated by the teacher and comprised a teaching colleague, and a person from the community. Focus groups consisting of four students from each of the three teachers' 2000 Year 11 School Certificate Art classes were also invited to participate. The semi-structured interviews for all participants included questions on teacher disposition, learning, motivation, teacher/student relationships, cultural diversity and discipline. The findings from all of these interviews were analysed for common beliefs and attitudes.

While the teachers' work was grounded in their own repertoires, biographies and traditions, three common perspectives emerged: the teachers' relationships with their students, their effective pedagogies and perceived philosophies. These emergent themes became the criteria of inquiry for the study and within each theme analytical categories were identified. This paper briefly describes the set of twelve beliefs and attitudes the teachers held in common.

TWELVE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

The first theme (beliefs 1-4) begins with these art teachers' relationships with their students and strongly features the voices of students and colleagues. Following this, beliefs 5-8 are the elements that make up the teachers' pedagogies. The final section, beliefs 9-12, focuses on the philosophies of the teachers.

The Teachers' Relationships

1. Teachers establish a strong connectedness/loving relationship with students
A powerfully motivating duty of care appeared to be at the heart of the teachers' interactions with their students. Strong relationships were established that involved consistency, warmth and caring. According to Jack's principal "if you don't show that you actually do care, you're not in the ball game". An unconditional form of love was demonstrated in these reported interactions and a sense of trust established:

He's precious, he's a precious person in the way that he relates to the students and I think he takes them to another place sometimes.

(Pete's colleague)

Jack's colleague talked about how "just being strict and having fair guidelines and all that sort of thing doesn't always work with our kids and that the students actually need a very caring and soft approach, it works much better". Such an approach helped ensure openness to learning according to Pete: "There's far more nurturing and caring with support here but it's all to do with making them independent learners".

2. Teachers have a sense of solidarity and empathetic regard for students

All three teachers maintained a strong pastoral dimension to their teaching role. They recognised adolescence as a vulnerable time where the teacher often took a mentoring role and empathetic student/teacher relationships were cultivated proactively:

... I think I'm much more accessible to the kids compared to many of the other teachers. I seem to get a lot of inside information, the kids just tell me things.

(Jon)

The teachers' self-reporting suggests that they had a sense of solidarity with their students which lead to non-judgmental classroom climates. Students in Pete's focus group valued the fact that they were not judged in any way by their teacher: "He doesn't show any difference between people".

3. Teachers value students as individuals

The teachers earned loyalty from a diverse range of students by responding to their individual behaviours. Forming an effective relationship was not a matter of applying a formula of approaches. Perseverance was also part of this process: 'He's always quietly nudging them along ... on an individual basis building their own confidence' (Jon's colleague). For Jack, understanding his students as individuals opened up more possibilities for learning:

I think showing them that you care about the class and about the subject and about them as people but also showing them that you've got skills, genuine skills that they can benefit from. Once they believe in those two things then you've got them on side ... once they trust you, they'll take risks for you.

(Jack)

4. Teachers are sensitive to the social and cultural forms of their students

These teachers did not put themselves 'above' their students and appreciated that the students wanted to be treated as adults rather than children. This generated a friendly but honest approach in their interactions: "I think I spend a lot of time talking about stuff that's not art related like movies I've seen and TV programmes so that the students have got a handle on who you are as a person, not some abstract, authority figure" (Jack). Pete's principal described Pete's relationship with students where kids treated him as friends and Jon's principal commented: "When I first came here I couldn't believe how much they sort of knew about kids and how close they were to the kids".

The teachers made a conscious effort to understand the cultures of the students and success in their art programmes came when the students "extend themselves because of who they are and who they are culturally and who they are personally" (Pete). The teachers also placed emphasis on interacting in the classroom in ways that were culturally sensitive and meaningful, "... so you use

Maori words or Samoan words to describe things and try and pronounce their names correctly, don't sit on the table" (Pete).

The Teachers' Pedagogies

5. Teachers actively build skills systematically

Each of the three teachers had quite a deliberate strategy of building on their students' 'technical self-esteem' early in the school year. They worked hard at making the learning process transparent. Jack reported that his junior programme was often geared around taking a long time to do something that looks really good and noted that this drew pride, but that research skills were equally important: "You don't just do a picture, you go and research a topic then you plan how it's going to come out, whether it's a print or sculpture or painting". Jon described how "you let them succeed (with) just really basic stuff and give instant feedback on how well they are going and not make things too difficult". Pete recommended getting juniors involved with sophisticated materials like oil paints early "so they're quite confident with complicated materials by the time they've reached the 5th form so I think they feel empowered mostly".

6. Teachers have relaxed classrooms underpinned with strong structures

While the data suggested that having a good relationship with the students was the first step, Pete talked about the importance of the kind of place that you make the art room. Regardless of how much pressure there was, the classrooms were described by all of the participants in the study as relaxed and comfortable places where strong work routines were evident. Jon's principal described Jon's room: "There will always be a real sense of purpose where they'll be busy, very relaxed, a very relaxed atmosphere". The teachers acknowledged their deliberate attempts to fill their classrooms with humour making a conscious effort to ensure their delivery was interesting and accessible. In fact humour was used actively as a teaching tool and students described their teachers as funny and easy to get along with (Pete's student focus group) and suggested that having a few laughs is important.

7. Teachers have high expectations of all students and empower students to reach their goals

The three teachers expressed the importance of communicating their expectation that all students would pass their Year 11 exam. Pete talked about succeeding as non-negotiable: "We tell them that they're going to succeed, they haven't got a choice". The teachers had high expectations of every student, deliberately communicating this belief at regular intervals so that the students themselves came to believe it:

He told us that we should all pass ... by the time we got to 5th form we were just yeah of course we can pass because all of us thought that we were good at what we did.

(Pete's student focus group)

In this study art students explained how they needed to know their teachers would not give up on them. The teachers articulated this belief so often that the students gained confidence and self-efficacy from it:

He'll like he'll trick you in a way, like you'll feel too stink if you don't do it because he's not, he's like a real cool guy but he's like you know if you let him down he'll just be disappointed, but he'll be disappointed in you so you don't like to disappoint.

(Jack's student focus group)

8. Teachers are active agents outside the classroom and go the extra distance

The principals of these low decile schools acknowledged the extra distance the teachers went in terms of personal energy and 'firing up' the students. All seemed to refer to their school's high marks as an understood convention but were still in awe of the teachers' achievements for their students. Although they were held in high esteem the teachers did not perceive themselves as great followers of school rules and routines. Sometimes the teachers bent the rules. They all commented on 'not noticing' whether students were wearing a jacket, hat or were chewing gum: "To me number one priority is they work and everything else is forgiven provided they work" (Jack). Teacher energy was often focused on countering practical barriers to learning: "If you're going to make a gesture in a department, it's usually food, fish and chips. We do give a lot of materials" (Pete). Each of the three teachers rang the students' homes when there was a concern, informing the parents of the expectations of their children. Jon felt it was important to also communicate "the interest you have over the kids". The teachers did not rely on the premise that work could always be done at home, so made provision for their own 'homework times' albeit differently. Like Jack and Jon, Pete ran workshops during school hours so "when I say homework time, that's kids who might work in the art room at lunchtime or after school". Though Jon did not have weekend workshops like the other two, he always made himself available after school.

The Teachers' Philosophies

9. Teachers model a personal and public passion for learning and are artists themselves

Professional development opportunities helped these teachers to reflect on their practice, change it when necessary and take on leadership roles within their school cluster art networks. These teachers were people who were excited about new knowledge and enjoyed challenges. All had been involved in assessment and professional learning at local and national levels. The teachers in the study were passionate learners, artists themselves and found participating in professional development empowering. The teachers described an energising dimension, generated by engaging in the production of art. Jon described this as "the only way to stay in teaching, to stay afloat and ... the most important thing for art teachers is to have some practice and to explore some of their own interests". Pete generated annual staff exhibitions, while

Jack's colleague commented on the positive flow down effect Jack's exhibition had on his students.

10. Teachers celebrate cultural diversity

Being aware of diverse cultural perspectives was seen as critical in a multi-ethnic school and these teachers gave emphasis to addressing meaningful issues through cultural exploration. The findings in this study suggest that the three teachers did more than recognise diversity, encouraging active engagement with, and celebration of diversity. There was a strong awareness from the participants that every culture was valued in the classroom and exploring cultural content through imagery, symbols and ideas contributed to the art programme's success. The students were positive about valuing the work of others: "You can just sort of see where they're coming from" (Jack's student focus group). For Jack:

The works are more about something, not of something and the consciousness of the students in the last few years has been quite high on that. They are relatively proud of the fact that they can point to an image and say this is here because of this and this is here because of that rather than it's here because it looks pretty.

(Jack)

11. Teachers publicly celebrated student work

As practising artists, the teachers not only communicated their passion for learning to their students but also had high aspirations for their students' work to be celebrated. Each organised public exhibitions and gallery shows above their teaching load to give students the opportunity of sharing their successes. Jack had organised a partnership with one of the local galleries to show student work annually and Jon gained great satisfaction from organising an exhibition of his student work at the airport: "We were getting postcards from strangers and it made them (the students) feel proud to be New Zealanders and proud to be Polynesian" (Jon). Jon's colleague commented on the way the world of the classroom was opened up for the students because "it means that their work is being taken out of context of just being in the school examination programme".

12. Teachers promote meaningful engagement with students' families

The three teachers encouraged their students' families to become involved with both the production and celebratory aspects of their art making experiences. Showing their Year 11 artwork to families and friends, whether in exhibitions or informally, became important for the students. "My uncle came down and he spent about half an hour sitting on the floor just talking to me about it and looking at it because I did my Dad's side of the family more and so that was good being a family theme, that was something to talk about as well, that means that to me" (Jack's student focus group).

One of Jon's students spoke of the positive way his art was received by his family: "My family, they were proud, they said you're going good at your art". Jack talked about how art has: "a unique kind of ownership thing that they can

keep being excited about what they do. And they're proud. Also their parents engage, this is meaningful, then that's huge it gets valued".

DISCUSSION

It was the teacher, it was the people in the class, it was the atmosphere, it was your personal like just the way you felt about things and personal drive and all that kind of stuff.

(Jack's student focus group)

The teachers' relationships, pedagogies and philosophies suggest a picture of how they maximised both academic and social learning in their classrooms. The data from 70 low decile schools points out the distinction that art teachers are ensuring more success in Year 11 achievement than other subjects. The teachers in this study knew that they could not gain high student results without first cultivating the crucial relationship, then building certain common pedagogical elements that convinced all students they were succeeders. Philosophical beliefs, sensitivities, passions and intentions of the teachers became manifest in this process. Can we evaluate how effective their actions were? Furthermore, how transferable are these actions to other subject contexts in low decile schools?

The three teachers expected and secured high aspirations and effective self-management skills for their students, attitudes and skills which are the accepted norm for more economically advantaged students. As in Lingard's et al. study (2003) the teachers' successful building of examination success was inter-dependent with other productive pedagogies of connecting beyond the classroom, creating a supportive environment and valuing diversity and difference. What this evidence suggests is that low decile art departments may offer the pedagogically focused leadership needed in low socio-economic schools. As sites for a seamless integration of the personal, the social and the academic they offer a meaningful starting point.

REFERENCES

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