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Elementary Majors' Resistance to Art Methods Courses: Exploring Issues of Gender, Class, and Civility

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Abstract

We teach art education methods courses to elementary generalist teachers at a large Midwestern state university, where we find some students express entrenched preconceptions about the role of art in elementary curricula and demonstrate resistance to the content and instruction. Collaboratively, we sought to find why these students evidence such resistance. Concerned that this resistance might be in part due to socialization processes that devalue both art and women, we investigated our conjectures by developing survey questions about student expectations, their value of art as a school subject, whether they anticipated integrating art with other subjects in their future classrooms, what ideal content and instructors of an art methods courses should be, and how they experienced other students as supporting or hindering their learning. We performed content analysis of previous course evaluations and survey responses of 145 students and then interpreted findings and drew implications for those teaching similar courses.[2]

1 This article was written collaboratively with equal contributions by each author. Names are listed alphabetically.

2 We would like to thank the National Art Education Association Foundation for providing funds for ongoing aspects of this study. We would also like to thank David Murphy for his contributions to analyzing demographic information and Sara White for transcription work related to this project.

Overt Challenges

We—Lara, Marjorie, and Enid—are faculty members in an art education program at a large Midwestern state university. Like many art educators working at the post-secondary level, art methods courses for pre-service elementary generalist teachers comprise a portion of our teaching responsibilities. Also like others, we encounter challenges of instructing elementary majors in art education methods courses. One day a group of students approached us questioning why art should be included in their elementary education program of studies. "After all," the leader of the group explained, "art is not being tested in our state." A few weeks later, students in one of our classes questioned whether art products produced in class should be graded. "Art should be fun, after all we are not artists," one student emphatically announced.

These students' limited visual arts backgrounds and knowledge, art anxiety, and weak school art experiences in their personal histories have long complicated the success of teaching these students (Beaudert, 2006; Galbraith, 1995; Stokrocki, 1995; Smith-Shank, 1993; Zimmerman, 1994). In Spring 2004, however, a different pattern emerged in our senior-level course, *Art Methods for Elementary Teachers*. We began to experience increased rudeness in class, mean-spirited comments on student course evaluations, and, in a few cases, organized group complaints and overt challenges to our authority as instructors. Some students expected and even demanded high grades for minimal effort.

Although we repeatedly revised the syllabus and tried a number of strategies to engage and appease our students, problems continued across sections and instructors. Certainly all of our students were not dissatisfied, but as instructors we felt that those few who were unhappy had taken on more dominant presences in our classes. There seemed to be a general acceptance of rude behavior among students and the course became onerous to teach. Instructors who were doctoral students, adjunct or non-tenured faculty, and especially those faculty who students viewed as *different* tended to feel especially vulnerable, as negative evaluations could potentially affect promotion, tenure, or future employment. Instructors felt pressured to lower expectations for student performance and give high grades.

Discussing the dilemma, we noted that while problems with

teaching these courses had been acknowledged in art education literature, complex conditions influencing ways that they may play out have not been systematically examined. We wondered if the facts that the majority of students and instructors were women from middle class backgrounds, and if different perceptions about the value and purposes of art education might contribute to students' resistance to these courses. We decided to begin a collaborative research project to seek understanding of forces or factors that might underlie difficulties surrounding the course. The purpose of this article is to share some of our initial investigations. Our study begins with an analysis of course evaluations and a survey of students in our art methods courses. Our work is theoretically framed by selected literature about art as a feminine subject; gendered and classed socialization; and issues of civility and resistance in the context of teacher education.

As a preface, we wish to note our determination to resist blaming students for any negative attitudes about art methods courses, and want to emphasize our interests in examining this topic in all of its complexity. Due to the large numbers enrolled in the *Art Methods for Elementary Teachers* course each year and the significant impact that elementary classroom teachers have on children's education, finding better ways to reach these students is an important issue.[3] In this article, we first provide background about the course and offer a preliminary analysis of course evaluations from previous years. This analysis leads to development of research questions and a student survey questionnaire. Then we discuss survey results interpreted through a theoretical framework. Finally we discuss implications for the field of art education.[4]

Theoretical Framework

We three researchers had some hunches as to why some students in this art methods course at times have less than positive attitudes toward the course and the value of art in the elementary school curriculum. These hunches guided a selection of literature that forms the theoretical framework for our study and serves as the basis for our analysis.

Art Perceived as a Feminine Subject

Some feminists (such as Martin, 2000; and Nicholson, 1980) argue that dominant Western discourses consistently pose the feminine as lesser in value than the masculine. To the extent that art education as a school subject is linked with the feminine, it becomes viewed as insignificant, unnecessary and of lesser value than subjects associated with the masculine. Students are exposed to gender-biased language throughout their lives and may bring such ideas to art methods courses. In terms of pedagogy, Dalton (2001) suggests art education is regularly taught in informal ways that are assumed friendly and comfortable to female learning. Indeed many young women claim to enjoy art making and art classes. She points to the reality, however, that being skilled at art often offers women little in terms of social or economic reward, and those art forms most closely associated with the feminine are the least valued.

Gender and Middle Class Socialization

Also useful to our study is feminist research about ways in which girls and young women need to negotiate contradictory roles within society and are socialized to manage conflict and resolution. Within Western middle class discourses that pose adults as assertive, independent, and in control of their life choices (Broverman, Vogel, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972), "[a]dolescent girls discover that it is impossible to be both feminine and adult" (Pipher, 1995, p. 39). The conventional definition of femininity, which describes one who is a submissive, selfless caretaker, for example, contradicts notions of the independent adult who is empowered to be assertive, to express independent views, and to risk conflict or disagreement. According to Simmons (2002) and Brown (2003), although mainstream cultural stereotypes portray women as inherently irrational and emotional, the "good girl" is expected to keep those impulses in check and abnegate feelings of anger, frustration, or fear. A culture

3 A presentation at the National Art Education Association Convention in Spring 2005 attracted a large interested audience and other art educators approached us to share similar stories.

4 We plan to publish findings from subsequently collected data that include focus group interviews, interviews with instructors, and course observations.

that "refuses girls access to open conflict" forces aggressive tendencies be refocused "into non-physical, indirect, and covert forms" (Simmons, 2002, p. 3).

Cohort groups of young women who spend extended time together might be conducive to fostering this kind of covertly resistant behavior. Simmons (2002) cites research confirming "that the guilt girls experience during aggressive acts decreases significantly when responsibility can be shared with other people" (p. 84). The shielding group provides anonymity for young women who have negative feelings, making their individual opinions hard to identify. As a result, instructors, including art educators, perceived as assertive, empowered, or authoritarian could become targets for indirect bullying by young women within cohorts. In popular culture, the movie *Mean Girls*, the Ophelia Project[5] that focuses on girls' use of relationships to manipulate and damage others, and the aforementioned literature, suggest that relational aggression is encouraged by cohorts.

Lareau (2003), by examining daily family life in poor, working, and middle-class families, explores how children of different social classes come to be advantaged or disadvantaged in public school environments. She discusses how contemporary childrearing beliefs and practices may instill a sense of entitlement among children of middle and upper classes. She describes a context in which parents, and especially mothers, continually mentor skills of assertiveness, public performance, and social interaction. These middle and upper class children are encouraged to view their own opinions and perspectives as valid and equal to those of adults. They learn to negotiate with authority and assume that rules and regulations established for all can be bent toward their individual wishes and needs.

Civility and Resistance

Caboni, Hirschy, and Best (2004) argue that incidents of uncivil behavior in university settings are on the rise, although there has been relatively little research on the topic. Alexander-Snow (2004) writes that women and people of color not only experience greater student incivility, but learn to expect it. She notes that, in general, women faculty and faculty of color are perceived by students as less powerful and/or credible, and as a result their students are more likely to engage in uncivil behaviors.

Given that elementary art methods courses are viewed as unimportant in the larger scheme of things and given that they are frequently taught by women, challenges of teacher authority may be more frequent. It is also known that students often have different expectations of female teachers than male teachers. Women teachers are expected to be warm and nurturing, arguably to behave more like mothers, and are generally not perceived to have the same kind of authority that male teachers have (Cammack & Phillips, 2002; Jipson, 1995).

Course Background

Each semester we provide five to seven sections of a two-credit, required visual art methods course for undergraduate elementary education majors, with 24-28 students per section. It is taught by art education specialists, both faculty and doctoral students. Although a few men have taught the course, the majority of instructors are women. The course is part of a cluster of methods courses, which also align with an early field experience.[6] The students, who are senior undergraduates, complete all courses in the cluster as a cohort and take the art methods course in their final semester, just prior to student teaching. As in many elementary teacher preparation programs, almost all are young women.

All sections of the art methods course use a common syllabus; however, individual instructors interpret and present course content somewhat differently. It includes strategies for looking at and talking about art; developing art vocabulary; finding and evaluating teaching resources, designing standards-based lesson plans, and media experience in the context of sample art education lessons and integrating art with other

5 The Ophelia Project began in 1997 in Erie, Pennsylvania with a group of parents and now has many national chapters, including one in our own community.

6 The early field experience provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to become familiar with actual school practices. They are short term and distinguished from student teaching, which involves a full time intensive practicum.

subjects. The curriculum incorporates issues related to child development in art, inclusion, multiculturalism, and assessment. Assignments include reflective responses to readings, a bookmaking assignment, analysis of a child's drawing, as well as creation of a resource binder. As part of the field experience in Spring 2004, students designed and taught a visual art lesson integrated with a social studies unit (see Figure 1).

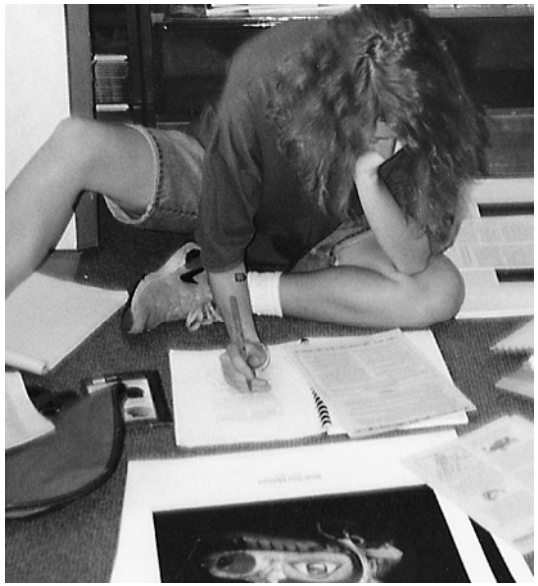

Figure 1. A student in an art methods class is researching an integrated art and social studies unit using a variety of resources. Photo by authors © 2007.

The two-credit art methods course meets once a week for two hours, whereas three-credit methods courses in other subjects meet from two to three hours twice a week. The art methods course, therefore, is sometimes viewed as an add-on and not of primary importance. Because our program is positioned in a school of education, students complete a required pre-requisite within the School of Fine Arts, dichotomizing the studio and pedagogical content. Toward the end of their program of studies, students are concerned about completing their coursework, their student teacher placements, and passing the Praxis exiting examination in their major area.

Findings from Course Evaluations

Although a majority of students report positive experiences in the art methods course, several are overtly resistant and there seems to be a general malaise expressed through course-end assessments. Hoping to better understand student perspectives about the course, we conducted a content analysis (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005; Wolcott, 1997) of course evaluations over a span of five years, 1999-2004, and then developed a survey questionnaire to which all elementary generalist, art methods students were asked to respond.

At our university, all instructors are required to distribute a standard course evaluation at the end of each semester. The form includes a place to rank the course and instructor based on five questions and encourages additional written comments. In our analysis, we focused on the written comments that presented information in ways that rankings could not. We randomly selected course evaluations from all sections for Fall 1999, Fall 2000, Spring 2001, Spring 2002, and Spring 2003 semesters. In our first layer of analysis we categorized student comments as positive or negative. For example, one student wrote, "The teacher was great and changed my attitude about art." A negative comment was "It seemed that the instructor was constantly in a power struggle [with the students] and concentrated more on that than on teaching." Although there were more women than men instructors of the art methods courses, there were no appreciable differences among student evaluations of male and female instructors.

Positive comments (81%) about teacher characteristics included descriptive words such as enthusiastic, energetic, helpful, fun, awesome and great instructor, positive attitude, and cared about and respected students. Positive comments about course content and teaching strategies (72%) were that instructors introduced useful activities about how to include art in academic classes, gave good feedback, graded fairly, and made doing art projects fun. Negative comments (about 7%) about instructors included comments such as: the instructor was not respectful of students' points of view, not a good listener to students' ideas, didn't connect with students, or lacked good classroom management skills.

Negative comments about the course (11%) focused on percep-

tions that instructors graded too harshly, did not give enough feedback, or gave assignments that were too long and included busy work, and assigned lesson plans that were complex and difficult to put into practice.[7] Some students thought that too much was expected of them as they were not art majors (6%). Some would have liked more hands-on projects (15%) included in the course. A few felt the class was a waste of time and pointless (5%). Often students within the same section perceived the instructor and the value of the course in opposing ways.[8]

Research Questions

Review of evaluation comments revealed that a percentage (11%), albeit small, of students across time and course sections questioned the validity of the art methods course. Findings led us to formulate the following research questions that we administered to all students enrolled in all sections of the art methods course in the Spring 2004 semester:

1. How do pre-service elementary majors and their instructors understand and experience an art methods course at our university?

2. To what extent does the literature related to art as a feminine subject (Dalton, 2000), gender and middle-class socialization among girls and women (Brown, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Pipher, 1995; Simmons, 2002), and issues of civility and student resistance in higher education (Alexander-Snow, 2004) help explain student responses to and student/teacher relations within the pre-service art education courses for elementary teachers at our university?

3. How do our findings inform the form and content of the art methods course for generalist elementary majors at our university?

Findings of the Spring 2004 Survey Questionnaire

The survey instrument, distributed in 2004, includes demographic questions and eight open-ended questions to elicit attitudes toward the art methods course. A total of 145 students in all five sections of the art methods course participated in the survey. Anonymous responses reveal that the students are predominantly White (almost every student), middle-class[9] (about 85%), and female (95%). Slightly over 75% are in-state residents; *not* first generation university attendees, and identify their homes as suburban or small town. Thirty percent of these students' mothers are identified as teachers.

The first and second open-ended questions ask students to describe their prior expectations for the art methods course. Their responses (89%) generally suggest that they believe they would and should be taught to integrate art with other subjects in the general education classroom through hands-on activities that are fun, practical, easy to do, and can be completed in a short amount of time.

In response to Question Four, regarding whether or not, after having completed the methods course, they anticipated integrating art into their future classroom curricula, students overwhelming (nearly 89%) affirm that they definitely plan or are hopeful about doing so, and suggest social studies and language arts as logical subjects for arts integrations. When asked how important they view art in the context of the elementary school curriculum, (Question Seven), over two-thirds again reported they view art as: very important; equal in importance to other subjects; or at least of qualified importance including value as a separate or special sub-

7 Evaluation responses were open ended and some students did not comment on every issue, so percentages do not add up to 100%.

8 Course evaluations are kept confidentially in each department at our university, so it is not possible to gain access to course evaluations in other subjects for comparison. Course evaluations, however, did confirm some of our previous perceptions about students' reactions to the art methods course and provided a springboard for the survey questionnaire that we next designed.

9 The label of students as *middle class* is based on descriptions of parents' occupations and educational backgrounds.

ject. But, in the context of the elementary generalist classroom and relative to other subjects, close to a third of the responders still viewed art as lesser in importance than other subjects, or at least as lesser in terms of their future employment.

We can see, as Dalton (2001) argues, that art, as a feminized subject, is not highly valued even when enjoyed. In our study students for the most part enjoy and even claim to value art education. They insist on its need to be pleasurable and informal. They also, however, recognize the status of art making as less significant within dominant discourse and educational practice, and may well doubt its value in what they perceive as the *real* world into which they are beginning a career.

From responses to Questions One, Two, Four and Seven, therefore, it appears the majority of students value art as hands-on extensions of academic lessons. They value art less as a stand-alone subject that requires special skills and knowledge or extensive preparation. About 10% of the students admit feeling hesitant at the outset of the course because they believe that talent is needed to obtain good grades in art. After completing the course, approximately the same small percentage of all the students continue to express doubts about the value of arts integration, are critical of the art methods course, and indicate that they find it to be "a waste of time," or state that they had no intentions of incorporating visual art into their teaching.[10]

Perceptions of art as valuable for reasons other than for its own sake, are reiterated by responses to Questions Three and Six, which focus on issues of assessment. When asked if they thought art products should be graded, a slim majority (54%) specifically indicate they did not believe art should be graded, or at least, not on the resulting appearance or quality of art products or "the skill of the maker." Furthermore, among those who indicate they think artworks might be graded, the majority believe assessment should be based on how much time and effort is put into artwork, whether directions are followed, or simply by participating in the assignment. Less than 2% of the total respondents indicated that students might be assessed according to specific criteria of lesson objectives or the thoughtfulness evidenced in an art product, although assessment was role modeled for students in variety of ways including evaluation by peers, self, and instructors through essays, rubrics, lesson plan forms, and portfolios.

When asked, "If art is not being tested . . . should an art methods course be required?" an overwhelming percentage (88%) agreed that art methods should be taught in the elementary classroom, and methods courses should be included in the teacher education program. They value art as a vehicle for creativity, self-expression, pleasure, calming therapy, or in terms of non-specific notions about art appreciation. Two explanations were especially intriguing: describing how art might be used in the classroom, one student writes, "I will use a child's drawings of scenes in books or history to assess their knowledge." Another indicates, "It will be used as an alternative way of assessment." Here, students suggest that art might be a tool for assessing other subjects, even though the majority believed (Question Three) that art itself should not be assessed.

Over a third of the students did not think that the course will be useful in the future, even though they often cannot articulate what content should be included or how it might be taught differently. A few, however, did suggest the pedagogy class should be combined with a studio art course that emphasizes art making.[11]

In Question Five, respondents are asked to describe an ideal instructor for an art methods class. Many students mention qualities that are common to rules of effective pedagogy. They want their art methods instructors to provide and administer clear criteria, consistency, and uniformity in terms of grading procedures. About 17% insist that they deserve to be "respected as peers" of an art methods instructor, and dislike being treated "like children," treated differently, or generally disrespected. Another student expressed a belief that she was entitled to have her own opinion validated over her instructor's, "She . . . tells us our opinions are wrong on our papers when the explanation is our own opinion." An explanation for some women students' comfort with resisting instruction might be a socialized sense of entitlement, as described by

10 Because students were anonymous, we were not able to compare grades with the students comments on the survey questionnaire.

11 As noted, in our program Elementary Majors are required to take a 3.0 credit course in studio art in addition to the 2.0 credit Art Methods course. This suggestion implies that the two required courses be combined in one, thus reducing the total credits required.

Lareau (2001) that assumes adults will readily serve them. Also, Alexander-Snow's (2004) assertions that being a woman faculty member who is not assumed to have the same authority as a male faculty member may play a role here as well.

The most frequently (50%) mentioned quality, however, is that an art methods instructor should have experience as a generalist classroom teacher and understand the daily experiences of a generalist teacher rather than that of the art teacher. The ideal instructor is described as fun, enthusiastic, patient, supportive or helpful, flexible yet fair, creative, but open to and non-judgmental of the ideas students offer. Several indicate that an ideal instructor would not criticize their work. Ideal instructors are additionally characterized (67%) as those who provide students with lots of hands-on activities and useful ideas for incorporating art in the classroom. About one-fourth of the students dislike being assigned "pointless" readings, being required to write detailed art lesson plans, or being expected to perform like art teachers. These responses, by more than a majority, imply that the function of an art methods instructor should be to present ideas for easy-to-do art, make class fun, and unconditionally support student ideas with enthusiasm and non-critical comments. Not more than 5% of respondents mention that an art instructor should have background and experience related to art or art instruction, implying that these characteristics are unimportant.

Finally, students were asked, "In what ways have other students in the art methods class hindered or supported your learning experiences?" (Question Eight). More than half the students' responses indicate that peer culture and support is strong, and students often bond and commiserate together about challenges that the art methods course presents. Over half reported that other students collaborate with and support them in the art methods class. Only 19% report that no one hindered or supported them, and that they did not feel influenced by the group. Comments from 6% of the students, in response to Question Eight, reveal a sense of group consensus as to how they experience the class with comments such as, "Most people agree that this class was painstakingly boring and unhelpful," or "We all agree that 80% of our class experience has been a waste of time." This finding agrees with Simmons' (2002) argument that there may be a connection between relational group aggression and attitudes of some students, particularly towards women instructors and classmates, who may not concur with the consensus of a dominant group in a course.

An equally small number of students (6%) express feelings of alienation from the core group. These students were generally positive about class content, but negative about receiving peer support. For example one student writes, "Some students talk too much and need to have feelings for others. Lots laughed at my work and made me sad." Others (7%), who really enjoyed and valued the art methods course, feel hampered by negative attitudes expressed by other students. One student comments, "They hindered my learning by thinking they would be better able to teach this class than the instructor," and another writes "A lot of students made rude comments about the worthlessness of the class, but I've greatly enjoyed it." Group members who join together in common bonds can therefore effect students' attitudes and learning, both positively and negatively, in art methods classes (see Figure 2). Indirect bullying by young women in cohort groups, as Simmons (2002) describes, can be a factor in how this small group percentage experiences the course (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Members of student groups within an art methods class can learn to work together collaboratively and cooperatively to develop positive attitudes towards art methods classes. Members of student cohort groups also can hamper some students' enjoyment and learning in education methods classes. Photo by authors © 2007.

Figure 3: Members of student cohort groups also can hamper some students' enjoyment and learning in education methods classes. Photo by authors © 2007.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings at this point cannot be generalized and are specific to our own setting; nevertheless, some readers may recognize commonalities with their own circumstances. The conclusions we can draw are limited as well by our focus on students' written comments and claims as they complete the particular and situated tasks of course evaluations and responding to a questionnaire. This part of our study cannot address, therefore, the gaps between what people say or write and how they actually behave now or in the future. Many of our findings reiterate issues raised by other art education researchers (such as Beaudert, 2006; Galbraith, 1995; Stokrocki, 1995; Smith-Shank, 1993; and Zimmerman, 1994). By drawing on literature that explores gendered and classed enculturation as well as civility issues in higher education, however, we begin to build a stronger understanding of the complexity of teaching art methods courses to elementary majors, which in our situation is a case of women art educators teaching a feminized subject to women students in a field of general education.

We note that in exploring issues of gender with respect to this study, we are not making a case that there is a causal relationship between the largely female populations of art methods courses and dissatisfaction with the course. We do believe, however, that certain feminist literatures help to inform ways in which art education is undervalued as well as the potential impact of cohort groups on courses such as this one. University-level art educators may be seen by students as lacking professional authority and may be undervalued as teachers. A population of middle-class students, therefore, may feel entitled to challenge a course where a taken-for-granted low status is concerned. Where cohort groups exist, along with strong peer relationships, potential for challenges from some students may be exacerbated and even predictable.

It also could be interpreted that young women, who may accept the conventional femininity of being a "good girl" are attempting to move out of their expected behaviors and respond with criticism when completing course evaluations and questionnaires. Through an opportunity of anonymous feedback, they are able to practice being assertive and authoritarian, qualities they may not fully embrace as they are acting out in a protected context. In other words, student course evaluation responses may be viewed as a window into an otherwise hidden world.

Art educators need to counter taken-for-granted attitudes among many higher education colleagues and administrators that art education should be merely fun and easy. Attention should be given to institutional and structural support for art methods courses, including instructors' rights to make and uphold pedagogical decisions, and an institutional culture that insists on adult-like and professional behavior among preservice teachers.

Programs designed around cohorts may effectively build communities of learning within core classes, but they may be detrimental for courses attached more marginally to the cohort. Art educators might have better teaching conditions with a random selection of students who do not have firmly established peer relations. Art methods courses that take place earlier rather than later in student programs of study may allow students to develop conceptions of generalist teaching that embrace the arts. Courses that take place at the end of students' study may battle more firmly entrenched and traditional notions of what it means to be a classroom teacher. Art education methods courses should include applications of contemporary feminist pedagogy and positive models for developing leadership so that elementary education majors can reflect on and confront their attitudes about art and take action to value art in their future

classrooms.

We have just begun to understand phenomena underlying why some students are resistant to art education methods courses, especially when issues are related to women students' gendered roles, middle class entitlement, and entrenched notions about the value of art education in elementary curricula. We have started on a path to make evident the hidden culture of behaviors that may work against art education being considered a worthwhile component of elementary teacher preparation programs. We believe it is imperative that we listen carefully to the perspectives of elementary education majors and hear what they are trying to tell us about their needs and expectations. Art educators at the university level need to work closely with the many elementary generalist teachers who are innovatively integrating the arts within their classrooms, and begin to use these individuals as professional models (Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2006). We can learn from and contribute to the work of teachers who collaborate to build models of art education practice for elementary classrooms that address new notions of feminism, group tolerance, well-considered values, and an environment of acceptance and civility.

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