



1-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Stankiewicz, Mary Ann (1980) "Goals for Art Education," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 7: No. 2.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1918>

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A critical look at 'creative needs' and 'mental health' as goals in art education.

Goals for Art Education

By Mary Ann Stankiewicz

Art education shares some goals with general education. For this reason, art educators can benefit from critical analysis of educational goals by philosophers of education. The reverse may also be the case; some examinations of art educational goals may have value for general education. This paper is an attempt to look critically at "creative needs" and "mental health" as goals in education, specifically art education.¹ Although my examples of goal statements will be taken from writings in the field of art education, similar goals are found in general education. Three conceptual analyses by philosophers of education will be used in this examination: Boyd Bode on the concept of needs in education; R.S. Peters on mental health as an educational aim; and J.P. White on the concept of creativity. This paper will not only suggest some problems with a certain sort of educational goal but also point to some relationships between philosophical analysis of educational goals and curricula.

One common goal for the teaching of art in public schools states that children have certain needs, including the need to be creative. These needs must be met, the goal continues, so that children will develop into fully-functioning, mentally healthy adults. In this goal, three notions, human needs, creativity, and mental health as an aim of education, are linked in a means to ends relationship. While these notions are often found in art education, they are not limited to art education.

The notion that one goal of education is to meet

children's needs was frequently espoused by Progressive educators during the 1920s and 1930s. A more contemporary example can be found in the British Plowden Report, which brought the notion of "the open classroom" to the attention of educators. The Plowden Report proposed planning education in terms of children's needs, some of which are listed below:

Children need to be themselves, to live with other children and with grownups, to learn from their environment, to enjoy the present, to get ready for the future, to create and to love, to learn to face adversity, to behave responsibly, in a word, to be human beings.²

Writing on creative needs as a goal for art education reached a zenith during the 1940s in the work of such authors as Natalie Cole, Victor D'Amico, and Viktor Lowenfeld.³ However, this same goal can be found in the work of earlier art educators, for example, Margaret Mathias. Mathias had served as elementary art supervisor in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and as Director of Art in the Public Schools of Montclair, New Jersey. She also taught summer sessions for Kindergarten and first grade teachers at Columbia Teachers College. Mathias was an early proponent of a Progressive philosophy in art education who advocated meeting children's needs through art. She declared that art teachers should make children's art needs their first concern.⁴ One sort of art needs were creative needs:

This drive to respond to experience we call creative power. At one time creative power was thought to exist in only a few people. Now we believe that every one has creative power. And, further, the psychologist shows us that every one must have opportunity to create if he is to have wholesome development. When we think over our own experience, we realize our satisfaction in making something which we ourselves have thought of, and for which we feel responsible, and which we are able to carry through to completion. This satisfaction we recognize as one of the highest and most dependable of human enjoyments.

Therefore, our first and most important reason for teaching art is to help each individual develop his creative power.⁵

In Mathias' terms, art is the response to experience through materials, a definition derivative of her mentor John Dewey. Mathias distinguished two sorts of creative needs: a drive to respond to experience and a desire to make things. Together these constituted "creative power," a notion taken from the writings of Arthur Wesley Dow.⁶ Not only does our creative power give us enjoyment, but according to psychology, exercise of creative power is necessary to healthy growth. Therefore, the development of creative power is the most important goal of art education.

Creative power is, according to Mathias, a human need. But, what do we mean when we talk about "needs"? Boyd Bode in 1938 pointed out that what we call "needs" are the same as wants or desires.⁷ The label "need" was used in Progressive Education to legitimize certain wants. Bode asked how one determined which wants ought to be legitimized as "needs," and concluded that, given conflicting wants, a decision was best made in reference to an end within the context of a program or philosophy. Thus, an educator who begins the process of curriculum de-

velopment by looking at student "needs" is working backward. The correct place to begin, according to Bode, is by asking about the ends of education.

Given Bode's analysis of the concept of needs in education, we can see one problem with Mathias' statement of a goal for art education. She conceived of creative power as a human need and began curriculum development from this "need." Since the need is only legitimate in terms of some end, Mathias is merely talking about children's desire to create unless she makes reference to some end and to a framework within which such desires might be legitimated as needs. One end met via creative power is enjoyment. Making art and looking at art are satisfying and enjoyable activities according to Mathias. While we might all agree on the enjoyment to be found in such activities, most of us would probably hesitate before recommending enjoyment as the principle aim of education. Certainly, we want the student to enjoy learning, but teaching a subject with only the goal of enjoyment seems frivolous in these days of "back to basics." However, enjoyment is not the only end served by the creative needs. Mathias tells us that psychologists have shown creative needs necessary to healthy development. Teaching art as a means to healthy growth seems, at first glance, a sounder goal than art for enjoyment.

II

Generally, a psychologist focuses his interest on mental development. The result of wholesome mental development is a state referred to as "mental health." Thus, Mathias has legitimized creative wants into "creative needs" within a psychological framework with mental health as an aim for education. R.S. Peters has analyzed the concept of mental health as an aim for education, so let us refer to his discussion.⁸

Mental health as an educational aim is just one aspect of the modern trend of looking to science for values, according to Peters. "Mental health" appears to offer a norm which might function as a goal. In Peters' analysis, "mental health" refers to the development and regulation of wants in a realistic, undistorted, and comparatively conflict-free manner. The psychologist who holds "mental health" as a norm is not telling us which wants are worth satisfying, but rather that wants should be regulated to some extent so that conflicting wants can be avoided. Most of the qualities psychologists list under the heading "basic needs" are of the sort described above and can be subsumed under rationality or mental health; the notion of self-actualization is slightly different.

The concept of self-actualization is found in the writings of Abraham Maslow, a psychologist whose work has influenced humanistic education. According to Maslow, the hierarchy of basic human needs has as its base physiological needs which must be met for survival of the organism. The hierarchy moves upward to safety, love, and esteem needs, and is topped by the need for self-actualization.⁹ Maslow's definition of a healthy individual is one who has met all the basic needs of "a man who is thwarted in any of his basic needs may fairly be envisaged simply as a sick man. . . ." ¹⁰ Self-actualization, the need to "become everything that one is capable of becoming," ¹¹ is met by very few individuals according to Maslow.¹² Perhaps this lack is due to the complexity of self-actualization; components include more efficient perception of reality, spontaneity, ability to center on problems, quality of detachment, and creativeness, among

others.¹³ Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs might be visualized as a flight of steps. Only the human being standing on the top step, who has met all his basic needs can, according to Maslow, be considered mentally healthy. Since art education offers opportunities to meet one's creative needs, art education claims a share in meeting the educational aim of mental health.

To Peters, self-actualization implies more than mental health and the satisfaction of basic needs; it implies growth, extending the self toward goals higher than subsistence. Thus, it seems odd to include self-actualization as a necessary part of mental health, as Maslow did, since we can have mental health without self-actualization. As Peters writes, "though people may be missing a lot that they might find satisfying if they don't devote themselves to art, music, and good causes, it is odd to describe them as mentally ill."¹⁴ Certainly we do not usually limit the state of mental health to the few individuals who are self-actualizing according to Maslow.

From Peters' analysis we can see that "mental health" is not a sound goal for education, suggesting as it does the regulation of some human wants at a minimum level necessary for functioning within some system. Asserting that education should seek to develop people who can maintain a state of mental health is a negative counsel which ignores the function of education in the transmission of culture, according to Peters. Education is neither medicine nor therapy. "The main function of the teacher is to train and instruct; it is not to help and cure," writes Peters.¹⁵ Even speaking of social improvement as a goal for education does not logically imply individual mental health. Although society, as a whole, may not be able to regulate wants, individuals within that society may be rational. And, vice versa, although each individual may possess rationality, to assume that the group possesses rationality is to commit the fallacy of composition.¹⁶

If meeting human needs is not sufficient as a goal for education, and "mental health" also falls short, can the goal of developing creativity serve as a sound goal for art education?

III

The writers of the Plowden Report, like many other educators, assert that children want to create. Many art educators, for example, Margaret Mathias, have claimed creativity as their special domain. The artist is, after all, the paradigm for the notion of creation.¹⁷ Aestheticians often speak of art as creation of a new world, a new reality, or a new realm of possible emotions. The artist gives this new world form through various media. Like the adult artist, the young child draws, paints, or models when supplied with appropriate materials. Thus, the art educator who supplies the child with crayons, paints, paper, and clay and who encourages the child to make pictures and clay figures will often tell you that his/her goal is to develop the child's creativity.

From Bode's analysis, we know that "creative needs" can be distinguished from simply wanting to create only within a framework with some end in view. From Peters' analysis, we know that if the end which legitimizes meeting creative needs through education is a concept of mental health as an aim for education, then we have some problems. If "creativity" is part of "mental health," that is, if all human beings must be creative in order to function at a level of rationality, then developing creativity cannot serve as an educational goal. It is merely a standard for

minimum functioning. If, on the other hand, "creativity" is more than a norm such as "mental health," then it may logically serve as a goal for education.

J.P. White in his analysis of "creativity" suggests that a paradigm case of creativity would be Einstein as a scientist or Dostoyevsky as a novelist.¹⁸ In either of these cases, "creative" refers to some sort of product, not to some inner state. If Dostoyevsky had left no record of written work, we would find it difficult to evaluate him as a creative person. The product is creative, not in isolation, but within some field of endeavor with certain standards, according to White. The standards are necessary in order to determine if the work under consideration is impressively different from the average range of works in that field. We do not usually speak of the designer of a production line car as an exemplar of creativity, but we might well point to the designer of the Bricklin as an example of creativity in automotive engineering.

"Creativity" seems to function in two ways, to describe and to evaluate. In White's analysis, "creativity" is more than minimum performance in some area. Therefore, developing students who can do outstanding work in science or the arts might well be a viable goal for education. If we were to talk about a person displaying creativity, not in the arts or in science, but in regulating their wants (what Peters described as mental health), then we would, given White's analysis of the term, have to be talking about functioning at an impressive level. The person who displayed creativity in regulating wants would have to go beyond minimum functioning. Thus, creativity cannot logically be a necessary part of a minimum standard for mental health, but it might serve as a goal for education.

IV

When we return to Mathias with the information garnered from our three philosophers of education, we can elucidate her goal of meeting children's creative needs. First, these "creative needs" are wants. Children want to respond to experience and to make things. Second, these wants are legitimated as "needs" only in terms of some end within a context. "Mental health" cannot function as an educational end because it is merely a negative counsel, describing minimum rational functioning. Developing curricula which provide children with opportunities to make and to respond so that they can be mentally healthy confuses education with therapy. When the desires to make and to respond are set in a context with "creativity" as an end, the situation changes. "Creativity" implies going beyond a minimum performance; it implies a product which is impressive when measured against some standards. "Creative power" in art education, then, would imply making art that is impressive when evaluated by standards within the art world. "Creative power" in response would imply a sophisticated ability to react to experience rather than a naive response.

Mathias may be correct in saying that all people want to make things and to respond to experience. Her use of "creative" legitimates these wants, not as a means to mental health, but as a means to artistic performance and appreciation at an impressive level. All people may be able to make art and to appreciate art, but not all will do so impressively when judged according to the standards set by various theories of art. The implication of White's analysis of "creativity" is that only some people can be called creative in any given field. Thus, Mathias contradicts

White if she seeks to make everyone a creative artist.

If creativity, as White has analyzed it, is a goal for art education, then certain consequences follow. First, students need opportunities not only to make art and to respond to art, but also to learn standards for achievement in art. Thus, art history as the study of past artistic achievements, art criticism as the study of current standards in art, and aesthetics as the study of values in art would seem appropriate in a curriculum with the goal of developing creativity.¹⁹ Second, the art educator should certainly try to help each student become creative, but not all students can achieve that goal. Third, curricula which focus on self-expression, permitting the student to make whatever he/she wants without any standards would seem to be, not paradigms of creativity in art education, but rather misunderstandings of the concept. A parallel conclusion would seem to apply to education in general. Creativity may be a viable goal, but curricula which ignore standards of achievement and permit students to "do their own thing" with no provision for evaluation cannot logically claim to be developing creativity.

NOTES

¹ Quotation marks around a term denote discussion of the concept.

² *Children and Their Primary Schools*, vol. 1, par. 501-507, in *The Open Classroom Reader*, ed. Charles E. Silberman. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 88.

³ Natalie Robinson Cole, *The Arts in the Classroom*. New York: The John Day Company, 1940.

Victor D'Amico, *Creative Teaching in Art*. Scranton, Pa.: International Textbook Company, 1942.

Viktor Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947.

⁴ Margaret E. Mathias, *The Teaching of Art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, p. v.

⁵ Mathias, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

⁶ Arthur Wesley Dow, *Theory and Practice of Teaching Art*, 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 1912, p. 1.

⁷ Boyd H. Bode, "The Concept of Needs in Education," *Progressive Education*, 15 (January 1938), 7-9.

⁸ R.S. Peters, " 'Mental Health' as an Educational Aim," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum*, ed. Jane R. Martin. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970, pp. 93-105.

⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970, pp. 35-47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-170.

¹⁴ Peters, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 4th ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1972, pp. 96-97.

¹⁷ R.K. Elliott, "Versions of Creativity," *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* (July 1971), 142-143.

¹⁸ J.P. White, "Creativity and Education: A Philosophical Analysis," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum*, ed. Jane R. Martin. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970, p. 122.

¹⁹ For a curriculum model in art education based on the roles of the artist, the art critic, the art historian, and the aesthetician, see: Gilbert A. Clark and Enid Zimmerman, "A Walk in the Right Direction: A Model for Visual Arts Education," *Studies in Art Education* 19, No. 2 (1978), 34-49.