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Recommended Citation

Becci, Carol. "Comparative Case Studies of Two Visually Impaired Students and Their Art Experiences in the Public School." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 2 (1983): 24-27.

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COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF TWO VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS
AND THEIR ART EXPERIENCES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

Carol Becci

Blind children, as do all other children, have a need and desire for artistic expression. Many art educators, however, approach mainstreaming experiences of blind students with apprehension and confusion because they regard the sense of sight as the decisive factor of artistic experience and ability. Quite to the contrary, imaginative activity and artistic experience for any person does not have to be an experience of the visual, or depend on the capacity for observation. This study closely examines the artistic expression of blind children along side children whose sight is normal. Through these comparative case studies it becomes apparent that all children, both blind and normally sighted, make and experience art in almost the same manner.

The two blind students in the study are both male. One is 12 and the other is 14. The 12-year-old has been blind since birth, and never had a formal art experience before. The 14-year-old, although legally blind, can see objects if they are held up two inches from his eyes. This is his second experience in an art room. Therefore, before the actual school year began, I assumed that the 14-year-old would encounter fewer problems than the 12-year-old since the 14-year-old has some degree of sight and already had a previous art experience. I also assumed the 12-year-old would create art in a haptic manner because he is totally blind, and that the 14-year-old would create art either in a visual manner or haptic manner, or in both. I was soon to find out, only three weeks into the school year, that both my assumptions were wrong. The 14-year-old, although having the ability to see, refused to use the small amount of sight he had and also refused to use his sense of touch. Any art experience that required more than a pencil and paper presented tremendous problems and anxiety for the 14-year-old. The 12-year-old, on the other hand, was having success after success with each art project. Many times even more success than the sighted students. He also seemed to create in a visual manner although he never had the ability to see. I was beginning to find that sight was not a critical factor for the making of art.

I began looking for other research that might support what I was discovering with my blind students, and the material I found at first was very scarce and limited in content. I then came across The Nature of Creative Activity, by Viktor Lowenfeld (1959). This book provided a sound philosophy of children's art, the handicap of blindness, and how all children, both blind and sighted, make and experience art. This resource provided a sound philosophy that helped to clarify the facts I was finding, and to approach art education of the blind with confidence and certainty.

Before teaching art to blind students, one must become familiar with the implications of blindness upon the individual's life. Two

individuals with the same degree of physical handicap may differ widely in their detachment from the environment. This detachment may be classified into 2 kinds: Objective Detachment, which is the degree of the individual's handicap, and Subjective Detachment, which is the degree by which an individual suffers from her or his handicap. For example, blindness can mean a serious handicap for someone who is longing for sight and so remains unaware of her or his own qualities. This description is similar to the 14-year-old in my case study. Although he does have some degree of sight, he scarcely uses it. To complicate matters he has allowed his loss of sight to overcome him and is desensitized to some of his other senses, especially touch. In contrast to blindness that becomes a serious handicap for some, for another blindness can become part of the personality. This type of person adjusts to her or his blindness and uses all opportunities to enrich life as subjective detachment ceases to exist. This description is similar to the handicap of the other blind student in my comparative case study. Although the 12-year-old has been completely blind since birth, he uses all of his remaining senses to their utmost to enrich life. He actually has turned his blindness into a positive asset in his life.

Thus, if one has the opportunity to live or work with these two types of blind individuals, it becomes apparent that blindness can become a secondary handicap in a person's life. If the blind person accepts her or his blindness as a trait, and develops other senses and skills, that individual will live as a normal person.

Sighted individuals usually underestimate the capabilities of the blind, and educators of the blind, especially in the elementary and secondary grades in public schools, must be especially careful not to underestimate the abilities of the blind. When I began my study, as previously stated, I believed the 14-year-old would have a much easier time creating art since he has some degree of sight. I assumed the 12-year-old would pose a greater problem since he is totally blind. After just three weeks the reverse of my assumptions was observed. It was becoming apparent that the ability to see would not affect the ability to create art.

Lowenfeld supported these findings in his book, The Nature of Creative Activity. Many case studies of the art of blind children and the art of sighted children are presented which helps demonstrate this fact. He described two kinds of techniques employed when making art, haptic and visual. The visual artist is one who depends entirely on the capacity for observation and the visual experience when making art. The haptic person, however, uses the eyes only when compelled to do so. Otherwise, the person reacts as a blind person who is entirely dependent on touch, smell, emotion, and other body sensations. When a haptic minded person makes art, the eye does not mediate between reality and the concept.

Most children, whether blind or not, create art in a haptic manner. Values, subjective attitudes, and experiences of the self are the main factors of the child's art instead of visual accuracy. Schematic child

drawings can originate in non-visual experience, and have non-visual origin because we see the same formations in drawings of weak-sighted children and in drawings of normally sighted children. Early schematic representations of the child are bound up within the individual self and individual circumstances. Proportions and changes of objects from drawing to drawing are mostly dependent on the subjective attitudes called out by the child's experience. In the 11th year of age the haptic creativity is at its height. By the 12th year the intensity of desire for visual art experience begins to overcome haptic expression in some children. By the 14th year of the child's development, the type of art experience the person employs usually remains constant. Blind children who have never made art before will work through all of the schematic stages of a child regardless of their age. The 14-year-old in my case study is now producing drawings typical of a 3rd grader although he is in the 8th grade.

After reviewing material on visual and haptic artists, an art teacher can approach teaching art to the blind with more confidence and ability. As the art teacher realizes that probably half of an art class will create art in a haptic manner whether they are blind or not, techniques one uses with sighted haptic students can be applied to blind haptic students. The reverse is also true. Art educators can apply techniques used in teaching visually sighted students to visually blind students. In this manner, all of the art students can experience the same art curriculum without making exceptions for students because they cannot see.

The teacher must also be careful not to assume that all blind students will make art in a haptic manner. Many blind students will make art in a visual way, methodically scrutinizing the details, proportions, etc. of the art object they are making. It would disturb a visually minded person to be stimulated by only haptic impressions. The reverse is also true. "Seeing" also may be an inhibitory factor when forced upon individuals who do not use their visual experiences for creative work. Many people with full sight must be classified with the non-visual people, and many people without sight must be classified with visual people. To consider the organ of sight alone is quite insufficient to give us insight into productive creative activity.

Using Lowenfeld's information on visual and haptic types, art teachers can give equally enriching art experiences to all students, whether blind, normally sighted, or of any other handicap. What children cannot always achieve in their lives, they can do in their creative art work. Through continuous contact with themselves and their art work, children not only grow emotionally, but mentally. Children face themselves through their art work gaining self confidence and emotional release. Schematic representation and overall art expression of the child are influenced by numerous circumstances unique to the child's world. The teacher should never assume that a child is haptic because he or she cannot see, nor that a student is visual because the ability to see is lacking. The teacher should never force a specific method of expression on the child. It must be realized that even the most

primitive, creative work born in the mind of the individual, and produced by her or his own hand is of greatest value.

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