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Miriam Hirsch

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In Pursuit of a Wild Patience

Miriam Hirsch

*Department of Education, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva
University, New York, New York, USA*

Abstract

This essay explores how the concept of wild patience informs our practice of teaching and learning in classrooms and in teacher education; how it crafts imaginative spaces in curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation policy and process; and how it can reassure our dreams and hopes for aesthetic education in this generation and in those to come.

Key words: *aesthetic education, Maxine Greene, teacher education.*

In the late 1990s, I sat in Maxine Greene's course on the Aesthetic Education at Teachers College in New York City. She talked with her characteristic gravelly voice about walking up Broadway past the off-track betting office and wondering what she shared in common with the men sitting on the stairs. She spoke of her conversations with local Harlem high school students hanging around the sidewalks outside school. And she used one quirky phrase I have been thinking about for over two decades. "We need a 'wild patience,'" Maxine Greene remarked. "A wild patience."

On my notebook from that course, I drew the phrase "wild patience" in the margins. "What could she mean?" I wondered at the time. "Isn't *wild patience* an oxymoron?" I have been turning this two-word phrase over and over in my mind ever since.

Background and Definitions

It seems that Greene was inspired by a line in Adrienne Rich's poem "Integrity": "a wild patience has taken me this far." According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, "wild" can mean living in a state of nature and not domesticated; not inhabited or cultivated; not subject to restraint or regulation; marked by turbulent agitation; uncivilized; beyond normal or conventional bounds; or deviating from the intended course.

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“Patience” is, of course, the act of being patient: bearing trials calmly without complaint; manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain; not being hasty or impetuous; showing steadfastness despite opposition, difficulty, or adversity; or able or willing to bear. The duality is oxymoronic, and the concept is exceedingly tough to wrangle. Greene (1988a, p. 135) concluded *The Dialectic of Freedom* by writing “There is a need for a wild patience. And, when freedom is in question, it is always time to begin.” I wonder what it might mean to begin a wild patience. Do we acquiesce or revolt? Challenge the common core or work with the educational community? Dr. Greene, are you asking the impossible, or are you encouraging a particular way of being and knowing?

Conceptual Frame

Schwab (1974) parceled education into the following categories: the teacher, the student, the subject matter, and the context or milieu.

In Schwab’s view of the school as an organization, curriculum delivery is a negotiated process between the four commonplaces or universals of education: the teacher, the student, what is taught, and the milieu of teaching-learning. While each of the four commonplaces is theoretically important, at any given time one may become more important than the others. (Schwartz, 1984, p. 439)

Even with the current enthusiasm for hybrid educational formats or online institutions, these domains are still propaedeutic. For example, Kahn Academy (<http://www.kahnacademy.org>) features a teacher (video or live in class the next day), student (in front of the computer), subject matter (originally mathematics, but now science and humanities topics, as well), and milieu (home, library, school, computer lab, or park bench). The traditional brick and mortar building is easier to parse.

The *teacher* greets the *students* at the door and watches as they sit down in their assigned seats to do bell work. She calls them to *morning meeting on the rug* and reviews the daily schedule. The literacy block begins with a *mini-lesson on making inferences* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, Common Core Anchor Standard R1, 2010), and then students transition smoothly to *independently reading of leveled books at their desks*.

This essay attends to possible interpretations of Greene’s “wild patience” across the four broad categories that secure an educational experience—teacher, student, subject matter, and context—examining what may be a fecund construct for re-animating and energizing education in troubling times. In following Greene’s example, I incorporate works of art alongside the lived experiences of preservice teachers to ground the concept of wild patience with insight and inquiry from my work in an undergraduate teacher education program.

Discussion

The Teacher

In the undergraduate teacher education program where I work, I recently held individual meetings to assess how the candidates’ semester of student teaching was unfolding.

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Unsurprisingly, the pressure of the edTPA exam and other state teacher certification examinations has beleaguered the students, so they no longer have time to enjoy the process of student teaching. The looming deadlines of Tasks 1–4, the overwhelming commentary responses, and the ever-changing technical specifications have transformed the magic of the first student teaching experience into a series of rotating hoops that keep shrinking and growing as one tries to pass.

Do I tell my students to have wild patience, or do I remind them to focus on what really matters? Since becoming certified matters, does that become the priority at the expense of mindful reflection and careful research? I remind them that candidates in every teacher education program are going through the same thing.

And then I turn to Greene (2001, p. 126) for solace: “When we are compelled or lured to remain passive receivers of discrete parts of a curriculum, say, obliged to speak in a manner others determine and to follow some extrinsic logic, we become disempowered.” I conjure Martha Graham (1930) bound in the fabric of her solo piece *Lamentations*, tensing and rotating in the fabric that binds and limits her mobility. I see the angled woman in the pink dress, her back to us staring up at the house, in Wyeth’s (1948) *Christina’s World*. The works of art remind me that there are mechanisms, systems, and externalities that exert gravitational pull and offer friction. As Dewey (1934/1980, p. 59) described: “An environment that was always and everywhere congenial to the straightaway execution of our impulses would set a term to growth as surely as one always hostile would irritate and destroy.” Perhaps a wild patience means that I have to dig deep within my own creative instinct to support the student teachers as we traverse the new geography of teacher education.

The Student

It is a difficult time to be a student in America today. The focus on college preparedness and career readiness looms large. When we used to ask children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” it was an opportunity for imaginative free-thinking possibilities. Today, with national concerns of economic productivity, international comparisons, and the global fiscal future, the question has a less warm-hearted and fuzzy take on vocational choice, implying to students, “Are you going to be a drain on society or contribute in innovative ways?” Precisely at a time when technological advances are moving at hyper-speed, we are interrupting the student’s growth and development with our measurement obsession. Tests may convince us that we are active participants in educational progress, but in fact, we are interrupting and disrupting the natural organic flow of learning.

Why are we allowing these injustices to continue? A wild patience. “How, on the various levels at which you teach, can you create the kinds of situations where involvement with the arts not only enables you and your students to combat boredom and banality, but develops among all of you the sense of agency that is most apparent in encounters with the arts?” (Greene, 2001, p. 182). Greene implores us to integrate the arts as an antidote to the data-driven fever, thus balancing the banality of the test prep mindset and generating a sense of initiative.

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In former years during my work with Lincoln Center Institute, the students railed against the arts integration. “Why can’t we do something that better helps us prepare for our future careers as teachers?” Now, the cohorts appreciate the infusion of art into the curricula. Oddly, the testing fervor has generated an unusual groundswell of support for the arts.

We recently studied Tan’s (2007) *The Arrival*, a book of images without narrative text. The students began by drawing a familiar object in an unfamiliar way. “Imagine what the function of a tea pot or a clock might be 50 years in the future. Make a sketch,” directed the teaching artist. The drawings led to a rich discussion about artistic decision making, or as Eisner (2000, p. 9) termed, how “small differences can have large effects.” Next, the students explored select images in Tan’s work, identifying patterns and empathizing with the experience of arriving in a foreign place where things look both familiar and unfamiliar. The following semester, when I asked the cohort to name an experience in the arts that has had an impact on their lives thus far, the learning experience with *The Arrival* was repeatedly referenced. Maybe it has taken the climate change of testing to precipitate the resurgence of the arts. How oddly wonderful.

Dewey wrote: “It is not enough that certain materials and methods have proven effective with other individuals at other times. There must be a reason for thinking they will function in generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time” (1938/1997, p. 46). The hunger for the arts is the counterpoint to the multiple-choice, rubric-lined, standards-based wallpaper. I am not only arguing for arts integration; I am advocating for play and sensory experiences with a wide range of materials and engagement with works of art that will, for students, dynamically provide interest, imagination, and a desire to find out what they want to be when they grow up. For most of us, life is a journey based on learning experiences, self-discovery, and taking risks, not a calculated pursuit determined from preschool by a data set. “Some things sink deep, others stay on the surface and are easily displaced” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 71). We need a wild patience to remember, paraphrasing Einstein, that not everything that counts can be counted, and our students are hungry for rich nutrient material. The arts sink deep; the tests will be replaced.

The Subject Matter

I was recently part of a working group on teacher education for Jewish day schools, and we were tasked to operationalize essential elements of teacher education that were particular to a religious school environment. My group worked with the idea of being a role model and how with the construct by Grossman et al. (2009), one could represent, deconstruct, and approximate the high leverage practice of being a role model. We spoke about the impact when students see their teachers picking up trash, recycling, giving to charity, or volunteering at food banks. We discussed relational behaviors such as listening attentively, following up, attending to the speaker in a school-wide assembly rather than grading papers, and having focus during prayer sessions. Then, during a break, many of us visited the campus museum for a brief tour of a Warhol exhibit led by the museum educator with the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) approach to aesthetic art education (Housen & Yenawine, 2001).

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Hallmarks of the aesthetic inquiry practice of VTS include the questions: “What do you see?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” “What else do you notice?” The professors and practitioners of teacher education were confused. How can one just leave the interaction with noticing deeply, linking responses, and pushing for additional layers of observation and reflection based on evidence? Why was the emphasis on the viewer’s interaction with the work of art not developed into an art history lesson or clarification of why Warhol even painted a series called “10 Portraits of Jews of the 20th Century?” It was bemusing to me that the group was comfortable with outlining essential elements of being a role model, which seems largely idiosyncratic, fundamentally human, and inelegantly quantified, but prickly about leaving their art questions unanswered, about living with the ambiguity of not knowing the answers to questions inspired by the Warhol images.

In the subject matter domain (and I realize that many of the ways I have parceled out Schwab’s fundamental four thus far overlap, but such is the complexity of teaching and learning), we all need to cultivate a wild patience. Did Warhol engage in “Jewploitation” to raise money from wealthy Jews at a time when he was personally bankrupt? How did he choose these individuals, including Louis Brandeis, Sarah Bernhardt, Golda Meir, and Franz Kafka? Who didn’t make the cut? Why 40-inch silk-screened canvases with geometric blocks of color and crayon-like drawings over photographs? How do the artistic choices affect us? There must be a place in education today for questions without immediate answers. Greene suggested education must carve out space for multiplicity and imagination: “Each time I realize how multiple are human languages and modalities for addressing the world, I recognize again how cheated we are and how subject to manipulation when no one helps us realize how many possibilities exist” (Greene, 1988b, p. 54).

Costa and Kallick (2000) identified, among their habits of mind for the 21st century, several that directly relate to ambiguity, multiplicity, and imagination, which engagement with the arts can promote. These include the need to think flexibly, to remain open to continuous learning, and to respond with wonderment and awe. If we are only learning to pass tests, then we have closed doors on possibilities that emerge from openness, re-view, and returning to things that grab our imaginations. Subject matter should not be taught and closeted like hefty texts shelved in book rooms awaiting layers of inevitable dust. Personal research and inquiry should be as valued as professional research. “Teachers, like their students, have to learn to love the questions, as they come to realize there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability” (Greene, 1988a, p. 134).

Questions need to be decoupled from answers. Teachers and students need to savor the curiosity and insight that comes from asking and thinking about questions that matter to them, whether or not they will be tested on the answers. “The aim of the educational process inside schools is not to finish something, but to start something” (Eisner, 2002, p. 91). “It is always time to begin” (Greene, 1988a, p. 153). “What if?” and “why not?” can awaken any subject matter if we can give students time to explore their questions and the resources of their imagination. “The arts provide permission to use one’s imagination as a source of content” (Eisner, 2002, p. 82). A wild patience provides students with time, space, and the privilege to reflect on their questions without the hard press to summon an immediate answer before the clock runs out.

The Context/Milieu

How do we resist the urge to wrap it all in standards? “There is more beauty in a rock than any of us is likely to discover in a lifetime” (Eisner, 2002, p. 87). Qualitative experiences texture the world we inhabit, just as profoundly as numbers, trends, and projections. The vicissitudes of educational philosophy swing in a tempest of discontent with heated emotional swells. We hear the essentialist arguing for the basics, the perennialist advocating for the classics, and the progressive taking her cues from the student’s interest. Choices do matter, as do the standards. But the arts give every student the chance to imagine the world as if it were otherwise, to consider alternatives, practice creative problem solving, dabble in learning something new, or wonder about something they had never before considered. I know that today, teachers are afraid to take risks because the stakes matter so much. My friend, a first grade public school teacher in a New York City top-ranking school, explained to my preservice students how her professional evaluation is linked to the scores of the third grade students she may or may not have taught two years before they take the third grade state exams. We are all in this together, and everyone, even those with whom we strongly disagree about the national or local educational policies, cares about children: that is all it has ever been about. However, to diminish the arts, in theory or in practice, for the sake of easy measurable outcomes, may sabotage the many possibilities for creative students, creative teachers, and creative teacher educators.

Conclusion

In Orson Scott Card’s (1977) sci-fi classic, *Ender’s Game*, Ender Wiggin thinks he is playing a game in a simulator when in reality he is fighting the Buggers and saving Planet Earth. Quite clearly, no one is saving the planet with standardized tests. However, it is time to save the souls and spirits of our students, teachers, teacher educators, parents, and all of us who care deeply about the future of education. The arts shepherd a wild patience that bridges kinetic and potential energy; they matter now, and they will matter in the future. “When we ponder our experiences here as audiences and as participants ..., we cannot but recognize what Dewey meant by saying that our lives ‘reach a deeper level’ when touched by the arts” (Greene, 2001, p. 197).

My grandfather came to America from British Palestine in the early part of the 20th century. He used to tell a story of how he came with 25 cents in his pocket and worked tirelessly to build up his business in order to provide for his family and secure a stable life in America. There was a phrase in Hebrew that he often repeated: “*Af al Pi Sha’it mamaiya, Ah Chakei Lo,*” which means “even though despite everything ... I will wait.” He understood a wild patience, and imagined a different future for himself, in a way I never will. The phrase speaks to the courage of long-term vision, dealing with the daily in pursuit of the larger goal on the horizon.

I envision a world where every child has the opportunity, insight, and invitation to “release their imagination.” “It is not a matter of making people better ... the idea is to release the imagination” (Greene, 1998b, p. 53). And, that, I believe, is an agenda worth pursuing. Yes, “the central questions will continue to haunt us” (Greene, 1995, p. 197); we will need to pursue “wild patience,” but that is exactly as it should be.

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