Curriculum Enacted as the Aesthetic in British Columbia: Where Are We Now? Where Can We Go? And How Might We Get There?

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Abstract: This paper outlines the benefits and possibilities of enacting aesthetic education in the context of public education in British Columbia. Teacher training and working conditions are discussed as areas that influence teachers' abilities to develop or shift pedagogy. Through exploring where we are now, where we can go, and how might we get there, aesthetic education is encouraged as a pedagogy, while acknowledging the lived experience of teachers both pre-service and in-service. Factors that work to encourage or make challenging pedagogical shifts are discussed as is the role of teachers' learning and working environments in supporting their professional growth.

Keywords: Aesthetic Education, Pedagogy, Curriculum, British Columbia

Introduction

Within curriculum theory there are a multitude of concepts about what curriculum ought to be and how it ought to be enacted (Blum, 2020; Bobbitt, 1918, Dewey, 1916; Pinar, 1979 Tyler, 1949). Some curricular theorists, such as Tyler (1949) call for a technical curriculum that is ultimately concerned with how curriculum upholds social order, the economy, and productive workers. Others such as Apple (2013), Blum (2020), Ladson-Billings (1997), and Pinar (1979) recognize that if learning is to become more meaningful and personally relevant to students, there is a need for change in educational systems. On this end, Pinar (1979) speaks to the concept of reconceptualization in education. Pinar recognizes reconceptualization as a complex task and calls for both individual and collective effort to understand how to disrupt current educational practices and move forward in a way more in line with meaningful educational experiences (1979).

In relation to curriculum reconceptualization in education, Pinar (1979) asks "where the field had been, where it is now, and where it might be going" (p.93). Inspired by these prompts, this paper will explore the possibilities for aesthetic education in the context of British Columbia (BC) by examining where we are now, where we can go and how we might get there. The purpose of this exploration is to discuss the possibilities of enacting aesthetic education within the K-12 educational system in BC and the role of teacher training and working conditions that must be addressed alongside calls for pedagogical shifts. This paper is a call for teachers to embed aesthetic education into their pedagogies, a call for universities and professional development opportunities to offer aesthetic education training, and a call for policy makers in education to make needed changes in teachers' working conditions to support their important work.

Aesthetic Education

Maxine Greene's philosophies and teachings of aesthetic education will be used to share understandings of this practice, and its applications in BC classrooms. Greene outlines aesthetic education as something whereby in viewing and interpreting art, an individual experiences opportunities for criticality and meaning (1986). This experience is shaped by individuals own subjectivities and personal histories and is often done alongside others simultaneously engaging in these processes (Greene, 1986). While generally pointing to art as human created pieces such as painting, poetry, theatre, and dances, Greene also points to the natural world as sources of art, noting the beauty of sunsets, skylines, forests and more (1986). Central to aesthetic education is the act of noticing and perceiving, and a movement towards wide-awakeness (Greene 1986; Greene, 1977). Wide-awakeness requires people to be present to life and its requirements and involves meaning making through reflection and active engagement in life (Greene, 1977). In other words, wide-awakeness, or sometimes referred to as consciousness, means being aware of the world and one's relationships to and with the world (Greene, 2004).

For Greene (2004), aesthetic education recognizes that the possibilities of meaning are vast and meaning making and relating to one's environment—including the people in it—are important. The goals of aesthetic education then, are not to find a singular truth of understanding, but rather for individuals to engage with noticing, reflection, and meaning making towards their own understandings and perceptions of life. Greene believed arts were

a place where this process could happen, leading to authentic learning spaces (Gulla et al., 2022). As mentioned above, arts can refer to both human driven and natural creations. This paper is particularly concerned with how aesthetic education can be enacted across curriculum in BC, rather than siloed to arts-based courses.

The contrast of aesthetic education is technical curriculum which focuses on breaking learning into objectives, or unmet needs and then producing and following a curriculum that meets these objectives or needs (Tyler, 1949). This type of curriculum states that it is "unnecessary for the school to duplicate educational experiences already adequately provided outside the school" (Tyler, 1949, p. 6). This statement begs the question - how do we know what educational experiences students are getting outside of school? What factors, such as socioeconomic status, social support, and opportunity play into educational experiences outside of school? While technical curriculum is focused on the imparting of knowledge from the teacher to the student, based on objectives that have been formed from the difference between "the acceptable norms" (Tyler, 1949, p. 5) and the current abilities of a learner, aesthetic education disrupts this. Aesthetic education recognizes the complex task of learning and views the teacher's role as a guide of student inquiry and learning, rather than a knowledge transmitter (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). If BC teachers are to adopt or expand aesthetic education into their pedagogical paradigms, an understanding of BC's current curriculum and necessary teaching supports can help provide guidance for this endeavour.

Where Are We Now?

British Columbia currently has a curriculum that supports creative, deep learning within flexible learning environments by providing both school districts and individual teachers with autonomy to organize their schools and classrooms in creative ways, and by outlining a curriculum with competency-driven approaches that focus on core competencies (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a). While BC's Curriculum defines *what* to teach, it does not mandate *how* to teach, and as such there is flexibility in how learning is organized and the methods used to engage in it (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a), which means that teaching aesthetic education is entirely possible in K-12 classrooms in BC.

While a flexible curriculum is beneficial, it is not the only reason that aesthetic education is possible to teach within the BC Curriculum, as some courses specifically call for aesthetic experiences. A search of the word "aesthetic" in BC's Curriculum yields six pages of results, ranging from the subject of dance: "aesthetic experiences have the power to transform the way we see, think, and feel" to music: "aesthetic experiences have the power to effect change" to theatre: "aesthetic experiences can be enhanced through movement, sound, imagery, and language" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-b). Moreover, the possibilities of aesthetic education are not limited to arts-based courses. BC's Curriculum features three core competencies: communication, thinking, and personal and social competency (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a). Communication can be further examined as communication and collaboration; thinking includes creative, critical, and reflective thinking; and personal and social competencies include personal awareness and responsibility, positive personal-cultural identity, and social awareness and responsibility (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-c). These competencies inform the curricular competencies that represent the "doing" in every subject of the BC curriculum, and curricular competencies along with curricular content represent the learning standards that teachers are meant to assess students' learning on (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a; Government of British Columbia, n.d.-d). Both the core competencies and curricular competencies are robust, yet flexible, allowing teachers to determine a way to encourage student learning for their current students and contexts, making aesthetic curriculum a possibility across a multitude of course subjects. Specifically, in focusing on noticing and perception as an aspect of aesthetic education, students can develop core competencies across a range of activities. This connection is explored further in the following section.

While aesthetic education can be used to inform teaching practices that fulfill aspects of BC's curriculum, unfortunately many BC teachers are struggling right now. In the 2023/2024 British Columbia Teachers' Federation Membership survey, one teacher stated:

> It's everything else–lack of prep time, no TTOCs, having to teach double classes, lack of admin support, new report cards and no time to plan for this–all of these areas are leading many to be exhausted, frustrated and burning out. (BCTF, 2024, p. 8)

The survey continues to find themes among participant responses such as teachers being expected to do more with less, teachers experiencing gaps in meeting student needs (especially for students with disabilities and diverse

needs), and teachers needing more people and more time to successfully meet student needs (BCTF, 2024). Furthermore, 55.4% of BC teachers feel that their workload is not manageable, and 58.2% feel that it has increased compared to their previous year of teaching (BCTF, 2024). Additionally, only 30.9% of teachers felt that they received sufficient in-service training on curriculum and reporting requirements (BCTF, 2024). The current experiences of teachers do not support the large task of examining and shifting their pedagogy to increasingly incorporate aesthetic education should teachers feel the invitation to do so. As such, the experiences of teachers in BC must be acknowledged, and efforts to improve working conditions taken seriously, for calls in pedagogical shifts to be respected and well received.

Where Can We Go?

Aspects of engaging with an aesthetic education practice can include reflecting on learning through multi-modal means and using inquiry-based teaching strategies focused on questioning (The Maxine Greene Institute, 2025). Additionally, moving towards wide-awakeness through noticing and perceiving, and actively engaging with life, are central to aesthetic educational experiences (Greene 1986; Greene 1977). It is with these understandings and based on my practice as a secondary teacher in BC, that the examples of aesthetic learning experiences shared are drawn from.

In terms of enacting aesthetic education, a strength of BC's Curriculum is that it often does not prescribe *how* what students do needs to be demonstrated. For example, a curricular competency for grade 9 physical and health education (PHE) is "analyze strategies for promoting mental well-being, for self and others" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-e), and teachers can design learning tasks that allow for students to analyze strategies in a variety of ways. In this case, students may write their understandings of this competency down, or share it verbally with their teacher, or in other creative ways such as creating a video, making a poster, or crafting an alternative artifact of learning. Aesthetic education can therefore be used to support learning in BC's curriculum as either (or both) learning tasks and demonstration of learning can be created using aspects of noticing, reflection, and inquiry. For example, to teach this mentioned competency, a PHE teacher can take students outside to do breathing exercises in fresh air while observing nature or have students try journaling, drawing, and/or listening to calming music, and in these ways engage with art (both natural and human made) through aesthetic education. Teachers and students can build inquiry projects from experiencing various well-being strategies. Teachers need not have lessons that explain the benefits of various well-being strategies in a linear step by step fashion and then test on it, as a technical curricular approach may promote, but rather, can have students experience well-being strategies and reflect on them. Students can reflect by way of writing, drawing, sharing pictures, and/or speaking to their experience. Indeed, the BC curriculum honors the experience of "doing" to foster deeper learning (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a), and aesthetic education provides an avenue to support this.

Another curricular competency (from science 9) is to "make observations aimed at identifying their own questions, including increasingly complex ones, about the natural world" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-f). To teach this, teachers could make use of the natural environment around their school (if accessible) and have students create inquiry questions and then notice and reflect on the environment to explore their questions. For example, a student may ask "why do tree branches lean a certain way?" and in noticing and reflecting upon the conditions around trees, lead towards an answer of branches orienting towards the sun. Teachers can use aesthetic education in this example to encourage students to use senses such as sound and sight to notice and observe and find meaning, while simultaneously fulfilling the curricular competency learning.

Teachers can also expand their projects and teaching beyond their specific areas of expertise, disrupting the course-based silos of secondary education. Teachers can collaborate with colleagues and offer students cross-curricular projects that deepen learning and encourage engagement in aesthetic education. For example, creating a garden at the school can be an invitation for students to engage in the mathematical process of measuring space and financing supplies; the scientific exploration of living things and their flourishing conditions; the artistic ability to observe and create. Underpinning these learnings will be an encouragement to notice and observe. Before measuring the space of the garden boxes, students can be asked, how much space do plants need to grow well? What do surrounding nature and gardens tell us? What makes for an aesthetic garden space? Similarly, why are some plants flourishing and others are not? Why and how do gardens inspire art projects such as paintings? This becomes a collective invitation to engage and make meaning from a seemingly simple project.

Moving beyond curricular competencies, aesthetic education can be used to explore the core competencies of communication, thinking, and personal and social responsibility. Creating and critiquing art in its many forms can help students develop communication skills if teachers guide focused discussions around these topics. Central to creative thinking, as defined by the BC Curriculum, is reflection, curiosity, and joy in learning (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-g). These qualities can be encouraged through aesthetic education by cultivating wide-awakeness. Under the personal and social core competency is positive personal and cultural identity for which BC's curriculum notes that "people who have a positive personal and cultural identity value their personal and cultural narratives and understand how these shape their identity" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-h, para 4). Arts can be a place to explore identity. In this case, exploring identity through story or narratives, be that through text, dance, painting or another arts-based method, can both promote positive personal and cultural identity while also having students experience the benefits of aesthetic education.

While teachers in BC have the potential to enact the curriculum in a meaningful way, full of rich learning experiences that reflect aesthetic education because of the nature of the curriculum, there are barriers to doing so. Teachers must have the knowledge, skills and support necessary to enact curriculum in this way. Teachers will need to know how to foster student inquiry, encourage students to observe and reflect, and create arts-based experiences to engage with aesthetic education. Teacher training and working conditions must prepare and actively support teachers in meeting the asks of their profession. Teachers have a responsibility to have a broad knowledge base and understanding of the courses they teach, engage in professional learning, and implement effective pedagogies that create respectful and inclusive environments for student learning (BC Teachers' Council, 2019). And the environments that teachers work in have a responsibility to provide supports. The systems and structures, including policy makers, that work with BC teachers in their profession need to recognize the complex task of teaching K-12 today and provide necessary resources and support to encourage teacher—and therefore student—success.

How Might We Get There?

Teachers initially learn their practice from formal education of university programs and have continuous education by means of professional development within their profession (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Møller-Skau (2023) acknowledges that student teachers, especially those with limited experience in the arts, face discomfort when engaging with aesthetic learning processes and often find these processes challenging. However, having exposure to aesthetic processes in teacher training represented a shift in student teachers' confidence and desire to enact aesthetic education in their future teaching practices (Møller-Skau & Lindsøl, 2022). This points to the importance of teacher training programs that support aesthetic practices for their benefits to be realized in teachers' pedagogies. Teacher training programs need to be explicit in encouraging teachers to both experience aesthetic education for themselves through coursework and develop strategies to enact this pedagogical paradigm in their own classrooms.

Moreover, as teachers have a profession that requires continuous learning (BC Teachers' Council, 2019), school districts have a role in providing quality learning opportunities for teachers. To increase awareness and knowledge of aesthetic education, and invite teachers to engage students this way, aesthetic education and the nuances of its application in teaching must become a prevalent part of both teacher education programs and professional development.

Teachers having knowledge of, and practice in, aesthetic education is important but represents one component of a broader landscape of factors that contribute to pedagogy. Another factor that influences pedagogy is teachers' working conditions. Working conditions must be such that teachers have the time, knowledge, and support to explore pedagogical shifts. In the context of BC, teachers feel strongly that having more educational assistants and more classroom teachers would improve their workload — as would having more preparation time (BCTF, 2024). Improving working conditions of teachers is imperative for them to meet the demands of the profession, avoid burnout, and have the capacity to continuously examine and refine their practice.

What might education be like for students who see and feel themselves as active agents of learning and sources of creativity and knowledge in their schools? What might the experience of students who have difficulty with a structured technical curriculum be if offered education aesthetically? While I argue the benefits of aesthetic education, ultimately teachers must feel the call themselves to engage in this work, as they have personal autonomy

to determine pedagogical approaches. I wonder how this call would be received in BC if modeling of aesthetic education in teacher education programs was prevalent, more preparation time was offered to teachers, and the profession had enough teachers and educational assistants?

Conclusion

In summary, aesthetic education has the capacity to offer rich learning experiences that are meaningful to students as they call upon students to take notice, to pay attention to life in its entirety, and to explore art, be it natural or human made, through their own subjectivities and histories (Greene, 1986; Greene, 2004). I advocate for the increasing implementation of aesthetic education in the context of K-12 schooling in BC. BC's Curriculum allows aesthetic education through its overarching core competencies, and its course specific curricular competencies. The task ahead then, is to invite teachers to see where aesthetic education fits in their pedagogies, and ensure they have both the training and supports necessary to engage in teaching aesthetic education. Training can come by way of teacher education programs (pre-service) and professional development (in-service). Support can come by way of increased educational assistants, teachers, and preparation time (BCTF, 2024). It is time to acknowledge the increasing workload placed on teachers, and offer them tangible, necessary supports to engage with their work fully without risking burnout. Only then can the task of implementing aesthetic education be successful.

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