

Learning Together: Art Education and Community

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Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago

Section Labels

HISTORY

Many threads of history lie behind Chicago's progressive art education in the latter 20th and early 21st centuries. Many educators created school and community art programs to address the disparities and opportunity gaps Chicago youth faced as a result of racism, segregation, and economic divestment. This introductory section highlights educators and organizations whose values and approaches set a precedent for the work of more recent artist educators.

In 1894, not far from here, Hull-House co-founder Ellen Gates Starr and a group of women from the Chicago Woman's Club established the Chicago Public School Art Society (CPSAS), which provided reproductions and sculpture casts to schools in underserved communities. Over many decades, CPSAS brought art to schools, offered art appreciation lectures and curricula, led museum visits for school children, and awarded scholarships to art students. In 1984, CPSAS changed its name to Art Resources in Teaching (A.R.T.) to avoid confusion with the public school system. Later, in 2013, A.R.T. merged into Urban Gateways, a theater and music education organization dedicated to equitable access and the voices of the young. Today, Urban Gateways continues to offer programs to over 80,000 young people annually across Chicago.

Another influential force was Dr. Margaret Burroughs, an artist, poet, activist, educator, and institution builder who fostered Black-centered spaces and led institutions where Black youth and artists found respite in a system shaped by racism. At the age of 24, Burroughs co-founded the historic South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) with Black artists in the city because they had few opportunities to exhibit. SSCAC artists shared their talents and art school knowledge with community members, teaching classes to the young and old. Burroughs taught art at Bronzeville's DuSable High School from the mid-1940s to late-1960s. In 1961, she and her husband created in their home what is now The DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center, an institution that studies and preserves Black culture.

PARTICIPATORY ART EDUCATION

Funding structures often limit arts education. Significantly, during the 1970s budget crisis, Chicago Public Schools laid off almost all its art teachers. In the 1980s and 90s, private foundations led efforts to increase access to arts education, providing grant funds, studies, and plans according to their standards. In this evolving landscape and amid changing criteria, teachers devised diverse

approaches to educating in the arts, often working to fill gaps left by the public standards, systems, and funding structures.

One significant approach included students as partners to promote the students' agency and expression as a way to affirm their identities and community ties. Whether founded by community museums, groups of artists, or college art education professors, numerous Chicago organizations have collaboratively imagined alongside students, inviting their participation as partners, decision-makers, and co-creators.

ARTS INTEGRATION

Across the history of art education, the question of purpose and goals has been debated. Are the primary purposes of art education creative inquiry, critical thinking, self-discovery, confidence building, deeper social connections, improved outcomes in other subjects, and/or skill building for professional roles?

An approach that connects the arts to other school disciplines, arts integration has been explored in the US since the 1930s. Arts integration, which began to be more widely practiced in the 1970s and 80s, allows students to engage in the creative process to explore connections between an art form and another subject area to gain a greater understanding of both. Sculpture and science, for example, or drawing and literature are taught simultaneously, often in a collaboration between a teaching artist and a classroom teacher. Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) has been Chicago's leader in arts integration since the 1990s. In addition to facilitating art integration programs across Chicago Public Schools and supporting educators in developing curricula and creative inquiries, CAPE supports significant research on social-emotional learning, academic success, and teacher growth resulting from arts integration.

Educators at CAPE were significantly influenced by the work of Chicago Commons, a Reggio Emilia studio for very young children. The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes child-centered experiential learning that integrates touching, moving, listening, and observing. Documentation is also centered in this approach as a way for educators to understand how their student-peers are growing in their understanding of a particular subject. CAPE adopted documentation as a central practice, notably in student project exhibitions, among other formats.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Multiple programs in Chicago support young people with paid mentorships in the arts, often with an entrepreneurial focus. To marry education and the fight against inequality, unemployment, and crime, these organizations have devised multiple ways to lead programs that support students' professional futures. Paying teens a financial stipend to get involved in creative projects teaches

youth the value of their time and lowers barriers to participation. Students are also offered safe environments, positive role models, arrays of skill development activities, and pathways to real-life applications of talent, interest, and skills.

A MUSEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Exhibition and display methods play a significant role in art education work. In Chicago, significant museums were founded as educational venues, most notably the National Museum of Mexican Art and The DuSable Black History Museum and Educational Center. In schools, students often organize their objects in exhibition formats for their classmates and families. Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education presents multiple year-end exhibitions where students, families, and educators not only experience the art made in their own schools, but also work created by other young people in the city's schools. Spiral Workshop similarly created exhibitions as part of the learning process.

Two noteworthy forms of museum and exhibition-making that fostered curatorial and docent skills are shared here. One is a co-created memorial to the loss of a beloved school building (Edward Jenner Elementary Academy of the Arts). The other as a growing source of education, affirmation, and pride (Arthur Dixon Elementary School).