

Foreword

“Just read your paper
And you’ll see
Just exactly what keeps worryin’ me
Yeah, you’ll see the world is in an uproar
The danger zone is everywhere”

— RAY CHARLES

The morning of September 11, 2005 was as clear and bright as the one four years ago. The radio news show I was listening to bounced between stories of America’s efforts to mark that tragic fourth anniversary and the still emerging stories of tragedy, horror, and racism in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Two voices kept bouncing around in my head. First was Ray Charles singing, “yeah, you’ll see the world is in an uproar/ the danger zone is everywhere.” And the second was my own, asking, “Where are all of these children going to go to school?” The next question I asked myself was how their teachers could possibly address the enormous complexity of their new students’ reality.

What could make children who had experienced such peril and loss feel that school is a safe haven, not another danger zone? In truth, this question is not only relevant to the schools that have opened their doors to children of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. It is a question that can be asked of any school, but especially any school whose students are, as we say, on “free or reduced lunch”—in other words, children who live in economic poverty. (I want to be clear that I do not equate economic poverty with cultural, spiritual, relational, moral, intellectual, or aesthetic impoverishment. Qualifying for free or reduced lunch measures family income, not the other qualities mentioned above.)

Indeed, I believe this is the question raised and addressed in the study reported on in this book. Lauren Stevenson and Dick Deasy remind us that creating safe zones where children will feel secure enough to engage in the challenging work of serious learning can be accomplished in high poverty schools. Indeed, they share ten examples that demonstrate this possibility, even as they reveal the complexity of the challenge of doing this. What do these ten schools have in common? In each of them, studying and/or making works of art (paintings, dances, plays, songs, films, and so on) plays a significant role in their curriculum and their culture.

To my mind, Stevenson and Deasy ask many critically important questions. They want to know how schools can become truly powerful learning environments, not simply places that can report increases in test scores—at any cost. They want to understand the importance of situating rigorous teaching and learning in a strong community. And they want insight into what it is about studying and making works of art that creates a special and powerful “third space” between and among teachers, learners, and works of art.

This last question is, I believe, an essential key to understanding how engaging in arts activities can transform students’ relationship to their own learning, teachers’ ideas about teaching, and the culture of the school. That the arts can catalyze changes in a school that lead to a healthier and more productive environment should not come as a surprise (though it does not seem at all obvious to most people in the field of education). The arts are widely accepted as one of the defining elements of any culture, community, society, or civilization. If we want to understand the values, morals, philosophies, aesthetics, and qualities of life in an historical period or geographic region (including our own), we study the arts of that time and place. If we want to contribute to the creation of our own culture in our own time, participation in the arts as creators, audience, or critics allows us an active role in the essential conversations of our communities and culture. Making art and actively appreciating the aesthetic dimensions of human creations are ways we transform our world from a random, chaotic place into a pleasing and

even beautiful environment—a profound, but possible, transformation and one sorely needed in most of our schools.

Stevenson and Deasy have shown us schools in which this is exactly what has happened. Students have *moved* from passivity to activity, from being receivers to being creators. Teachers have done the same. Ironically, in most of our schools, being a teacher is often as passive as being a student. Teachers are conveyors of curriculum and assessment, not creators; they are discouraged from invention and improvisation and encouraged to stick to the ‘program.’ Indeed, programmed instruction is as prevalent in schools today as it has ever been. In this book, however, we see ten schools in which this transformation is underway. The arts provide the crucible for this alchemy.

The authors offer many answers to the question, “How does this transformation happen?” We have much to learn from their observations and the insights of those teachers, artists, administrators, and other researchers with whom they spoke. I am not surprised that the authors chose “third space” as their title for this book as that phrase points to what is perhaps the most essential element of this transformation—and also the most illusive. The idea of “third space” invites us to focus on that which might, at first glance, seem to be invisible. It is the “space between” teachers and learners, between the various individuals in a learning group, and between the learners, teachers, and works of art. This is the space in which meaning that has been negotiated and constructed by the members of a group emerges. When students, teachers and others (including administrators, parents, artists) gather around a work of art created by an artist or a student in the fourth grade and they strive to understand that work—what they see, what it means to each of them, what it makes them feel—they not only make sense of the work, they build community and understanding among themselves.

The beauty of the concept of “third space” is that it helps draw our attention to a space that is essential to learning and the creation of community—the place where connections are made. Arguably, making connections, along with identifying questions and having hypotheses, is a critical element of the process of building knowledge and under-

standings. Certainly, making connections is essential to the creation of effective and healthy communities. Negotiating differences in perspective, exploring alternative interpretations, and creating new solutions are all features of life in the “third spaces” of learning in and through the arts. They are also, I would argue, among the central processes of a true democracy.

Finally, it seems important to note one more feature of the arts that may explain their special role in the transformations described in this book. Among other qualities, the arts are attempts to understand both the common (experienced by most or all) and profound (of great seriousness and significance) aspects of what it means to be human. They explore experiences all of us are likely to have in our lifetimes—loss, love, fear, and moral confusions, for example. The arts strive to make visible and communicable that which eludes our general capacities to express, thus creating the possibility of forging connections between people on the ground of basic human experience.

I do not believe there is any other setting in schools that provides such an opportunity so well. Surely, the study of history, for example, can be a portal to this realm, but, as taught in most schools, it most often does not. This book suggests that the “third space” created through the study of the arts, when taught well, is a space in which students and teachers not only *can*, but *must*, be awake and in touch with one’s humanity, including one’s complex emotions and identities. It isn’t hard to understand why children and young adults would prefer to spend their days in schools with many “third spaces” than those where these spaces rarely, if ever, exist. I certainly know which I would choose.

This book suggests an alternative vision of both the process and result of school reform. It points to reform that occurs not as a result of accountability measures, but as a natural transformation through the building of a new kind of community of learners, a community of creators. This book describes a “kinder, gentler” (to borrow from George Bush, Sr.) approach to school change, not based so much on punitive accountability, but rather on an invitation to create an exciting, meaningful, and more beautiful school. It is always good to have some alter-

natives in mind when trying to tackle as large a problem as the improvement of our public schools. This book provides such an alternative. I hope we can learn the lessons it offers.

Steve Seidel

Director, Project Zero

Director, Arts in Education Program,
Harvard Graduate School of Education