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Multicultural Art Education:

An Examination of Graeme Chalmers' Early Theory of Multicultural Art Education Within the

Discourse of the Visual Arts

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Within the larger discourse of art education, the individual pedagogical preferences for teaching art are continually evolving. As new educational philosophies and theories are further developed, our pedagogical approaches and curricular structures are altered to better realign with the broad, universal goals for the teaching of the visual arts. Throughout the history of the field, these curricular structures have ranged from the modernist discipline-based approach (DBAE) toward more contemporary, post-modern structures that, for example, include the multicultural approach. A literature review on the discourse reveals that as theorists moved from visual arts curricula dominated by modernist ideologies toward the acceptance of post-modern values, the pedagogical practice of multicultural art education followed suit. Multicultural art education has continued to evolve, expand, and reaffirm its place within the greater context of the field in large part due to the work of key educators including: McFee, Garber, Irwin, Delacruz, Wasson, Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki and Chalmers. Although each has made significant contributions to the development of multicultural art education, in the following paper I will specifically focus on the research and writing of art educator Graeme Chalmers.

Professor Graeme Chalmers has dedicated his academic career to researching and developing the multicultural branch of art education. Throughout his body of research, Chalmers has continually advocated for the necessity of teaching art through a multicultural curricular perspective, claiming that “there can be unity in our diversity and art is the lifeblood of culture... it is a necessity” (Chalmers, 1984, p. 23). During early research on the topic, Chalmers championed for a celebratory approach to teaching multicultural art education which culminated in his 1996 book titled *Celebrating Pluralism*. In *Celebrating Pluralism*, Chalmers proposed using the DBAE curricular structure as a framework for addressing multicultural issues including ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and diversity. However, in later research Chalmers (2002) shifted

his view and adopted a more critical multicultural approach that “challenged hegemonic knowledge” (p. 186). In this rejection of what Hanna (1994) called the “food/festival/arts/quaint native garb emphasis,” Chalmers modified his multicultural theory from celebration to specifically utilizing cultural diversity as an introduction for discussions concerning social change (cited in Chalmers, 2002, p. 186). Or put differently, Chalmers’ more recent research has taken the multicultural branch of art education, removed it from its original context, replanted the sapling, and through dedication, cultivated a new species—a critical multicultural art education, which I personally find more compelling to implement within the post-modern classroom context.

To better understand Chalmers’ evolution of thought on the topic of multicultural art education, it is important to first examine his relationship to the subject of the ‘other’ as well as the root of his interest in studying multiculturalism. As a professor at the University of British Columbia Graeme Chalmers, a native New Zealander, has adopted Canada as a home away from home. In his 1998 editorial titled “The Same but Different” Chalmers wrote:

What is it like to be a Canadian art educator? Is there anything that makes us different from our American cousins? Some of us chose to study in the United States. In myriad ways, through what we read and watch, as much as in person, many of us cross the border freely and frequently. (p. 291)

With this, I discern that Chalmers was perhaps writing as an outsider to what he deemed “American” art education. In writing from this outside perspective Chalmers (2002) not only recognized his “nomadic” role as a researcher and educator but also simultaneously questioned the implications of addressing this perspective within multicultural art education (p. 190). After reading select articles written by Chalmers on the topic, I have concluded that Chalmers utilized

this nomadic vantage point as a catalyst for researching the relationship between culture, identity, and the practice of teaching the visual arts. That said, I have also observed how Chalmers' approach to theorizing and addressing multicultural art education has evolved from his earlier writings that focused on celebrating pluralism to the more current publications in which he is dedicated to postulating a post-modern critical approach.

For Chalmers, the notion of maintaining a cultural foundation for education in the arts is an issue that has continually arisen within his research. In my own dissection of Chalmers' multicultural theories I have identified that in his early research he argued that art is "a process of human action and behavioral development" (Chalmers, 1974, p. 21). He believed, "too little attention is given to the social dimension of art" (p. 21). In other words, Chalmers posited the idea that within our field we as art educators harbor the ability to help students "create an awareness of social issues which can initiate social change" (p. 21). With this claim, I believe Chalmers demonstrates artwork as a concept of a cultural product that possesses the potential to promote social change through educated awareness. What is more, Chalmers declared that through art's inherently social nature students are able to become "propagandists and catalysts of social change" (p. 22). Chalmers (1974) described:

Well-planned courses in the *social foundations of art* should help students see the functions of art in culture as it transmits values and attitudes, and identifies cultural meanings to respect and understand cultural pluralism in our society by becoming aware of the functions of art in our many subcultures. (p. 22)

Through this affirmation of the innate value of all subcultures, Chalmers believed students could reach a level of cultural understanding he greatly valued. In fact, Chalmers (1974) stated, "cultural understanding should be the most important objective of teaching art" (p. 23). With

this, I link Chalmers' earlier conviction that social change is plausible through art with a later theory, which stressed the importance of examining diversity through ethnology or cultural anthropology.

Furthermore, Chalmers (1981) engaged in the theoretical discussion of ethnology and argued that in order to justify teaching art education in schools educators should "present art as a cultural artifact, and the cultural anthropologist as model for both art teacher and art student" (p. 6). For this, Chalmers drew upon Kaepler's (1976) notion in which:

The anthropological study of art is essentially an analysis of cultural forms and the social processes which produce them according to the aesthetic precepts of a specific group of people at a specific point in time. Discovering ... the processes and philosophies from the indigenous point of view is preeminently an ethnographic task. (Cited in Chalmers, 1981, p. 6)

Through this perspective, Chalmers advocated that the art education curriculum be used as a site for studying cultural anthropology. Or, to reiterate, Chalmers (1981) believed that students could first become anthropologists of their own cultures and through this role would "learn to value and *understand* the arts as well as to produce art that *matters*" (p. 6). By approaching multicultural art education through the anthropological lens Chalmers (1981) stressed the need for the visual arts curriculum to "make us aware of the sheer diversity of culture" (p. 8). This celebration of diversity became an important issue for Chalmers. That said, I postulate that Chalmers' celebration of pluralism and his emphasis on a multicultural curriculum that "acknowledged and celebrated racial and cultural diversity" came as a reaction to the historic ethnocentrism of the public school art curriculum (Chalmers, 1992a, p. 134).

Ethnocentrism is defined as a belief or assumption in the superiority of one's own cultural group and according to Chalmers (1992a) is "an implicit part of racism" (p. 134).

Chalmers (1992a) expressed:

Ethnocentrism has become a familiar word most generally understood, in parallel with 'egocentrism,' as an attitude or outlook in which values derived from one's own cultural background are applied to other cultural contexts where different values are operative. (p. 134)

With this statement, I believe Chalmers attempted to address the ethnocentrism of Western aesthetic theories that dominated much of the K-12 school art curriculum. Chalmers (1992a) observed that much of the art curricula in North American schools had been occupied by "particular notions of good art," traditionally associated foremost with Western artwork (p. 134). This history of associating *good* with *Western* has been used by both "European and North American art educators to promote some art as more worthy of study and some as less worthy," ultimately creating a cultural hierarchy (p. 134). I believe Chalmers attempted to address and combat the presence of this Western ethnocentrism with his celebratory multicultural theory, despite the fact that in the post-modern context it is evident the selective bias was rather perpetuated through DBAE curricula.

In other words, although DBAE stressed the importance of including art history into the school art curriculum, I believe the theory failed to fairly promote all art history equally. In my understanding of DBAE, I found the modernist theory showcased mainly Western artwork, or the artwork of dead-white men, while it seemingly ignored work generated by other non-western cultures. In doing so, I believe the prescribed DBAE curricula merely reaffirmed the division

between high and low art while perpetuating a white supremacy which Popkin (1973) believed could be traced back to the Enlightenment. Popkin (1973) wrote:

During the Enlightenment the lack of proper intellectual equipment among non-whites became a major basis for judging them in terms of their ‘philosophy’ and ‘way of life.’ It was particularly ‘people of color [who] just did not have the right things going on in their heads to qualify as a man in the philosophical sense. (Cited in Chalmers, 1992a, p. 136).

In other words, in theory DBAE curricular design intended to combat judgments as described by Popkins by attempting to “promote cross-cultural understanding by identifying similarities (particularly in the role and function of art) within and amongst cultures” (Chalmers, 1992b, p. 16). For example, Chalmers (1974) articulated that:

Understanding *within* America is equally, if not more, imperative at the present time. We should avoid programs with such extremely patronizing and elitist goals... museums and schools need to affirm the values of all cultures and ethnic groups which they serve. (p. 23)

However, in Chalmers multicultural art education model I believe theory did not accurately inform practice.

From a post-modern perspective I feel that in attempting to promote cross-cultural understanding through celebratory comparisons Chalmers’ multicultural art education philosophy became clichéd and perpetuated the stereotypic understanding of various minority cultures. Additionally, despite the intentions of this early form of Chalmers’ multicultural art education I have concluded that in practice, this version of the curriculum was not as successful as theory intended. While celebratory multiculturalism was intentionally designed to reflect modernist ideologies that included authenticity, essence, and depth, I believe Chalmers’ multicultural theory provided only a surface survey of various cultures—a cliché. In fact, using

my own post-modern ideologies I believe this celebratory, multicultural art education was in fact extremely patronizing. Personally, I do not agree with having students draw comparisons between works of art based solely on the Western aesthetic, which at the time was solicited through the DBAE framework. In fact, I see the activity as unfair and even dangerous. Students were passing judgment on multicultural works of art using Western criteria as measuring sticks. This naïve or inaccurately informed comparison I believe therefore invited a return to the cultural hierarchy of the past. I feel that using such superficial comparisons of practice only perpetuated the elitist curriculum and ultimately did not truly celebrate plurality as Chalmers foresaw.

In summation, despite what I have identified as the shortcomings of Chalmers' earlier vision and theory of multicultural art education, I do feel that situated within its modern context the theory was rather cutting edge and quite revolutionary. Celebrating plurality brought a much-needed awareness to previously overlooked, and often times unaddressed issues related to the ethnocentrism of school art education. For its time, *Celebrating Pluralism* provided the field of art education an invaluable approach to teaching a multicultural curriculum that would make sense to students and their communities.

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