

Statement of Philosophy of Education

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek meaning “love of wisdom.” That definition describes the legacy my mother gave me. She modeled for me not the heavy, contemplative wisdom that this definition might evoke, but a joyful, childlike curiosity, an inexhaustible desire to know more about the world around her. She loved gardening and plants and birds and biology, and religious studies, and well, everything! I remember in her last years, when she had Parkinson’s, that she wanted me to be with her during doctor visits, to ask questions, to help her remember and know more about this disease. She wasn’t sad or macabre about it. It was yet another fascinating aspect of life being revealed to her, there for her to absorb its mysteries. It is her spirit living through me to this day that has me see myself as a learner, above all else. It is the joy in learning that she exhibited that underlies my passionate efforts to bring pleasure and adventure to the learning process.

Another critical piece of my philosophical foundation lies in my cultural roots. My childhood home literally sat in the middle of the cotton fields of South Carolina, and the crop dusting planes flew over during the growing season, leaving a film of pesticide dust on the furniture. Life was hard work, and hot, and bare-footed. On one level, everything in my life grows out of that time and place. My father was a public safety officer, and involved directly in the civil unrest that was occurring during those tumultuous years in American history. The first African American student entered my school when I was in 4th grade, and 10 years old. Her name was Shirley. I lived with the contradictions and tensions that surrounded me during this time, from my conservative religious upbringing, to the socially activist music I was learning and playing, to the requirement that I boil the dishes used by the black man who sometimes worked beside my mother and me, to maintain our yard and huge family garden. Two cultural paradigms struggled to coexist, and the deep and complex ways that people were connected and disconnected became an important part of the fabric of my youth. These experiences are central to the perspective I hold today, and that I inevitably bring to the work that I have chosen to do.

Books and music fed me through those growing up years, and led me to question not only the religious structure that I knew, but more significantly, the social structure that surrounded me. I was being changed through songs and stories. To this day songs and stories are a centerpiece of how I teach and learn with students and teachers, and it is through the stories and songs of world cultures that I believe we come to know and understand something significant about our fellow humans.

I studied Music Therapy and Education at the undergraduate level, and have found this training invaluable in my work over these many years, as it was through this work that I began to think about the arts as a functional vehicle for learning. In those days I taught developmentally disabled or autistic students how to perform tasks using music as the mnemonic device. I was particularly attracted to cultural traditions, at first largely African American, as a rich resource for songs and games that would serve in this way.

I taught. Privately at the beginning, and then was drafted to teach as a cultural enhancement teacher in a diverse elementary school. My self-study of cultural traditions had continued, and I immersed myself in

any person or publication that could teach me new songs, stories, and games that reflected cultural traditions. I was specifically developing materials that called on whole body participation of students, and relied on their creative inventions in their execution. This work was intuitive, in that I did not have theoretical foundations for what I was doing at this time.

I taught young children at Carolina Friends School in Durham for several years, and was then asked to take a position there, serving with a project that their Middle School was undertaking that was a concept-based study of immigration, paralleling the immigration of the students themselves from elementary to middle grades, and based in the cultural history of immigration in the the US. During this time, A+ Schools approached me and asked me to join them in the training of teachers nationally based on their model of school reform grounded in multiple intelligence theory and arts integration. I began to study and develop work out of practice-based models of education at this point: Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design, curriculum mapping, and the work of Sir Ken Robinson about creativity in education.

But I also began to be aware of the gaps in my understanding. What did I really know about education? What did I really understand that explained the choices that I was seeing played out in classrooms? How could I work with teachers, without a full understanding of their rationales and learning paradigms, and the historical framework within which our educational system exists? I needed to speak the language of the classroom teacher. It was time to return to the classroom myself.

I went into graduate school in Education, with a concentration in Partnership Studies, as based in the work of Riane Eisler. The thread of understanding and participating in learning through a consciousness of who we are as cultural beings, and the power relationships that exist in our interactions, centered and grounded the work I chose to do. It was here that I had my first real exposure to Dewey, Freire, Giroux, Delpit, Banks, Nieto, Sleeter and others, those who were to become my long-term guides. I chose to synthesize these learnings through a research thesis about African American music as a lens through which to view American history. In this work, I created both a research based thesis, and a study guide for Middle School educators. My commitment to classroom practice was a central focus throughout.

During this time I was accepted as one of roughly 50 Kennedy Center Teaching Artists in the US. The John F. Kennedy Center has an ongoing relationship with those they have designated as such. They offer professional development for this group at a national retreat each year, and collaboratively work with us to refine our workshops and professional development courses, coaching, and demo teaching. We, in turn, are called upon to share this expertise at their conferences and institutes, in the CETA (Changing Education Through the Arts) program, and in our support of the many partner organizations in their system nationally. It provided a network of others who, like myself, worked to provide quality experiential arts-based learning experiences to teach across the curriculum.

Over the many years I have been teaching, I have delivered hundreds of workshops and residencies, demo teaching and coaching sessions, conference presentations and keynotes. I have continued to

follow my mother's lead, learning and absorbing the lessons of these experiences. I have written and reviewed grants, and enjoyed the process of designing and implementing programs that utilize best practices, structures that truly support change. I have become increasingly concerned that the structures within which much of my practice exists oftentimes are constrained by funding or timelines or other issues that don't allow for the reflective and sustained qualities necessary for change. Once again, I began to think about what more I needed to do my best work. I was led back to study once more.

I had become aware that, despite my life-long engagement with culture, that engagement was bounded by a specifically American experience. I decided it was time to broaden that perspective. I wanted to consider culturally responsive pedagogy, and I wanted to consider the capacity of the creative process to hold one's individuality, to allow for the expressivity that draws on the best we have to offer, both as cultural beings and as individuals. New Zealand offered a fascinating option, in that there was a politically structured bicultural society, without the language barriers that might exist for me in many locales. I went to the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, where I was offered a full scholarship, and undertook research in creative process and culturally responsive pedagogy. I was fortunate to expand my cultural horizons by conducting the research for my dissertation in New Zealand Maori traditions, Native Hawaiian traditions, and Oneida tribal traditions. During this time I worked in New Zealand, Ireland, England, Norway, and other locations, attended and presented at conferences, and began to shape my ideas into writings that I could share with the field, publishing a number of journal articles and contributing to a book chapter. My process had thus become both more grounded in the field and more reflective.

Process: It was the center of my doctoral research, and the center of my life's work. Educational philosopher Maxine Greene speaks to the importance of this aspect of learning.

We are interested in education here, not in schooling. We are interested in openings, in unexplored possibilities, not in the predictable or quantifiable, not in what is thought of as social control. For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nurture of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn.

... We see it as integral to the development of persons- to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development. We see it as part of the human effort (so often forgotten today) to seek a greater coherence in the world. (Greene, Variations 7)

I believe that our evolving understandings must be honored and cultivated, and must be allowed to breach boundaries, existing in a range of literacies, acknowledging that learning is both mental and physical, synesthetic as it moves from one form of expression to another. It must be reflective at every stage, re-formed as our understandings and selves evolve. In the final analysis, I am still that South Carolina girl whose mama took her to the garden, and marveled at the beauty there. I aspire to stand beside others in wonder at the richness of who we are and in the world we share, still and always, a learner.