

MORAL IMAGINATION AND ART: ECHOES FROM A CHILD'S SOUL

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate urban fifth graders' moral imagination through their personal symbolic language derived from their perceiving, feeling and making systems identified by Gardner (1973). The data was gathered using qualitative sources including entry and exit interviews, journals and focus groups. Action research was employed within the focus group process to promote qualitative information. The data was collected within the participant's school environment, which allowed for a natural setting. The data sources were collected to explore possible evidence of moral imagination through student's personal symbolic language. In some instances the students' poetry samples, rich in context, provided data for more than one finding.

Focus groups met once a week for six weeks to view paintings utilizing Perkins' (1994) visual thinking process. At the end of each session students recorded their personal symbolic language, which had been generated from their visual thinking about the painting. The personal symbolic language gathered from this process was then employed by the student to create poetry that stemmed from their examination of the painting. Journals were maintained by focus group participants throughout the six focus group sessions and evidenced students' personal symbolic language. Exit interviews were conducted, whereby participants selected one piece of creative writing from their journals for exit interview questions. This qualitative research data presents findings of moral discrimination (seeing), moral affect (feeling), and moral thought (making) as manifested within the personal symbolic language of urban fifth graders. Approximately 75% of the data were utilized which includes entry interviews, exit interviews, and journal entries.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

For the purpose of this study the three systems that comprise moral imagination include, moral discriminations (moral seeing), moral affect (moral feeling), and moral thought (moral making). Moral discrimination leads to moral feeling. Moral feeling leads to moral thought and moral thought subsequently (as a

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result of moral discrimination and moral feeling) leads to moral imagination. Moral imagination originated in the imaginative realm and revealed both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. These three systems, that comprise moral imagination although separately delineated as research questions, overlap, and do not impact one another in a linear form, yet rather occur systemically as a result of the visual thinking process. Moral discriminations (moral seeing) reflect observations in relation to what the participant sees in the artwork. Moral affect (moral feeling) reflect an association between what one sees and what one feels as a result of seeing the artwork. Moral thought (moral thinking) reflects what one thinks about in relation to what one has felt when seeing the artwork.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative action research study, which utilized focus groups with at-risk fifth graders as the action research vehicle. These students participated in a visual thinking process based on the research of Arnheim (1969) and Perkins (1994). The entry and exit interviews framed the focus group experience.

The paintings selected for the action research were presented to the focus group participants in the following order: *Nighthawks*, by Edward Hopper, *Starry Night*, by Vincent Van Gogh, *Christina's World*, by Andrew Wyeth, *The Banjo Lesson*, by Henry Tanner, *Summertime*, by Romare Bearden, and *The Problem We All Live With*, by Norman Rockwell. The paintings were presented in a sequential order throughout the action research process, representing a variety of artists from various ethnic backgrounds. These works are realistic in composition and lent themselves to the developmental stage and visual curiosity of the preadolescent (Gardner, 1982) that was revealed when utilizing the visual thinking process as outlined by Perkins (1994). The focus group experienced a sequential series of paintings that presented themes of personal, social, and political isolation. The series began with Hopper's three faceless subjects seated at the diner in *Nighthawks*, and ended with, *The Problem We All Live With*, a painting by Rockwell, that encompassed all the themes including racism, public persecution and entrapment. It was evident, as a result of the action research, that the participants, as expressed in their personal symbolic language, related directly to the artwork through their experiences, therefore, this authentic experience provided the research study with texture rich data and content that revealed both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences.

Students were drawn to the loneliness and darkness in Hopper's painting, *Nighthawks*, and related to van Gogh's sense of isolation and despair evident in *Starry Night*. The personal symbolic language reflected the students' sense of isolation and poverty and at the same time revealed hopeful insights. Student poetry manifested an intuitive understanding of life experience. These

insights developed and originated from the characters in the artwork and held intrapersonal and interpersonal meaning.

Intrapersonal intelligence can be considered a dominant precursive construct in human development. It represents the “internal aspects of a person...to one’s own feeling life—one’s range of emotions: the capacity instantly to effect discriminations among these feelings and, eventually, to label them, to enmesh them in symbolic codes, to draw upon them as a means if understanding and guiding ones behavior” (Gardner, 1983, p.239). The interpersonal informs the intrapersonal intelligence as this intelligence “turns outward, to other individuals...to notice and make distinctions among other individuals and, in particular, among their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions” (p.239). Both, the intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence reveal themselves concurrently within the participant’s personal symbolic language and reflect an “orientation toward, and a gradual knowledge of, other individuals, as the only available means for eventually discovering the nature of one’s own person” (p.248).

Gardner asserted that art has the singular potential for bringing individuals closer to the “other” or those that are different by highlighting common traits. It is a means by which individuals may relate to the “experiences and subjective life of others” (p.349). In this sense, therefore, this art based action research may have critical insights for at-risk children who need this “medium of expression,” in order to “communicate their thoughts, desires, and precepts freely and passionately” (Gardner, 1973, p.349).

This action research supported the Deweyan thought that, “the arts impact the mind and heart to significantly work in synchronicity with the imagination” (Dewey, 1934, p.347). The purpose of this study was to research the moral imagination of at-risk urban fifth grade students as manifested within their use of personal symbolic language. Moral discrimination, moral affect, and moral thought corresponded to Gardner’s (1973) three systems of human development. Within each of these areas the pedagogy of the action research process promoted student growth. For the purpose of the study, moral discrimination was equated with Gardner’s perceiving system, moral affect was present in the feeling system and moral thought is represented in the making system. This research utilized entry interviews, exit interviews, and writing samples of at-risk urban fifth grade students. As a result of this qualitative action research study, moral imagination (moral discrimination, moral affect, and moral thought) revealed an emerging sense of self through the student’s personal symbolic language.

THE RESEARCH

A cognitive symbolic product was revealed by all of the students after participating in the visual thinking process, creating poetry and discussing the meaning of their poetry. The cognitive symbolic product took form through the utilization of personal symbolic language collected throughout the visual

thinking process. The personal symbolic language is a product of cognition during the visual thinking process and may be seen as the data that represents the student's "built-in limits of knowing" (Gardner, 1991) in reference to their definitive ways of defining objects and characters into broad categories. These categories are "tangible or intangible, living or nonliving, feeling or nonfeeling" and reflect "ways in which they know about their existence regarding "personal developed theories of mind, matter, life, self, and other ontological realms" (Gardner, 1991, p.102). The creative symbolic product is "a result of the imagination bringing images into consciousness, an action of the mind that produces a new idea or insight" (Gerard, 1952, p.226).

The cognitive symbolic product represented new forms of thinking formulated from imaginary references inherent in the data the student participants collected throughout the visual thinking process. Students assembled and arranged (cognitive scaffolding) the personal symbolic language or data they collected from the visual thinking process, into a new symbolic form or poem. All of the participants expressed individual thoughts in relationship to the meaning of their poems that revealed both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. For example, Tashema was inspired by the character that was hiding in the background behind the curtain in the painting, *Summertime*, by Romare Bearden, and used that visual cue as an imaginary reference in her poem, "Although You Can't See Me." Tashema's personal symbolic language represented the voice of the character. Tashema explained to us that although "You can't see me, / There is a whole inside that you can't see." Tashema continued to reveal moral thought telling us that "Although you don't know me, / And you think I don't have anything, / I really do, / I got God." Tashema's cognitive symbolic product revealed moral thought as she represented her view of "other peoples'" existence and marginalized life within society.

Although You Can't See Me
 Although you can't see me
 There is a whole inside that you can't see
 Although you don't know me
 And you think I don't have anything
 I really do, I got God.
 Although you can't see me,
 I am your guiding angel.
 (Action Research: Stage Five)

Tashema's cognitive symbolic product, "Although You Can't See Me," revealed both intrapersonal and interpersonal moral thought. She wanted people to think about the idea, "That you can love someone or care for someone without even knowing them." She moved between intrapersonal moral thought, stating, "And you think I don't have anything/ I really do, / I got God" into interpersonal moral thought when she explained that, "You can love someone...without even knowing them." Tashema's cognitive symbolic

product represented her view of society's class structures and how others judge people living in isolation or poverty.

Like Tashema, Allison was inspired by the character within the painting, which was used as her imaginary reference and spoke through the voice of the young boy in The Banjo Lesson, by Henry Tanner. In her poem, "Banjo," Allison revealed intrapersonal moral thought telling us that she "is proud when she sees herself playing." She continued to move into interpersonal moral thought as she wanted "To say thanks", / To her grandfather. Her moral thought is revealed through her realization that her proud feeling and learning is due to her grandfather. She understood this relationship between her grandfather and herself.

Banjo
 Down my face
 I see myself play the banjo
 Proud I am
 To say thanks
 To my Grandpa
 Happy
 How happy I am.
 (Action Research: Stage Four)

Allison's cognitive symbolic product revealed interpersonal moral thought as she stated the meaning of her poem, "When you're older always love and cherish your parents cause when there gone and you have nobody else you're really gonna regret yourself." At the end of her statement, intrapersonal moral thought expressed a warning and is reflective of knowing the important role her family plays in her life.

Charissa used the main character in the painting as her imaginary reference, like Tashema and Allison, and created the poem, "Look Out Far," that was inspired by the painting, *Christina's World*, by Andrew Wyeth. Charissa related to the struggle of the main character lying isolated and helpless within an overpowering expansive space. Charissa's intrapersonal moral thought is expressed in her poem, "Look Out Far," as she revealed her personal thoughts of being alone as she tried to obtain a goal in her life. Charissa is alone, "Crying by yourself", yet tells us that she is "Strong, strong enough to do a hundred push-ups without breaking a sweat." Charissa description of strength reflects cognitive knowing of how strong one must be to persevere and achieve a goal. Charissa's cognitive symbolic product, "Look Out Far," presents a connection between domains of knowledge within intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. Charissa revealed her struggle to reach her goal, and gently reminded herself that it is important to try to relax, yet remains proud by "running the mile race." We feel Charissa's sense of pride and strength as she described the finish of the race as "Breathtaking." Her personal thoughts

describe the sensation she has to be as, “Relaxed as the cloud in the sky.” We see the end of her goal, as she tells us that the “mile race” is “beautiful” and leaves us with hope to always continue to achieve our goals and “Look out far.” Charissa repeated her message at the very end of her poem and reminded us again to, “Look out far.”

Look Out Far
 Alone as you
 Crying by yourself
 Strong,
 Strong enough to do a hundred push-ups
 without breaking a sweat.
 Trying to relax.
 Proud,
 Proud of yourself running the mile race,
 Breathtaking,
 Relaxed as the cloud in the sky.
 Beautiful,
 Look out far, look out far.
 (Action Research: Stage Three)

Charissa utilized specific imaginary references from the painting, *Christina's World*, by Wyeth, to assemble her poem, which included the expansive blue sky filled with soft clouds and the seemingly unobtainable horizon, the character reaches out for within the artwork.

Charissa wanted students to remember to be their best after reading her poem. She said, “Don’t be bad in school...be a leader not a follower.” Charissa continued to reveal intrapersonal thought when she stated, “I’m trying to really make it to the goal but it’s really hard.” Charissa said her goal is, “To be good for the rest of the year and to make sure nothing bad happens.” As Charissa expressed her personal goal she indicated an impending fear of something bad happening to her. This fear is indicative of her personal struggle to reach her goal in school, yet in her poem, “Look Out Far,” we see a confident Charissa who has intuited the sensation of reaching her goal. Her personal symbolic language revealed moral thought as Charissa can visualize herself completing her goal, “Proud of yourself running the mile race...Beautiful...Breathtaking”, as expressed in her poem “Look Out Far.”

Patrice utilized several imaginary visual references in her poem, “Fear of All,” which was inspired after viewing the painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, by Norman Rockwell. Patrice moved between intrapersonal and intrapersonal moral thought expressing the suffering the character endured due to the anger of others. We witness Patrice’s personal viewpoint of this tragic historical moment in American history as she described the little girl walking on “A path of pain and horror, / Not even a grown-up can walk on.” Patrice revealed cognitive understanding and knowledge of racism when describing the, “Discolored wall with a sign of hateness /...Word with hurtful meanings /

and Empty sidewalks being blocked by mean people.” Patrice described the facial expression of the girl when stating the, “Little girl hiding pain” and continued to tell us what she thinks of the little girls character describing her as, “A sweet flower that doesn’t care what people think.” This last thought revealed Patrice’s intrapersonal intelligence as she is hopeful in thinking that the little girl “Doesn’t care what people think.”

Fear of All

Bloody tomato being thrown,
A path of pain and horror
Not even a grown-up can walk on.
Big man blocking a small girl.
A gold-hearted girl that can’t be broken.
Discolored wall with a sign of hateness.
Little girl hiding pain.
Words with hurtful meanings.
Empty sidewalks being blocked by mean
people,
A sweet flower that doesn’t care what people
think.

(Action Research: Stage Six)

In “Fear of All,” Patrice expressed an understanding of the little girl’s struggle and strength to walk into the school, as she doesn’t run away, even under such cruel conditions imposed by “mean people.” Patrice wanted us to remember that “running away can sometimes change your life and hiding can sometimes change your life too.” Patrice revealed this moral thought after discussing her poetry. This moral thought originated from intrapersonal intelligence based on Patrice’s life experiences and moved to interpersonal intelligence in reference to difficulties she has felt from people that sometimes made her want to run away.

Keith was inspired to write, “ In the Deadeast Night,” after viewing, *Starry Night*, by Vincent van Gogh. Keith’s cognitive symbolic product revealed a creative imagination that actively recreated the painting scene in which he (Keith) is the artist, Vincent van Gogh. Keith, the artist, describes the sky (“dark raspberry blue sky”), the trees (“sapphire trees scrape the sky like a skyscraper”) and the stars (“It’s a starry night...colors start to swirl”) and a final sense of loneliness, “In the deadeast night.”

In the Deadeast Night

In the deadeast of night
I laid my head and stared out the window
As I gazed at the moon
My thoughts regenerated
I take out my paper,

My pen, my brush, and my paint,
I made a bumpy surface on my canvas paper.
I thought of the dark raspberry blue sky,
It's a starry night,
The sapphire trees scrap the sky
Like a skyscraper.
As I look in the sky,
Colors start to swirl
In the dead of the night,
In the dead of the night,
I know that outside myself there is a world,
In the dead of the night.
(Action Research: Stage Two)

Keith understood that van Gogh was isolated in a hospital, alone, and praying as he looked out the window into the starry night. Keith's moral thought is revealed in a subtle manner through his personal symbolic language, and revealed a sense of hope he has for Vincent van Gogh, when stating, "Outside myself there is a world." Keith has hope for van Gogh and perhaps for others to know that "Outside myself there is a world." Keith's poem, "In the Deadest Night," moved from intrapersonal to interpersonal intelligence as Keith expressed his realization that other people exist beyond ones' self.

Jonathan created this poem titled, "The Lesson," after viewing the painting, *The Banjo Lesson*, by Henry Tanner. Jonathan's personal symbolic language described the specific imaginative references he was visually drawn to. Jonathan moved between interpersonal and intrapersonal thoughts, "The Lesson," began with the relationship between the boy and his grandfather as the grandfather says, "Good job to the boy." Intrapersonal moral thought is revealed as Jonathan thinks that they "are playing to wash away their troubles," and he continued acknowledging that one needs to let troubles "come and go." This intrapersonal thought may be reflective how Jonathan handled his problems.

The Lesson

I think the man is the grandfather
He is saying, "Good job" to the boy.
The boy is the grandson and he thinks this is
hard.
Firewood's on the floor to keep the fire
burning.
There's a loaf of newly baked bread on the
counter.
There's a black coat on the hanger.
The apartment is broken down and smoky.
There is a rusty used up kettle on the floor.
The room is filled with noise.

They both happy that they have a home and
food
And they think they have all they need.
They are playing the banjo to wash away their
troubles.
They're trying not to think of the rent and
things
That might make them worry
Instead of letting it come and go.
(Action Research: Stage Four)

Jonathan said he felt the most important line was, "They're playing the banjo to wash away their troubles." Jonathan wanted us to understand that, "You should always talk to someone...maybe that will help a little bit and make your day a bit happier." This moral thought is explored through the interpersonal relationship between the grandfather and the boy. Jonathan understood that although they are poor and they may have money troubles, "They're trying not to think of the rent and things," the grandfather and the boy are together playing the banjo. They are helping each other to not worry, to "wash away their troubles" and let worries "come and go."

Like Keith, Kathryn also took the place of Vincent van Gogh in her poem, "My Guardian Angels," which was inspired after viewing van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*. Kathryn used the voice of the artist looking out the window. She expressed a sense of hope, inspired from nature as she looked out her window. She stated, "The whirling wind believing in me and giving me hope. The biggest star I see tonight, guiding me toward my destination." She continued to elaborate with imaginative description an inspirational scene of love for nature stating, "The tall midnight trees keeping me and my life guessing. The moon always singing in my ear, telling me my destiny. Town shows love, and light and tells me I should have faith in me and my art." Nature's scene, in van Gogh's painting, becomes an imaginary reference as her "guardian angel."

My Guardian Angels
The dark crystal skies
Looking like ocean waves
moving back and forth.
The whirling wind believing in me
and giving me hope.
The biggest star I see tonight,
Guiding me toward my destination.
The tall midnight trees
keeping me and my life guessing.
The moon always singing in my ear
Telling me my destiny.
Town shows love, and light

and tells me I should have faith in me and my art.

Mountain black as a cat telling me
why I was brought to earth
and what my art brings out to people.
Church bells ringing in my ear
telling me what I shall do,
Where I shall go from here?
(Action Research: Stage Two)

Kathryn's personal symbolic language revealed her sense of understanding of the rejection van Gogh suffered as an artist and his isolation in the hospital room. Kathryn's moral thought, revealed through intrapersonal feelings, speaks to a hopeful artist, one that needs to keep faith in her art and her life. Kathryn's cognitive symbolic product represented hope found in the spirituality of nature by the struggling artist. Kathryn's poem revealed a sense of doubt van Gogh may have held, suffering from isolation and despair, as she reminds us that the "Town shows love, and light / And tells me I should have faith in me and my art." Her moral thought is revealed as she reminds us to keep our faith in ourselves when saying do "whatever you want to do without anyone stopping you...just have fun with your life while you still can." Kathryn's final thoughts, "Mountain black as a cat telling me why I was brought to earth and what my art brings out to people," reveals her hope, that her art may in some way help people. In a subtle way she was telling van Gogh to be hopeful and not to stop painting. Kathryn questioned her future by saying, "Church bells ringing in my ear / Telling me what I shall do, / Where I shall go from here?" Kathryn's viewpoint moved from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal and back to the intrapersonal intelligence.

James created, "So Abstract," after viewing the painting, *Summertime*, by Romare Bearden. The symbolism of the city scene is expressed in the title, "So Abstract." James presented an objective viewpoint of the city scene Romare Bearden painted in, *Summertime*. James visual thinking led him to inquire into the relationship between the characters in the painting. He wondered if they are "Strangers or are they close." James personal symbolic language revealed that he was drawn visually into the background of the painting where there are "People looking in the house." He described a sense of the people's size in relation to the city building when he describes it as a "dollhouse." This description is an imaginative view by James of city life and the buildings that hold people captive like dolls in a dollhouse.

So Abstract

The woman is wearing a shirt
That looks transparent.
It must be not because it looks like
the woman is eating ice-cream.

Are these two people strangers
Or are they close?
What are those?
Yes, they are people looking in the house
Like it is a dollhouse.
(Action Research: Stage Five)

As James participated in the visual thinking process he expressed an understanding toward the characters within the paintings presented in the focus groups. James interpersonal intelligence is revealed through inquiry about the characters in the paintings, which largely became his imaginative references that he based his questioning on. In, "So Abstract," James can't help but wonder if the two characters on the city street are strangers, "Or are they close?" James is expressing interpersonal intelligence when inquiring with a hopeful question that there might be a relationship. Jonathan revealed moral thought when thinking about the characters in the street scene as he stated, "I feel bad for them and I feel good for myself because I'm lucky that I'm not in those times."

Like James, Rachel was also inspired to write, "So What," after viewing the painting, *Summertime*, by Romare Bearden. Rachel presented her view of city life through the voice of one of the characters to describe life living in the city. In, "So What," Rachel created a tragic life of poverty, despair, drug addiction, and mental illness. Moral thought emerged as Rachel expressed that even though life is so tragic her "family has love." She continued to speak to the "others" the stereotype impoverished, disenfranchised people and stated, "Still judge me, / What a waste, / You know what? I don't care what ya'll think."

So What
I live in the city,
Yeah, so what
My family is poor
So what
I have an uncle who's a drunk,
An aunt who's mental,
And a grandfather who's a drug addict.
SO WHAT.
My family has love that's what
I love about it most
Ya'll say that's all that matters
First I tell you all this an you
Still judge me,
What a waste,
You know what?
I don't care what ya'll think,

Yeah I have a raggedy behind dress
It's ripped and stained and worn
Till it's just cloth
But I love it,
SO WHAT
I bet you I'll whoop you up in the
game
I feel like a king off of what I gain.
My life will get back to the same
eventually
My family has love.
I'll bet you a quarter
To match me in a game of jacks
I wanna use the money
To buy some milk for my mom
We are pretty poor
But I'll survive,
I'll survive.
(Action Research: Stage Five)

Rachel's moral thought is revealed when she refers to her, "raggedy behind dress" as being, "ripped and stained and worn, till it's just cloth," and she continued saying, "I love it." Rachel expressed hope amidst despair through love for her family and for a dress that most people would throw away. This rejection may be compared to the way Rachel perceives society rejecting impoverished and isolated people. Rachel's voice in, "So What," moved between intrapersonal and interpersonal moral thought. She bets she can beat us at her game because she wants, "to buy some milk for my mom." Her strength is expressed in winning a game of jacks but deteriorates in the end when she stated that, "We are pretty poor." Hope emerged at the end of, "So What," as Rachel expressed moral thought and stated, "But I'll survive, / I'll survive." Rachel wanted us to remember to "just be yourself and really look at what someone else is doing and try to relate to them and on a really comfortable level and understand and be patient." The character speaking in, "So What," wanted to be understood, as both a sense of pride and a sense of not caring is expressed in the repeated use of the line, "so what." Rachel capitalized "SO WHAT," for emphasis within the character's voice.

Clare's wrote "Troubles," after viewing the painting, *Summertime*, by Romare Bearden. Like Rachel, Clare also expressed intrapersonal thought through the voice of the character in the artwork. We realize the magnitude of what Clare thinks the character is feeling as she stated, "Being troubled in this city is/ heartaching." She creatively presented a sense of hope through the phrase, "Seeing the children's bubbles" that "Lift away in the sky." Clare wanted to be "In a bubble with no worries / or troubles."

Troubles
Being troubled in this city is
heartaching.
Trying not to think of all my
troubles.
Seeing the children's bubbles
Lifting away in the sky.
Thinking of being lifted up
In a bubble with no worries
Or troubles
Wondering what it would be like with
No troubles
Moving on with my life.
Troubles.
(Action Research: Stage Five)

Clare expressed intrapersonal moral thought in her last line of, "Troubles," stating, "Moving on with my life." There is a sense that this may be her only way to problem-solve and see hope in the future. Clare said that her most important line was, "Wondering what it would be like without troubles...because everyday people have troubles and I know they wonder what it would be like without all the troubles and problems the have...their life would probably be a whole lot easier." The moral would be never to give up."

CONCLUSIONS

The arts present us with ideas in relation to human truths, ourselves, our existence, our lives, and our world. This qualitative action research study, provided the adolescent a mirror to look inward, to see, to feel, and to think about what they know, where they came from, and possibly where they are going, and the emerging perception of what they believe. This new thought can be conceptualized as a cognitive symbolic product.

The cognitive symbolic product was the result of combining two unique mediums, art and poetry, within the action research process. Eisner (1989) stated that the medium counts and as this action research revealed is "one of the best ways to know just how much to compare and contrast the messages that are conveyed through the use of media" (p.7). The emerging evolution in cognitive science is only beginning to discover the significance of Arnheim's (1989) early insights into the processes of cognition" (p.7). The cognitive symbolic product was a result of combining art and poetry within a visual thinking process, and as Eisner (1989) stated, "these two mediums performed as an epistemological function -- they help us know... what children can convey... and how they experience the unique features of the world they inhabit" (p.6).

Gardner (1973) stated that all great artists have one definitive characteristic in common, that they are “compelled to express as directly, completely, and honestly as possible all that they have been able to find out about their world and about themselves” (p.348). Eisner (1989) concurred with Gardner and his theories supported this study as he maintained that “the arts, particularly the visual arts, call children’s attention to particular qualities of the world, especially for children beyond eight or nine years of age. What is important in the arts, ultimately, is not only generalization, but individuation...The arts are our culture’s most powerful means for making life in its particulars vivid. In this way the arts escalate consciousness,” (p.6) especially as this study revealed the consciousness of at-risk urban fifth grade students’ as manifested through their personal symbolic language and resulting cognitive symbolic product. The arts must not be neglected and continued to be removed from traditional school curriculum and must be regarded as a significant medium of reflectivity and complex imaginative inquiry within school pedagogy.

The works of art presented in the focus group series presented the participants a visual playground in which to explore a myriad of intrapersonal and interpersonal thoughts about their self, their life and their world. The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore the moral imagination of at-risk urban fifth grade students through their personal symbolic language, as manifested through their perceiving, feeling and making systems (Gardner,1973).Moral imagination encompassed moral discriminations (moral seeing), moral affect (moral feeling), and moral thought (moral thinking) and thus provided a conceptual means to query the participants gradually developing capacity to explore their sense of “self,” when visually thinking about a work of art, in relationship to their self and their life, and the resulting cognitive symbolic product.

The paintings selected for the focus group series represented a variety of artists from various ethnic backgrounds that chose to remind us of human events that the curriculum might otherwise ignore. Artists have a “zealous” characteristic to pursue “truths about life, the world, and their feelings, these outstanding individuals...are powerfully motivated to share their discoveries with others” (Gardner, 1973, p.348). Therefore, the art works presented an authentic curriculum experience for at-risk youth and “provided critical clues for the understanding of the minds of children” and their moral imagination. Because as Gardner maintains, “children see, feel, and make from the first,” all their experiences enrich the systems on which their eventual participation in the aesthetic process was based” (p.349) as revealed through their personal symbolic language when viewing a work of art.

This effort is in keeping with the thought of Robert Coles, a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at the Harvard Medical School, and author of *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, who believed that children “constantly ask their whys...look inward in search of meaning and purpose: to seek an understanding of what truly matters” and in a sense toward the “heart of

spirituality” (1997, p.178). This research study provided in essence, an authentic experience upon which at-risk urban fifth grade students could directly investigate “whys” in relationship to sense of self. Personal symbolic language revealed moral discrimination, moral feelings and moral thinking that was both intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature. The “task of connecting intellect to character” (p. 184) and our learning’s to the knowledge of the other, “is daunting,” however, stories are embedded within the psychology of art in reference to the character’s lives, that “tug at our vain selves” and ask us “what is happening to you, right here, right now” (Coles citing Chekhov, 1989, p. 204).

The moral imagination of the participant responded to “the story” of the character in the artwork in relation to the self. Greene stated in *The Dialectic of Freedom*, “It seems clear, as Oliver and Bane have said, “that young people “need the opportunity to project themselves in rich hypothetical worlds created by their own imagination or those of dramatic artists” (p.119). Rich works of art provided a tapestry of visual imaginative references or schema (Goodman, 1976) for the adolescent to directly reflect and intuit personal experiences. These percepts in essence form the beginnings of belief systems (Arnheim, 1969). Concurring with Arnheim, Greene maintained that “reflective ness, even logical thinking remain important; but the point of cognitive development is not to gain an increasingly complete grasp of abstract principles. It is to interpret from as many vantage points as possible lived experiences, the ways there are of being in the world” (1988, p.120). In a sense the work of Anna Freud represents a precursor to Greene in that five decades ago she urged teachers to allow students to express themselves stating, “Let us try to learn from children all they have to tell us... let us sort out only later, how their ideas fit in with our own... Sometimes children we see will even help us with our own problems, those of theory, because there are many clues for theory in what a child chooses to say to an adult listener” (Coles citing Freud, 1986, p.15).

For the purpose of this research study on moral imagination, the works of art presented to the focus groups, provided a natural means to express the self. This was maintained by both Greene and Freud to be of greatest importance for teacher and researcher, students should be provided with authentic experiences to reflect and reveal what they see, feel, and think, in relationship to their greater understandings and sense of self (Greenwood and Levin, 2000). The ability to be reflective, Gardner (1997) maintained, in *Extraordinary Minds*, is a key element for the success of creative individuals such as Virginia Woolf, Martha Graham, Mozart and Gandhi. Gardner stated that “reflecting is, by definition, conscious” (p.147). Perkins (1994) theory of visual thinking provided the action research and the participants with a systemic process to think and reflect about the artwork in relationship to the self.

This qualitative action research study collected personal symbolic language that was stimulated and manifested after viewing works of art and

reflecting upon fragments and visual cues. As revealed through the data collected, moral seeing, moral feeling, and moral thinking were evident. These systems formed the phenomenon of moral imagination and revealed an emerging sense by which the participant to expressed intrapersonal and interpersonal thought. Moral imagination may possibly be seen as an emerging sense of self, having a gradual developed capacity towards moral intent and the impact of their behavior may have on others.

In *Extraordinary Minds*, Gardner points to the ability of artists to reflect on experiences and in fact form the resiliency in the individual to, “find meaning—and even uplift—an apparently negative experience that fuels one to face life confidently and effectively” (1997, p.152). This point is made in reference to the importance of the development of the moral imagination within children that is directly connected, according to Gardner, to the intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. The systems of moral imagination (moral seeing, moral feeling, and moral thinking) do not work in a linear fashion and however do reflect thinking that simultaneously moves between the intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. It would seem therefore, to educators, administrators, teachers, and curriculum directors and all those that work directly with children, that moral imagination is revealed, upon visually thinking through a work of art, and is a topic worthy of inclusion and of major importance for the education of all children but especially for those deemed at-risk in particular. Thus, the arts should not be at the fringes of education but should exist as a discipline that promotes significant overall cognitive results and develops the moral imagination which leads to a greater understanding of one’s self, others and the world.

This researcher is calling for all those in the education of children to embrace the importance of a moral imagination in children as a key component to possibly attaining higher intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Gardner uses the examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin, Luther King, (and the researcher will add) Dorothy Day as having high interpersonal skills and Mozart, Picasso, Woolf, Graham (and the researcher will add Simone Weil) as having high intrapersonal skills. All of these extraordinary minds had a highly developed sense of moral imagination in that they held a highly developed capacity to know what felt right or wrong for their self, in relation to others and the world. In addition, they maintained a passionate drive to express their vision of truth, therefore enriching our understanding of our existence.

Gardner pointed to the critical importance of the arts in human development and how we begin to see, feel and think from the very first. This research is critical for the education of children, especially those who are at-risk, isolated and alienated, and devoid of voice. This arts based action research, presented that, when the moral imagination was revealed, at-risk children were empowered to express a cognitive symbolic product. This cognitive symbolic product was a result of the new thinking that emerged from the personal symbolic language or poem. The cognitive symbolic product revealed the moral imagination of the participants in correspondence to what

they perceived to be their “right or wrong” directives in leading one’s life. This thinking was empathic and action oriented in that it pointed out the importance of family support, the need to support victims of poverty, the maintenance of hope and the ability and drive to achieve goals. This researcher recommends further research into the importance of the arts and moral imagination for students who though deemed by society as at-risk, are in actuality by virtue of their moral imagination, at-promise. Further research is also recommended for the training of teachers of all children, especially those deemed at-risk, in understanding the utilization of art by means of revealing a moral imagination through a cognitive symbolic product. This research has the potential to create for schools, administrators and teachers, an authentic school community which will flourish given it’s base in empathic understanding and the students’ gradual capacity towards moral intent and the impact their behavior may have on others.

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Moral imagination, according to philosopher Mark Johnson, means envisioning the full range of possibilities in a particular situation in order to solve an ethical challenge. Johnson emphasizes that acting morally often requires more than just strength of character. For example, moral action requires empathy and the awareness to discern what is morally relevant in a given situation. Moral imagination, as defined by Minette Drumwright and Patrick Murphy, is the ability to be simultaneously ethical and successful by envisioning new and creative alternatives. In other words, can people look beyond