

The New... **SCHOOL ART**

Reimagining School Art Style Projects

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“School Art Style,” is an art style in a category of its own, and it is said that “many of the art activities in schools do not actually support creative self-expression and ... are not effective in teaching students about methods of artmaking outside of school contexts” (Gude, O., 2013). Back in Arthur Efland’s writings of 1976, it was pointed out that “School art is not the same as child art...” and that, “school art style does not seem to be a pedagogical tool for teaching children about art in the world beyond school” (Efland, A., 1976). How is it then, in 2025, that we still have an immediate art style that comes to mind with the mention of “School Art,” one that has been perpetuated for decades, yet it is not representative of art that a child would make on their own, nor the process that a professional artist practices? What can be changed in our curriculum to provide more project-based, authentic, high-quality arts education in the schools?

How students can operate like mature artists:

- 1 Artworks are driven by ideas, not formal principles.
- 2 Art making is a form of inquiry and research.¹
- 3 Students make art about social justice issues that concern them – a challenge to the dominant culture.
- 4 Art making is interdisciplinary, with students doing STEM² to inform their work¹, including entirely digital works.
- 5 Artworks are more student-driven than teacher-driven.
- 6 Students become involved in peer-to-peer critiques outside of school that bypass the teacher.

-from *An Uneasy Guest in the Schoolhouse* (Winner, E., 2022)

*“That change
presumably
has to begin
with rethinking
the training
of future
art teachers”*


(Winner, E., p 144)

Criticism of School Art Style:

There are many reasons that the coined "School Art Style" has been criticized. All the way back to 1976, Efland called School Art, "game-like, conventional, ritualistic, and rules-governed" (p 38). These associations are because "School Art" projects are teacher-driven projects that are product oriented. These projects seldom express a child's need of self-expression or self-satisfaction through these projects, and they are not projects that children would make on their own. The finished products give a false feeling of the student's role in creativity, because the creativity is usually a limited choice option. Because of the unbalanced emphasis on using manual skills in completing projects versus a cognitive activity, these school art projects are not representative of current goals in art education.

Causes of School Art Style:

- Institutional expectations on products and assessment.
- The need for schools to justify financial value of art in the curriculum.
- Art class is considered a time in the school day to escape from more challenging academic lessons.
- School art is only valued as an aesthetic response or therapeutic activity.
- Large number of students and short time periods for art teacher to work with kids.
- The teaching profession itself (in public education) stems from authoritarian design.
- The expectation of art teachers to be able to turn children's creativity "on" and "off" during class time.
- Untrained or unqualified art teachers, with less-than-ideal work conditions.



Goals for Reimagining School Art:

Ideas for reimagining how to teach art education in schools, and throw out the idiom of "School Art Style" began back with Efland's analysis in the 70's, and have continued with critics such as Anderson, Milbrandt, and Gude. Anderson and Milbrandt wrote that art education should be "teaching art for life's sake" (p15). Other goals are the project's focus on the student's life experiences, and to develop problem solving and communication skills. Both the teacher and their methods of assessment should model a professional artist's practice. Projects should introduce working collaboratively and inspire student inquiry and analysis. Themes should allow students to represent themselves and their cultural identities, not just that of the Western art canon. If the viewpoint of teaching art for more than aesthetics or art therapy can be reached, teaching art's power as a social function will be, "helping students be more human through art" (Efland, A., 1976, p 40).

References:

- Anderson, T. & Milbrandt, M. (1998) Authentic art instruction in art: Why and how to dump the school art style. *Visual Arts Research*, Vol. 24 (No. 1), pp 13-20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20715931>
- Efland, A. (1976). The school art style: a functional analysis. *Studies in Art Education*. Vol. 17 (No. 2), pp 37-44. <http://jstor.org/stable/1319979>
- Gude, O. (2013, January). New school art styles: The art project of art education. *Art Education*. Vol. 66, (No. 1). pp 6-15. <http://jstor.org/stable/23392068>
- Winner, E. (2022). *An uneasy guest in the schoolhouse: Art education from colonial times to a promising future*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO.