When Doing Nothing Is Not Doing Less

by Katherine H. Oh

Curatorial Review: Drawing Together: Toward a Relational Ethics of Ignorance

Hyon Park

There are moments when “the more, the better” seems almost inevitable, when we are desperate to do something, only to realize our incapacity—to admit the vulnerability, yet accompany it with a demand for something more, as if what is already there were unsatisfying or inadequate. We try to conceal, resist, or overcome it. In those moments, addition comes before presence, and a series of additions becomes almost unavoidable, whether through accumulation or another new application. One intervention follows another—explanation, guidance, and strategy. Doing more becomes a way of responding to what we do not know how to hold, or of moving toward what we think is “the better.”

Toward a Relational Ethics of Ignorance, however, unsettles this taken-for-granted habit. Placing an aesthetics of “emptiness” before this addition, Park turns toward intentional self-alienation, a deliberate displacement of the teacher from the center of the encounter toward a different relational ethics. Her self-withdrawal holds in suspension the authority afforded by her proficiency in graphic production, refusing to let her expertise determine in advance “what the product looks like” before listening, waiting, and attending to what emerges through drawing together. Rather than understanding absence as incapacity, lack, or doing nothing, this withdrawal minimizes the disruption of teacher intervention, making space for children’s worlds to remain open, relational, and capable of unfolding otherwise. “Ignorance,” therefore, does not mean not listening. Instead, it means being attentive to what emerges from uncertainty, being persistent in waiting, and being ready to negotiate, resist, and communicate. Positioning herself as one who requires children’s assistance, not as a rhetorical gesture, but as one who actually needs and relies on the child’s cultural knowledge, the author brings her own expertise in drawing into the child’s aesthetic encounters. Neither knowledge alone is sufficient for what might emerge between them. She describes this process of “attending to each other’s needs” (p. 38) through “the will to un-knowing” and “the position of unknowing—an act of ignorance.”

Drawing on French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991), she moves beyond the dominant hierarchical line of delivery from teacher to child. Through an intentional delinking from preexisting knowledge, the teacher appears as “a teacher who teaches that which is unknown to him or her” (Rancière, 2010, p. 1). The knowledge the ignorant schoolmaster activates then becomes a “knowledge of ignorance”

(Rancière, 2017): an acknowledgment of one's own incapacity, or even a will to inhabit incapacity, in order to remain open to possibilities that cannot be known.

I bring forward this inquiry as an invitation to rethink relational ethics with children into conversation with teachers' persistent attachment to a myth of pedagogy grounded in adult superiority—the schoolmaster's will (p. 41) that may unconsciously continue to shape contemporary early childhood art pedagogy even when its approaches appear progressive. What becomes aesthetically "better" cannot be located in filling the encounter with the will of one side, but in an open togetherness, an emptiness that leaves room for what neither side could predetermine. Willful ignorance, then, becomes an emancipation from unexamined routines, opening toward an ethical creativity that may emerge through the uncertainty of being together.

Park, H. (2019). "Drawing Together: Toward a Relational Ethics of Ignorance." In C. M. Schulte (Ed.), *Ethics and Research with Young Children: New Perspectives* (pp. 37–48). Bloomsbury Academic.

Source: Torrossa – Ethics and Research with Young Children

About the Author

Hayon Park, Ph.D., was Assistant Professor of Art Education at George Mason University and Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Childhood Art. Her research and teaching engaged the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of childhood art and culture through critical, poststructuralist, and post-developmental perspectives. Park was also a founding editor of *Childhood Art: An International Journal of Research*. This review honors her scholarship and its continuing contribution to thinking differently about childhood art, pedagogy, and relational ethics.