

EXCELLENCE AWARD - 1997

Honorable guests, colleagues, friends and relatives it is a great honor to have been chosen to receive this award. To me it not only acknowledges my work, but also the efforts of all art educators in the province who share the same commitment and passion. This award elevates the significance placed on Art Education.

What role does Art Education play?

On a daily basis we are bombarded by thousands of images in many forms -photographs, video images, computer generated images, drawn and painted and collages images. I believe that if we are to prepare our young people for the 21 st century we must first help them to understand the layers of meanings and messages contained in the images that surround them.

To achieve 'visual literacy' students must acquire the ability to think critically about *what they see* and then have the opportunity to develop art making skills so that they can visually express their own thoughts and feelings. Their personal and cultural images can prove to be as powerful as any form of the written word.

Not only is it essential that young people become, visually aware and articulate but they must appreciate the role that art plays in almost every aspect of their daily lives. I often start my classes by pointing out that our clothing, buildings, furniture, vehicles, magazines, films, in fact everything that is manmade has been created by someone who has been trained in the visual art. When I say this, art suddenly takes on a new meaning and significance. It becomes accessible and meaningful to everyone, and the negative stereotype of art being a 'frill' disappears.

At the present time our schools still concentrate only on two modes of communication and expression which are numbers and letters. Movement, sound and image remain largely unexplored and in many cases totally neglected – yet they are equally powerful forms of expression – *especially in today's world*.

Arts along with media studies are often the only courses that offer students an opportunity to explore the visual mode of communication and educational support.

How can we continue to improve the present status of Art Education in N.B?

N.B. has come a long way in developing community art programs and implementing Art Education programs at the middle and high school levels. Unfortunately however, few if any art educators are employed at the elementary level, and as a result children often leave elementary school having formed a superficial and negative impression about the importance of art and image making. It would be unthinkable to neglect the fundamentals of math, science and english at the elementary level. Why is it still allowed in art?

To ensure that elementary classroom teachers can offer a comprehensive art program the Department of Education needs to insist that the one course student teachers take at university be specifically designed to meet their needs as elementary art educators. At present any fine art, art education or anthropology credit is accepted.

Teachers in the system who are not art educators, but are left to teach elementary art, need professional development in all aspects of teaching art fundamentals. The government could ensure that consultants are hired to provide 'on the job' assistance and training. This would significantly improve the status of art as a core subject at the elementary level.

Art plays a vital role in all of our lives, and images now are the dominant mode of communication. We must broaden our definition of art so that it encompasses all forms of images if we are to prepare our young people to meet the job markets and information challenges of the future. Providing a sound education in the arts ensures a life long understanding and involvement. Nothing less is worthy of our province's young people, and in the long run nothing less is worthy of New Brunswick arts and cultural vitality.

I thank you on behalf of all art educators for recognizing the work we do.

Mary Blatherwick