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Project Zero and The Arts in Education Program: Passion Tempered by Discipline

Informal remarks made by Howard Gardner at the Meeting of the Council on Arts in Education, October 14 2004

Passion is not the first word that leaps to mind when one thinks of Nelson Goodman, the eminent philosopher who started Harvard Project Zero in the fall of 1967. And yet Nelson Goodman was passionate about the arts. His passion went beyond being a connoisseur, collector, and patron of the arts. An impresario lurked in Goodman: he loved to plan, direct, and stage arts events; and he created a dozen memorable lecture-performances in the arts during his four years as the founding-director of Project Zero. In the spirit of that decade, Goodman memorably quipped, "Ask not what the arts can do for you; ask what you can do for the arts."

Housed from its inception at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Project Zero was founded as a research center in the arts. Its initial mission statement read, "Basic research in the arts and arts education". The Project got its wry name from another Goodman quip: "No one knows anything systematic about arts education, so let's call it 'Project Zero'." It was his firmest hope that the Project would move in the direction of "plus one."

During the nearly four decades of its existence, many hundreds of individuals have worked at Project Zero and thousands have studied there. Nearly everyone attracted to Project Zero has an interest in the arts—and many of us are either practicing artists, want-to-be artists, former artists, or artistes manqué. But a mere interest or even passion for the arts is not the defining characteristic of a Project Zero enthusiast. Those of us who have remained at Project Zero believe that the arts can be studied, understood, explicated. Like any other sphere of human activity and experience, the arts are open to analysis and they can reveal their secrets to the thoughtful scholar or practitioner. We do not believe for an instant that such an analysis will be destructive; if anything, an understanding of the nature of artistic activity and experience should deepen our appreciation of the special beauties, power, indeed even the mysteries of the arts. And that is why I have chosen the descriptor: “passion tempered by discipline.”

The years of Project Zero have been marked by numerous pivotal events and I am glad that its history is at last being chronicled in many places—among them pzweb.harvard.edu. Project Zero has evolved from a pure research center in the arts and philosophy to a hotbed of empirical study to a research-and- practice center that is deeply involved in educational experiments all around the world. It has expanded from a near exclusive focus on the arts to a concern with the full range of curricula. As studied by Project Zero, education now spans from the earliest years of childhood to mature adults, and extends well beyond schools to museums, businesses, and the internet. Though I cannot claim to be a disinterested party, I think I can say that Project Zero is one of the best known educational research centers in the world and among the most respected as well. What I have often joked about Harvard might

be said of Project Zero: “It may or may not be the best institution of its type in the United States; but it is certainly the best in the world.”

While the focus of Project Zero has expanded notably, its interest in the arts remains very strong. Most current Project Zero members are active in the arts and about one third of our projects at any one time are focused on the arts. We have done important work in artistic development and learning, assessment in the arts, arts in communities, museum learning, and the effects of arts education on other skills and curricula, to mention just a few recent thrusts. We have collaborated with groups ranging from the Educational Testing Service to the Lincoln Center Institute to the remarkable preschools of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. While cognizant of the broader educational benefits of the arts, we have never viewed the arts simply as a means of improving non-artistic understandings and skills. We underscore the intrinsic value and joy of the arts. What we continue to bring is an analytic eye to the gamut of artistic experiences—passion tempered by discipline.

Roughly a decade ago, Jessica Davis, a talented researcher at Project Zero, raised the possibility of creating a masters’ concentration in the Arts in Education. She noted that there was a rich research-and-practice base at Project Zero; that over forty students at GSE had written doctoral dissertations in the arts in recent years; and that while there were many art education programs in America, there were no graduate programs that focused on the theoretical and policy aspects of education in the arts. Jessica eventually convinced me of the cogency of these arguments; and together we were able to convince the faculty and

administration of the Graduate School of Education to launch an experimental program in this area of study.

I doubt that anyone—except, perhaps, Jessica herself—could have predicted the amazing speed with which the program became established and the range of talented students, faculty, and visitors who were attracted to the program. Within a few short years, the program was known nationally and internationally, and individuals flocked to follow its progress and, if possible to participate actively in it. The success of the program was due in no small measure to the generosity of members of the Council—chief among them John Landrum Bryant, who provided initial start up funds, endowed an important lecture series, and spearheaded the effort to raise money for an endowed chair. John Humphrey and Francis Hunnewell also provided excellent leadership and, when appropriate, the necessary prodding. In short order The Council on Arts in Education became a model for our school of education.

Leadership transitions are important, and it is crucial that they be handled be well. One of Nelson Goodman's great gifts to Project Zero was his ability to hand over the leadership to David Perkins and to me, and to continue being supportive while not engaging in Monday morning quarterbacking. After our 28 years at the helm, David Perkins and I sought to emulate Goodman's example, when Steve Seidel became the new Director of the program.

Crises can produce happy outcomes. Jessica's surprising decision last winter to retire from the Directorship placed the program in a fragile position. With huge reorganization

underway throughout the university, the Arts in Education program might easily have become a casualty. Happily, in consultation with many of us, Dean Lagemann recognized the value of the program, the potential of stronger ties to Project Zero, and the leadership abilities of Steve Seidel. When Steve was offered and accepted the Directorship of the Program, even as the ties of Project Zero to the rest of the school were being confirmed, the immediate future of the Arts in Education program was assured.

And, I would add, strengthened. I see a number of forces joining together to yield a multiplicative advantage for the Program. Harvard continues to be an outstanding and financially sound institution; the Graduate School of Education is embarked on a campaign to strengthen the profession of education in America and to focus on the improvement of public education in our country; Dean Lagemann has a long term, deep commitment to the arts and humanities; the quality of personnel and work at Project Zero has never been stronger; and the Arts in Education Program continues to blend passion with discipline. I am delighted that the relationship between two thriving entities is developing; I believe that all of the parties will be strengthened as a result; and even though I am a congenial (if not congenial) pessimist, I am optimistic that the best days of the Arts in Education program and the best days of Project Zero lie ahead.