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Ethos of Ambiguity: Artist Teachers and the Transparency Exclusion Paradox

Addressing changes in conditions for practitioners that can be related to education policy in England and Wales since 2010, this article presents issues faced by teachers of art and design and theorises responses in practice. The current insistence on transparency in education emerges through policy that audits performativity, in a limiting skills bank. Practitioners in Art and Design are particularly affected by what I term 'the transparency-exclusion paradox', as they battle to maintain the subject area and are 'othered' by the EBacc and Progress 8. I will discuss an emergent 'ethos of ambiguity' among artist-teachers and contemporary artists, with a theoretical basis informed by Beauvoir and Foucault. Empirical data from research participants will be evidenced, to explore strategies of response in inclusive social practice. This article adds to literature that considers the effects of policy in implementation and it contributes to research on creative expressions of ambiguity in the arts.

Keywords: ambiguity, art and design education, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, social practice, transparency.

Introduction

If we recognise that the arts in education are being held accountable to systems of governance that refuse to hear arguments for their equal cultural value, responses to policy in practice become a focal point for consideration. This article will investigate how education policy since 2010 has impacted schools and practitioners in England and Wales. I will present a theorised analysis of the adjustments made by teachers of art and design. This research represents a development in the literature of cultural politics in that it offers further insight into a creative ethos of ambiguity, in relation to policies that pursue attrition in the arts.

Some approaches to the impact of policy on education intend to reveal the workings of governance through a historicised view of the corporate structures of

education, and patterns of resistance (Ball, 2016; Maisuria, 2014; Wilkins, 2016). Others draw away from analysing systems of power, to focus on an 'adventure of pedagogy' (Atkinson, 2018) that aims to render policy constraints immaterial. I argue that we can relate to aspects of school governance that seek operative 'power through transparency' (Foucault, 1980, p. 154) in correspondence with resistance in practice, as a nurturing field of ambiguity (Beauvoir, 2015). This article considers possibilities for navigating systems of governance enacted through education policy, in forms of counter transparency that shield emergent creative practice and contradict hegemonic 'codes of visuality' (Atkinson, 2001, p. 68). Creative pedagogies may be seen as integrally responsive to policy discourses (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2018), even through expressions of deflection and multiplicity that have no literal connection to policy.

In agreement with Dimitriadis, Cole and Costello (2009), I view art practice as liminal, since it moves through and between the outlines of identity and culture. The arts thrive on subtleties of interpretation: 'art is often ambiguous by design' (p. 372), encouraging audiences to question their expectations and understanding. However I think that the forms of critical interaction that encourage such intricate ambiguities need to acknowledge engaged social practice, so that the capacity to decode and re-encode the meanings of art pedagogies (Peers, 2011, p. 424) is not a rare privilege.

A 'culture of scarcity' (Dimitriadis, Cole & Costello, 2009, p. 370) in schools that marginalise the arts is arguably not a localised phenomenon: it appears to be a feature of panic-driven globalised performativity (see also Huang & Vong, 2018). Yet there is a specificity in the national branding of policy that is visible in England. Recent reports on the effects of policy have charted the rapid decline of the arts in education since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in 2010. The 'EBacc' is a qualification that records GCSE examination achievement in five academic subject

areas considered to provide a competitive workforce, in relation to international comparisons (Matthews, 2018b). This ethos contrasts with the International Baccalaureate that projects its worth as a non-partisan measure of academic achievement (Yemeni & Dvir, 2016, p. 311), though perhaps it too is a force for 'permanent competition with other countries' (Foucault, 1988, p. 151).

Students and resources have been drawn away from the arts, as from other subjects excluded from the EBacc, to attempt to boost school performance in the league tables. The National Society for Education in Art and Design survey report for 2015-2016 charts the reduction in art GCSE entrants as minus 6% since 2014-15. In this survey of 1191 participants, 93% of responding teachers in state schools associated this effect with the introduction of the EBacc (p. 5). Analysis of Department for Education figures in 2018 revealed a further fall of 9% in art GCSE entrants, while English, maths and science account for 51% of exam entries (Ward, 2018, August 31).

This further reduction is associated with another policy of transparency and accountability: 'Progress 8', that was introduced for all secondary schools in England and Wales in 2016. In this measure of value added performativity, schools are assessed by students' improvement in 8 subjects between the end of primary school and the end of secondary school. The EBacc subjects take up five of the eight, with arts GCSEs included as possibilities for the 'other' three. In the more affluent South of England the arts are 10% more likely to be included in Progress 8 than in the North of England (Johnes, 2017, p. 10). The othering of art and design (Matthews 2018b) is further compounded by this policy that 'chooses to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too complex situation.' (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 7).

Recent education policy is producing what I consider to be a form of cultural attrition; this could perhaps have some correlation with the changes in the value for

teaching as a desirable and long-term profession. Price, Mansfield and McConney (2012) observe 'alarmingly high rates of early career teacher attrition' (p. 81). A policy climate formed through distrust of teachers (Maisuria, 2005) can be seen as turning against creative and ethically motivated early career teachers across subject areas. In a sweeping gesture, the skills-based 2013-14 national curriculum seeks to confine what Biesta (2014) terms 'the beautiful risk of education', and the process-based learning of a Deweyan approach to the arts 'in the flow and continuity of everyday life' (Dimitriadis, Cole & Costello, 2009, p. 368), which may also be seen through Foucault's concept of the 'arts of living' (Foucault, 1990, p. 239). Therefore, we may ask, how are teachers and artists responding to the mandate of this policy climate?

I will now theorise an approach to responses of art teachers, considering resistance as it emerges in vents of creative practice, nuanced subtexts of divergence, and collaborative connectivity.

Theoretical Framework

The implementation of a knowledge-based curriculum (Gibb, 2017) has sought what Foucault terms 'power through transparency' (1980) in a prevalent auditing culture (Wilkins, 2016). This transparency is however only partial, as knowledge of the systems of governance is distributed on 'a need to know basis', meaning that the detail is often obscured to the practitioners whose standards of practice these systems aim to reveal.

In parallel to a Foucauldian view of the transparency-exclusion paradox in policy implementation, I will acknowledge the resistance of those who embody spaces of practice, through 'an ethics of ambiguity', as proposed by Beauvoir (2015). Even earnest attempts at transparency are partial, due to our incomplete knowledge of the factors that impact our experiences of the world. We cannot form a subjectivity of 'pure externality', just as 'pure inwardness' is not an option (p. 6). Beauvoir urges an

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acceptance of our shifting expressions of identity and relations with the world: 'Since we do not succeed in fleeing it… let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity' (p. 8). With this view, the vitality of existence, in its complexity and paradox, is lost in concerted efforts to school a rationalised society.

Philosopher Sonia Kruks has noted that Beauvoir's welcoming of intangible conditions beyond our current knowledge, corresponds with post-human critiques of the rationalist subject (Kruks, 2012). Such fluid representations of subjectivity, and the inversion of values from the known to the unknown, relate also to Dennis Atkinson's view of emergent arts practice as being 'without criteria' (Atkinson, 2017; 2018). Atkinson encourages a realignment towards the experience of learning as an immanent inquiry, removing the emphasis on external criteria for assessment and exam results. Through this contra-transparency teachers are encouraged to explore development intrinsic to art practice, and following Rancière, to disengage from party politics or critical investigations in the interests of particular social groups (Rancière, 2010; Atkinson, 2018).

Considering the subtle concepts of artists, who make work with multiple layered reference points, we could perhaps identify an ethos emerging for contemporary art teachers and artists (Rabkin, 2010; Sweeney, 2013). There is a movement among artists to present work that invites a depth of consideration, and a repositioning towards the world through its playful (Graham & Rees, 2014), risk-taking (Allison, 2013) or disquieting ambiguity. Artists may feel that their work becomes a sum of its parts by having a direct political association, and is perhaps then held accountable to systems of interpretation as limiting as the 'new, more "neoliberal rationality" of art' (Peers, 2011, p. 416). Art teachers, as artist-teachers, are also seeking alternative forms of knowledge

exchange (Cranshaw, Rowe & Hudson, 2015; Irwin & O'Donohue, 2012) to escape the culture of auditing – in ways that I will later present for reflection.

I would like to resituate this ethical evasion of transparency, in the political context of our 'bond with the world' (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 8). If we decontextualise artworks from social practice towards intrinsic criteria, we could perhaps be moving towards the modernist realm of 'art for art's sake'. Modernism took art out of the worldly battlefield, to pursue emergent qualities in practice. It is telling that the discourses of modernism rely on embodied cultural resources of Western privilege (Peers, 2011), as expressed through the concepts, processes, materials, forms and functions of art and design.

Keeping in focus an awareness of how resourcing for the arts is increasingly situated in networks of social advantage (Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2018), I refer to Foucault's view of the genealogy of cultural privilege as a 'complex course of descent' (Foucault, 1991, p. 81); this emerges through discontinuities in: 'the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that give birth to those things that continue to exist for us.' (Ibid.). We could say that underlying 'faulty calculations' are inscribed in the cultural discourses of education – as for example policy makers calculate that insistence on a checklist of knowledge will provide a solid foundation for learning.

Here I will argue that socially engaged practice in art education does contend with 'false appraisals' in political contexts, as presented in Beauvoir's theory of freedom 'engaging itself in the world' (2015, p. 84). Practitioners can take on the paradigms through alternative forms of knowledge exchange (Cranshaw, Rowe & Hudson, 2015) that enable nurturing spaces of ambiguity to flourish.

Methodology

This research is made possible through a researcher-practitioner approach to investigating arts pedagogies and practice (Kincheloe 2003,). In art education I have collaborated with teachers, artists and curators. I have visited academy, state maintained comprehensive and Grammar schools and have made connections with participant art teachers in doing so. Participation in the 'Responses to policy in practice' project is through unstructured conversation, emails and semi-structured interviews with art teachers and artist educators. The methodology aims to respond to the textural changes and variations of response to policy, through sensitive and reviewed contact with participants – as a way of 'trying to open space for the indefinite' (Law, 2004, p. 6). There is no finite formula for exploring practitioner responses to policy, but in agreement with Law there is a commitment to investigating the 'generative flux' (p. 7) that informs changing conditions for practice.

There are currently 8 participants who work in different schools in England. I will refer to data from 'Sara' an art and design teacher, 'Tia' and 'Calum' - Heads of Department in schools, and 'Jane' a teacher in a sixth form college. These practitioners have all responded to recent intensified conditions of performativity in their workplaces by reconnecting with their art practice. Research ethics of confidentiality and anonymity are maintained (British Educational Research Association, 2018). I will also refer to conversations with named artists, who express views that inform artworks in the public domain and who have given their permission to be included in this study.

This project forms collaborative interactions between the researcher and practitioners. This research intends to counter isolationism in an evolving methodology (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2011) that builds connectivity between artist teachers.

Patterns of Attrition

To contextualise this inquiry, I will outline current factors that are contributory to expectations of transparency and to patterns of attrition in art and design. As noted earlier, maintained and academy schools in Britain are currently incentivised via league table prioritisation of schools with high exam results in EBacc subjects. This has led to a contraction of time and space in arts subjects. Prior to choosing their GCSE subjects, pupils in Key Stage 3 will often have shorter lessons in art and design, and may have this 'non essential' subject (Gove, 2010, p. 17) on a carousel. This means they receive a short burst of art every two weeks. There is a drive to emphasise performativity of teachers (Atkinson, 2011; Ball, 2016; Matthews, 2018a) and measurable productivity for pupils. Calum described institutional processes that appeared to present a choice for students wanting to take art, in the 'open bucket' of Progress 8, but actually excluded them from this option.

> Since setting up my art department in 2014, the focus has often been on prioritising the core and EBacc subjects over 'open bucket' subjects and their results. In the most recent options period of our incoming year 10 students, their choices were very much focused on students taking the core subjects and EBacc subjects, with a focus on more students taking triple science. This was often with students having opted for art as either a first or second choice within the 'open bucket'. However due to the school committing to small class sizes within GCSE art, due to not wishing to commit to more staffing of art, students have missed out.

The time-space contraction imposed upon art pedagogies is also seen in the frequent appropriation of art and design classrooms for other subject areas. One art department I visited had its space reduced from five classrooms to two. In another school the Head of Department has to share an office with a maths teacher. Through such structural changes, connection and sociable interaction between art teachers is institutionally discouraged. Jane said:

People take breaks a lot less. We used to sit down and have a real few more breaks, and be able to discuss things that were going on in the department which was time to discuss students or concerns. We barely have that time now.

Fragmentation and isolation (Huang & Vong, 2018), or absorption in other curriculum areas, are now experiences that affect many teachers of art. The ethos of art departments can be conditioned towards complicity with the neoliberal agenda (Maisuria, 2014) as a systemic predisposition or '*dispositif*' (Atkinson, 2018, p. 15) – in which normative codes are reproduced, and resistance, difference and conflict are suppressed (Matthews, 2018b; Wilkins, 2016).

This pattern of contraction has not occurred to the same extent in the independent sector; the allocation of resources is less affected by performance measures such as the EBacc and Progress 8. Consequently there are now widespread concerns (Warwick Commission, 2015; Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2018) that a rounded arts-inclusive education is available mainly to social elites.

Adjustments in Ethos

A school ethos reaches far beyond the motto emblazoned on uniforms and websites. As Bragg and Manchester observe (2017) ethos is used to drive the performance of teachers and students (p. 865). If 'ethos' is defined as an ethical and discursive framework for interpersonal relation, this framework may be interpreted and adapted according to the perceived needs of the school. It can also potentially be adjusted in the adaptations of practitioners. In a Foucauldian 'nuanced understanding of power relations' (p. 867), there could be an investigation of creative adaptation. For art teachers there may still be registered differences between school ethos, department ethos, and own ethos in practice. This difference can be expressed as a form of managed resistance, rather than overt protest (Matthews, 2018a).

Some practitioners feel as though their department is in a state of constant emergency, as resources become increasingly threatened. Sara described the experience of punitive conditions in relation to pressures on student recruitment.

> The main change has been the stress levels linked to recruitment for students choosing our subject, which impacts on teachers in the department e.g. from your classes X amount of students picked art/graphics/product design. It feels like is a naming and shaming approach.

Embattled defences and justifications for resources can be formed to maintain opportunities for students, rally professional status and retain staff. Management ethos may be deflected through perceptions of its narrow underlying interest – as a 'faulty calculation'. Tia said of school management, 'They are all corrupt because all they care about is exam results.' For Tia, caring about art, students and teaching was more justifiable. Contrasting experiences are represented among teachers of art and design who work in schools where there is a sustained development in the arts. Padget observes that 'support must come from the ethos of the school' if the teachers are to realise the creativity of their intentions (2013, p. 43). Such schools benefit from the interest of senior management, who may have had some arts training themselves.

Responses in Practice

At this point I will discuss the responses of practitioners, who could draw in with the contraction exerted on their working conditions, or seek vents of practice and express identities of creative multiplicity – to 'realise' ambiguity (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 12). Those who accept the changes in their conditions may be too afraid to try and relocate. They might identify their teaching skills as relating to the particular demographics of their work environment, whether comprehensive or grammar, mixed or single-sex. With a view through Foucault, these practitioners remain within the boundaries of their 'need

to know', and feel less empowered to test their limits (Foucault, 2007, p. 49) in the systems of governance.

 In such cases there can be a retreat into 'interiority' (Housely, 2009, p. 70) as a coping mechanism. For some this interiority is built through a relation to subject knowledge (Huang & Vong, 2018) that is cherished despite its lack of value in the whole school ethos. Practitioners may be complicit with new policy requirements for sheer survival, as for example Huang and Vong (2018) discuss the resistance of an isolated art teacher 'Mo' who withdrew to the sanctity of her knowledge of art literature as a 'virtual wall' to invasive institutional requirements (p. 9). They observe that Mo was: 'Following "yang" but doing "yin"' (p. 8) with an outward presentation of compliance, but then using the school's instructive learning resources as a shield for more experimental creative pedagogies. In this action Mo was able to experience some 'freedom over facticity' (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 48).

Among practitioners that I have spoken to in the field, the 'following yang but doing yin' approach resonates with those who have talked about their high level of frustration with the auditing culture that they are contracted to participate in. Sara said that she had changed schemes of work to suit the Head of Faculty, because she felt there was 'less chance of being scrutinised' in doing so. Here a semblance of transparency in the official manner of lesson planning is seen as enabling escape from observation. In this way ambiguity between appearance and action protects agency in practice.

Jane, a teacher in a sixth form college, Sara an art teacher in a school and Tia a Head of Department had chosen to work part-time, to escape the drill of performativity, and to regain their connection with art practice. Like Sara, Jane expressed the change in conditions through experiences of stress. 'I've noticed teachers are a lot more stressed. A lot more teachers in our department have gone part-time because they feel like full-

time is too much.' However paradoxically the approach to 'part-timers' at work added other forms of stress. 'The management is becoming less tolerant of part-timers, which actually means women.' Jane thinks that part-time, mainly female, workers are seen as more difficult to manage. As Marso says there is a 'fear of finitude, lack of control and unknowingness' (2017, p. 24) in patriarchal workplace ideologies, despite the additional flexibility in timetabling afforded to school management.

Teachers may feel that they are reflections of the school's needs, without a sustained connection to their arts practice, and as Sara says living 'vicariously through the students.' In this return to practice for teachers changing to part-time contracts, the time they withdraw is rarely reallocated to an existing or new staff member. Perhaps the survival through part-time art practice of existing teachers in the state education system is also indicative of the move towards externalising arts ventures, as extra curricular activities.

We may ask at this stage whether such adjustments through return to practice play into the hands of policy structures that are conditioning society towards the provision of learning in the arts for elites. Recent research has found that the creative industries that survive through interpersonal connections have small social circles, mainly among the affluent white population (Warwick Commission, 2015; Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2018). Therefore a movement towards practice 'without criteria' (Atkinson, 2017), to enable the 'becoming' of practitioner and student, could potentially signify a return to a depoliticised small circle of 'art for art's sake' (Pater & Wilde, 2003). I argue that if we can reconnect the vents of ambiguity and the responsive events of practice with cultural values found in forms of social engagement, as alternative systems of knowledge, the arts as 'moving targets' (Bucks, 2000) could enable expansions of creative equality in formal and non-formal education.

To address these ethical questions I think we need to look at how practitioners in art education seek vents of self-expression. As I have noted, current theories of practice emphasise the removal of extrinsic criteria (Atkinson, 2018), such as the knowledge-based curriculum, to enable reflective subtexts of meaning to take form. Artists I have recently worked with, such as Scottee and Doug Fishbone, resonate with this need for practice to evolve without splitting its integrity through a knowledge-based analysis. Scottee, who identifies as a working class queer artist, seeks to make work which 'says one thing, does another' (Scottee, January, 2018). This performative artwork challenges the "enlightened elite" (Beauvoir 2015, p. 152) by drawing them into participation through a pretext, and then launching more subversive content.

Fishbone who makes work in a range of media, often blurs boundaries of meaning with humour. He concurs with Atkinson (2018) in saying that defining artwork through a political association 'flattens' the subtleties of the work (Fishbone, May, 2018). He does not want artwork to be too 'readable' for cultural theorists: Fishbone works with conceptual freedom 'as an independence from the serious world' (Beauvoir 2015, p. 62) and in connection with an audience.

Returning to the context of art education, perhaps we could situate the contra-transparency tactics of teachers who seek reconnection with creative pedagogies and their own arts practice, alongside the evasive forms of 'becoming' sought by contemporary artists. This strategy of connection, rather than isolation, welcomes paradoxes of 'interiority' and 'relationality' (Housley, 2009) and encourages immersive learning experiences. Such concepts of ambiguity as an ethic for practice could perhaps help build relational ventures between artists and teachers, and begin to address the difficulties of a socially divisive policy climate.

Art teachers have responded to the constraining systems of governance by developing nurturing strands of practice. These forms of practice still rely on investment in a space for creating the work, and are supported by an audience, student participants or a market to be sustainable. In some cases the forum for emerging arts development can be provided though being open to some forms of scrutiny – as in raising funds and justifying widening participation, while shielding forms of ambiguity in practice as new forms of expression emerge (Atkinson, 2018; Beauvoir 2015; Kruks 2012). Among the research participants, Sara has started to produce screen-printed items to sell at markets and through online outlets. Jane has started teaching drawing workshops in a village church hall, and has turned her illustration practice towards saleable goods. Tia works with an arts collective to make pottery for exhibition. Multiple 'industrious' practices provide self-fulfillment, often with the additional intention of attaining economic sustainability. Jane said:

> I've started to branch out a little bit, to sow some seeds in other places. Because I don't know how long, if there's more pressures, and more cuts, I don't know how long I'd carry on teaching. Because it takes the joy out of teaching. You know everything creative, and being able to plan good lessons.

Practitioners need to maintain a sense of growth in their work, as part of the 'joy' of teaching. The metaphor of sowing 'seeds in other places' conveys the need to diversify, and to protect the development of ideas.

Among teachers in state education, a further form of responses to policy in practice can be seen among those who seek to build supportive networks. In this form of action, teachers build connectivity through exchanges of practice – such as sketchbook circles (Brass & Coles, 2014), social media networks, blogs (Budge, 2012; Miller & Williams, 2013) and participatory events that create openings for potential art students. Such exchanges encourage social involvement by providing creative and emotional

support. Those practitioners who engage in empowering networks (Foucault, 1980, p. 119) are producing forms of knowledge exchange (Irwin & O'Donohue 2012; Cranshaw, Rowe & Hudson 2015) that produce validation through relation. Practitioners may look for 'gaps' in local provision for the arts and seek to address these areas collaboratively.

> There's a real gap of that creativity of art scene and that vibrancy like there is in Maintown. So it's kind of wanting to create a bit of that, and also it's with another teacher I work with and it was for us to be able to go to each other's workshops and so on… Often I'm talking to people and I tell them it's called 'Making Wake Up'. Yes you get talking to other artists, and find out what other artists are about. I found out there's actually a little art school in the place where I live and yes, there's a lot of artists in that area.

The workshops are seen to fulfill a wide range of purposes, emphasising multiplicity in the participant's creative identity. Jane sees her programme of workshops in the local town hall as a collaborative venture that helps her combat isolation. This could be seen as Marso observes in Beauvoir as a 'freedom-enhancing politics of encounter' (Marso, 2017, p. 17) Jane's workshops are also a strategic response to lack of arts provision in her town. Such localised forms of engagement strategically intervene in policy enactments that outline isolation, for teachers and for those who want to learn through the 'arts of living'.

In Summary

In the current policy climate, teachers are investing in relational and affective forms of knowledge exchange to sustain developments in their own creative practice. I have noted that practitioner responses to education as an auditing culture of 'power through transparency' (Foucault, 1980, p. 154) appear to register a movement towards the holistic experience of making art, through an ethos of ambiguity. There are also material

adjustments in that a growing number of art and design teachers are working part-time, with a view to building security through their practice. I have found that participants form a multi-strand response to the confining effects of a performative school ethos. Some may argue that this development supports neoliberal capitalism (Chatelier and Rudolph, 2018; Huang and Vong, 2018), and it does appear to reflect the movement of art out of the core curriculum. However the sense of wellbeing that is brought about through such creative multiplicity offers an emergent experience of the cultural value of practice.

A surface of performativity among school teachers can shield experimentation and risk taking in art pedagogy that 'says one thing, does another'. In this interpretation, responses of art teachers to the current policy climate are conversant with the nuanced processes of contemporary artists. This research recognises that not everyone is going to do the same thing, and that practitioners hold on to agency in choice. Survival through an 'art for arts sake' approach may, for some, appear to be the most effective way of maintaining a balance of interiority in self-reflection, as related to the exteriority of a teaching role. In contrast, an accessible forum for social interaction is cited as an important factor among participants who favour a connective creative identity. I have here observed the development of an ethos of ambiguity that recognises the subtle contributions of diverse social groups to the arts, as they are integral to society.

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