

THE ARTS, SCHOOL PRACTICE, AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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Attempts at articulating and instituting socially responsive programs in art education are heartening and long overdue. The work of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, and the Bulletin as a reflection of the issues dealt with by the caucus, are laudatory and provocative. I seek to further these efforts in this essay by: 1) elaborating the social context within which schools function, and detailing how the political, economic, and ideological interests our educational system serves affect school policy, organizational structures within education, and school practice generally; and 2) suggest how the arts may be an effective force in countering the socially useful practices which schools embody. By situating the study of the arts within the literature on schools as agents of social reproduction we may see more clearly both the problems and possibilities for education in the arts that is socially responsive, politically sensitive, and ethically just.

Schools have historically been understood as central institutions in helping further the major tenets of the liberal tradition upon which our society was founded. From the inception of the common school system almost 150 years ago, and continuing through various reform efforts, schools have been thought of as central to the stability of our social system. Within the liberal tradition, our educational system has been conceived as essentially meritocratic and politically neutral, while schools have been thought to maximize human potential, provide necessary and fitting socialization experiences, create the conditions necessary for equality of opportunity,

promote social mobility, and generally serve as an important cornerstone for enlightened participation in democratic institutions. The value and place of the public school system in promoting and maintaining these liberal values has not gone unnoticed.

Yet increasingly this role of schools has been subject to critical analysis and interpretation. The major assumptions which inform our understanding of schools are continuing to be challenged from several quarters. Historians such as Katz (1968, 1971), Greer (1972), Karier (1975), and Tyack (1974), have questioned the view that public, universal schooling was instituted to further the interests of the lower classes and poor, on the one hand, or the "good of all," on the other; these scholars suggest instead that the creation of schools, their organizational patterns and structure, centralization, etc., progressed in such a way as to benefit disproportionately those in positions of power in the wider society. For instance, the patterns of acculturation which the schools fostered has the effect of denying the validity of values, norms, and ideas expressed by minority cultural groups and of furthering the beliefs of, particularly, white, male, middle class Americans. Again, there is considerable evidence that schools were founded to protect the wealth and privileges of the advantaged at least as much as they were designed to provide avenues for social and economic improvement. In addition to such historical inquiry, philosophers of education like Feinberg (1975) argue that an overt or tacit commitment to science, technology, and the demands of industrial capitalism skewed the theories and programs of educators working within the liberal tradition (e.g., Dewey) and affected their ideas concerning progress, human nature, and equality. Taking the demands of a growing, increasingly industrialized, and divided labor force as facts of social life to which

schools must respond, educational theories become shaped by the values of the productive forces of society. By remaining sensitive to the social context within which educational policy and practice necessarily functions, the critically oriented research efforts of such people as Feinberg reminded us of the continued need to treat historical and philosophical analyses as more than mere doctrines. When placed within a larger framework, such philosophical investigations become insightful and illuminating (see, for example, Feinberg, 1983). I shall return to this point later in this essay.

Political economists like Bowles and Gintis (1976) have presented further evidence that schools are not in fact the meritocratic institutions we have assumed. In particular, these authors have argued that the personality and dispositional traits which schools sanction correspond to the "needs" of a stratified, hierarchical, unequal society such as ours. The pervasiveness of a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) within our educational institutions, thus, is not to be seen as natural, inevitable, or even necessarily justifiable, but rather as being compatible with the requirements of a capitalist labor force. In addition to the hidden curriculum, still other writers have argued that the knowledge which schools convey-- both the form and content of the overt curriculum-- is related to the larger distribution of wealth and social power (Apple, 1979; Young, 1971; Whitty and Young, 1976; Bernstein, 1975). Here it is argued that the question of whose knowledge finds its way into classrooms (and whose does not), how it is organized and distributed (by class, race, and gender), what sorts of evaluative activities are correlated with it (Apple and Beyer, 1983), and so on, cannot be answered apart from the larger patterns of distribution extant in society generally. Thinking about specific knowledge forms, and their distribution in schools, as essentially isolated, politically neutral phenomena, is

simply not adequate.

All of these investigations point to one central fact. Educational policy and practice at a variety of levels-- the organizational patterns in accord with which schools are governed, the hidden and overt curricula they promote, the form in which knowledge is transmitted, the ways in which these things are evaluated, and even the very historical and contemporary purposes they were designed to serve-- need to be situated within the complex nexus of processes, institutions, and ideologies which comprise our social system. It is no longer sufficient to analyze education as an autonomous, abstracted, apolitical domain. Nor is it justifiable to design policy, programs, and curricula which are indifferent to the social context within which schools exist. Analyses such as those outlined above have gone some way in eroding the view that schools are meritocratic, amoral, culturally fair institutions dedicated to upholding traditions of freedom, democratic participation, and equality. Indeed the arguments and studies generated by this growing body of critically oriented research on schools indicate that educational institutions operate so as to further patterns of dominance, exploitation, and stratification. We may collectively refer to this body of scholarship as concerned with the socially reproductive role of schools. Two aspects of this research literature are of special interest when considering the possibility of a socially responsive art education.

First, the literature on the role of schools as agents of social reproduction has raised significant questions about the role of culture generally in ideological domination. While some initial studies (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 1976) focused on the economic parameters of social reproduction, and hence tended to generate analyses that were overly mechanical and economic, more recent investigations have highlighted the cultural com-

ponents of reproduction (Apple, 1982; Willis, 1978; Everhart, 1983; Apple and Weis, 1983; Beyer, 1983). Within this expanded version of social reproduction, the role of ideology is not to be located exclusively in economic patterns having to do with the division of labor, social mobility, and the like; instead cultural processes and objects, forms of consciousness, and concrete, day to day lived experiences are to be seen as key elements in understanding the role of schools in promoting social reproduction. In this way the arts may become an important subject for such critically oriented investigations (Beyer, 1979, 1981; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; Williams, 1961, 1977; Eagleton, 1976).

Let us examine this important conceptual point in some detail. Critical theorists have focused in part on the means by which the central demands of the economy are furthered by school policy and practice. For example, there is ample evidence that as students are hierarchically ordered, different students are taught different norms, skills, and values-- often on the basis of race, social class, and gender. Further, these norms and skills tend to embody the values required by these students' projected rung on the labor market. In this way schools help meet the needs of an economy for a stratified and partially socialized body of employees. Again, the educational apparatus as a whole helps to further the proliferation of various technical and administrative forms of knowledge that bolster the expansion of markets, help create new (and usually artificial) consumer needs, help maintain the division of labor, and promote technical innovation to increase one's share of a market or to increase profit margins. In sum, schools further the economic patterns of our system by promoting patterns which are aimed at 1) creating the conditions necessary for capital accumu-

lation and 2) increasing the viability of production.

More culturally oriented theories, while recognizing the validity of such economic consequences of schooling, have gone beyond this structural or impositional model of social reproduction. They highlight the ways in which schools, in addition to promoting, say, capital accumulation and production, also create forms of consciousness, cultural activities, and specific ways of seeing and feeling within day to day experiences for students. Such culturally sensitive theories insist that we analyze the ideological role of schools in more detail and specificity, and remain cognizant of the potentially transformative power of human agency (Wexler, 1982). In understanding the role of schools as agents of social reproduction, then, such theorists reject a simple correspondence between economic needs and school practices, and argue for a more sustained and closer look at how ideology may become a part of the actual lived culture of schools.

The insistence on detailing the actual unfolding of school practice as a carrier of ideological meaning and on analyzing cultural forms in general as important aspects of social reproduction has had another important consequence for our understanding of educational policy and school practice. We have developed an increased awareness of the particular ways in which people and social groups either perpetuate, or resist and mediate, the ideological messages transmitted to them. An increasingly fine grained analysis of the ideological aspects of lived culture has resulted in a fuller realization of how the socially reproductive role of schools is often contested and transformed. Willis (1978) and Everhart (1983), as well as others, present research studies which show how students do not always passively accept, but often attempt to resist and transform, the ideological, reproductive practices of classrooms.

This has special relevance for programs in art education in a way which I believe highlights the possibilities for a socially progressive treatment of the arts. For what these studies indicate is that cultural forms, and perhaps the art especially, are not necessarily determined in any strict sense by the ideologically useful patterns which dominate in schools. The domain of culture, that is to say, may itself be an effective counter to the socially reproductive role which our educational institutions play.

What this means for art and aesthetic education is of no small moment. In the remainder of this essay I will suggest how a critically oriented understanding of the social role of schools and a renewed interest in the resistant role of culture might affect policies and programs in art education.

There are several fronts on which we might move, given the preceding analysis and the consequences which flow from it. All of them have to do with the value or potential of the arts, and of programs dealing with the artistic/aesthetic domain, as these are situated within the reproductive role which schools serve. First, we need to recognize and value the ways in which aesthetic knowledge may be an important counter to the overly technicalized, linear based, efficiency oriented activities which tend to dominate the formal curriculum (Huebner, 1975; Eisner, 1979). The dominant model for curriculum making-- and this model is intimately related to those ideological functions of the overt curriculum mentioned already-- is based on the view that the goals for the curriculum are to be located in the demands of the larger society, its activities, occupations, and tasks (see, for example, Bobbitt, 1918; Charters, 1927; and Snedden, 1921). Further, these goals must be prespecified, behaviorally oriented, and systematic. Indeed this way of doing curriculum work is most descriptively referred to as the "factory model" (Kliebard, 1975). Artistic production and aesthetic appreciation,

on the other hand, seem incompatible with the sort of prespecification, linear thinking, and technological emphases this model relies on.¹ In countering such tendencies through the arts (in their construction, appreciation, and evaluation) we not only foster alternative forms of pedagogy and curriculum, but we challenge a dominant cultural tendency which is related to the socially reproductive role of schools. The arts, in altering our casual acceptance of such technological influences as natural or inevitable, may be useful in providing alternative forms of consciousness and patterns of interaction that undermine such tendencies. We may refer to this dimension of artistic programs as helping promote a socially responsive aesthetic through its embodiment of a different formal emphasis.

Second, we need also to rethink the content of our efforts in art education and the use of aesthetic objects in this process. This needs to be done in at least a couple of ways. We need to reexamine, to begin with, the philosophical and conceptual foundations upon which our understanding of the arts, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic value rests. We have become much too infatuated with a Presentational aesthetic which emphasizes sensory, formal, surface features of works of art, to the detriment of their other aspects and meanings (see, for example, Broudy, 1972). We have divorced art from other human interests, social concerns, and moral dilemmas in a way which ensures their continued impotence. We must articulate, and help others interpret and understand, an aesthetic theory that puts the arts in the center of social conduct and ethical deliberation (Beyer, 1982). Moving from such abstract, conceptual issues to the more immediate concerns of curriculum making in the arts, a part of which necessitates giving legitimacy

to those cultural symbols which seem most actively resistant to ideological domination. We need, in other words, to help our students appreciate the moral force of aesthetic objects, so they may become meaningful and useful in opposing the dominant, reproductive messages which schools communicate. There are many ways to further this: appreciating and evaluating contemporary and historical works of art that are of social import and consequence; creating works of art that respond to a variety of the most pressing contemporary issues and problems (social injustice in all its guises, the oppression of women and minority populations in particular, the prospects for world peace, the dangers of nuclear holocaust, and so on); being increasingly sensitive to the possibilities for working class, minority, and women's cultural forms, as examples of alternative, resistant aesthetic experiences; and analyzing more critically than we often do the "high arts" as these may embody social and ideological sentiments we might rather avoid.

What I am urging is a politicization of culture in a way which may further the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience and artistic activity (Beyer, 1977). This does not entail reducing art to an instrumentally useful tool, as for example in the more vulgar forms of Socialist Realism. I do mean to suggest, though, that unless we see the arts as of potentially liberating benefit to real people in actual lived situations, and art education as related in one way or another to the larger social and ideological purposes the school serves, we are apt to miss something important about the arts and their value for education. By remaining cognizant of the political, ideological, and social elements of educational policy and school practice, we may reorganize our efforts at promoting progressive programs in the arts. It is in seeing the political value of the arts in schools-- their ability to transform lived experience and the very facts of our social

consciousness and existence-- that we may begin to remake both educational practice and social life. Can we expect anything less of the arts, or of ourselves?

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Though I believe there is a basic incompatibility here between the dominant model of curriculum making and aesthetic knowledge, this does not mean that, in practice, the two have not been combined. The fact that aesthetic education programs, for instance, have utilized the factory model of curriculum making speaks to the dominance of that system (see Beyer, 1981 for an extended discussion of this).

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