Aesthetic Socialization and the Young Child

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An examination of the process of aesthetic socialization at the preschool level reveals communication, through direct and indirect teacher behaviors and classroom environment, of "taken for granted" aesthetic assumptions. Examples, such as the use of naturalism or realism as the major criterion for judging art and reinforcement of social skills like diligence and neatness through art activities, are examined in light of educationist and teacher contexts (Keddie, 1971). Implications include the need for examination of aesthetic assumptions and their transmission by art educators who work with young children, train teachers, and/or plan art curricula.

Introduction

In a broad sense, all modes of knowledge transmission may be described as forms of socialization and enculturation. These processes entail acquisition of culturally defined motivations and perceptual habits, attitudes, skills, and understanding of standards and symbolic codes such as art and language. The schools in our society have been a major source of the determination of which types of knowledge are transmitted to young children and consequently a major force in the shaping and maintaining of our cultural identity (Cicourel, 1974; Hansen, 1979; Mayer, 1970).

An increasingly large number of young children start their formal art education before ever beginning elementary school. The preschool population, constantly expanding due to social, economic, and educational factors, is initiated into the world of organized art experiences at a tender age. The influences of the preschool teacher, curriculum, and environment upon the young child's aesthetic socialization are important concerns for the art educator. Few preschools hire art education specialists, yet preschool students do receive formal and informal experiences in the visual arts. How is the young child's understanding of the status role of art shaped by the preschool experience?

Aesthetic Socialization

Preliminary examinations of the processes of aesthetic socialization with children have underscored the prevalence of transmission of culturally embedded assumptions about what constitutes art and what standards should be used in determining one's reactions to it. Johnson (1981) found that the content of knowledge transmitted to children by docents during art museum tours reflected taken-for-granted aesthetic typifications and cultural assumptions. These included the typifications that certain objects are "beautiful, nice, elegant..." (p.62), that objects of most value belonged to the wealthy and privileged, and that the standard for judging a work is if one feels good or bad when looking at it. It was not made clear that interpretations being offered were not the only ways available to typify aesthetic experiences. In another study, Johnson (1982) found that children considered art to be those forms that were regarded in nineteenth century Europe as the fine arts. Painting, drawing, and sculpture were noted most frequently; twentieth century artforms (video, filmmaking, and television) as well as weaving, textiles, and environmental design were notably missing.

Rosario and Collazo (1981) discovered two aesthetic codes in practice in preschool classrooms. The first, a "productive code," allowed the children major control of aesthetic experiences. The teacher worked as facilitator, attempting to draw from the child his or her own aesthetic criteria for both production and appreciation. These criteria were rarely questioned or rejected by the teacher. Rosario and Collazo found much more evidence of the existence of a second code, a "reproductive" one, which defined the role of the teacher as direct determiner of aesthetic experiences. The teacher was direct shaper of child expression and creativity. Access to media was tightly controlled and the teacher worked to get the child to produce artwork that conformed to objective criteria and teacher-made models, and led the child to understand and value such external criteria. Rosario and Collazo contend that the reproductive code of aesthetics transmitted in the preschool classrooms reflected a rudimentary form of "naturalism," favoring careful adherence to the objective world as the model guiding all aesthetic production and appreciation.

As these studies indicate, the importance of the role of the teacher of young children in determining the very structure and content of aesthetic socialization can hardly be overestimated. a number of educators have stressed that the teacher is the most potent single factor controlling learning in the classroom (Flanders, 1970; Gage, 1978; Good, 1979). The language used by educators in response to children's artwork (and the artwork of others) is a major vehicle of cultural transmission. This language reflects a specific set of assumptions, expectations, and values about the work in question based on each teacher's repertoire of cultural knowledge and on the personal experience with which that knowledge is infused. Since individuals within society differ in their cultural repertoires and since the verbal communication process mediates between the teacher's intention and the message the child decodes, cultural knowledge and assumptions are never transferred completely intact. However, cultural knowledge can be and often is substantially shared from generation to generation (Hansen, 1979).

Not all cultural transmissions are verbal ones. First, the very choice of which activities are to be engaged in reflects culturally embedded assumptions about art. The preschool teacher's choice of paint or clay as media for art time implies an acceptance of painting and sculpture as artforms, whereas the delegation of block building to playtime, for example, ignores the possibility of environmental design inherent in that process. Secondly, the teacher's physical treatment of the objects of the child's production communicates whether the work is considered as art as well as what standards are involved in reacting to it. Display of work can be viewed as implicit acceptance of it. Apple and King (1965) note that kindergarten teachers only displayed children's artwork that conformed to their expectations. They also observed that diligence, perseverance, obedience, and participation were often considered more important that the aesthetic quality of the work. This observation may in part clarify the findings of Gardner, Winner, and Kircher (1975), which indicate that young children focus on the mechanics of production, the hard work involved in making art. They also dwell on legalistic preoccupation with rules: what one is allowed to paint and punishments for improper procedures.

Rosario and Collazo (1981) found that teachers least often saved and

displayed products from activities that were primarily child-initiated. The only child-initiated products that were judged as art were those resulting from painting activities. However, they observed no instance of painting done on paper other than that specifically designated by the teacher for painting (as on newspapers covering the easels or tables for instance) being valued as art or placed on display. Thus, these two avenues of cultural transmission, the designation of certain experiences as art activities and the physical authentication of products from those experiences as art (especially when the production process exemplifies appropriate classroom or societal behavior), constitute, together with verbalizations, major contributions to the content of aesthetic socialization and enculturation.

Context

Most of the behaviors mentioned above can be grouped under what Keddie (1971) has called the "teacher context" (p.135). It is the classroom world of what is, in which teachers plan and carry out activities, respond to students, and evaluate outcomes. In participant-observation study of a developmentally oriented preschool class, I found teacher context patterns of behavior similar to those described above. The class was chosen because of its reputation as part of an excellent program, as evidenced by a long waiting list of potential students and frequent references from educational authorities in the area. The class is somewhat atypical, for it receives support from the local school system, a nearby university, and state and federal funds. It employs a head teacher with a master's degree in early childhood education and two aides. The mostly middle class students range in age from three to five. Several children are developmentally delayed in speech due to hearing impairment and/or other problems. Several others are learning English as a second language.

I observed the class four days a week, for three to four hours each day, over a period of three months. Data were gathered through extensive notes, informal interviews, photographs, and program documents. The data were sorted into categories using content and comparative analysis and were reviewed frequently. Member checks were carried out periodically, wherein the participants were apprised of the nature, categorization, and analysis of the data collected, and were asked for further input.

Among the teacher context behaviors observed were the positive responses of teacher/aides to those students who worked diligently and neatly, following directions closely. Additionally, although teachers usually displayed all the products from all students, implicit approval of products which were more referential or representational or which conformed closely to a teacher-made model (as in the ubiquitous cotton-ball snowman or turkey made by tracing one's hand) was apparent in observations. These types of work were most often saved in student files to be discussed with parents. The exclusion of pieces which were not representational or like the model narrowed the scope of what was considered valuable. The head teacher explained,

> "The parents like to see the kids' drawing ability is improving. When their pictures look like what it is supposed to be, the parents accept it as a valuable thing more easily. Uh...we know that art doesn't have to be that way, but that's what most parents like to see."

The indirect communication of this process is surely an important component of the young child's developing concepts of what is and

is not art, and further, what is and is not _good_ art, authenticating the reproductive/naturalistic mode described by Rosario and Collazo (1981).

However, when questioned about art and art activities in their classrooms, the preschool teacher and aides involved in this study responded in the "educationalist context" (Keddie, 1971, p.135). Keddie states that this context is called into being when the presence of an outsider necessitates discussion of how things _ought_ to be in school. Thus, these teachers indicated that the process of most classroom art activities was more important than the product, that products did not have to have recognizable imagery or follow a model to be good, and that time _was_ spent talking about different types of art (the children's and the works of others). However, these educationalist context assertions simply were not true descriptions of what actually happened in the classrooms observed.

When questioned during member checks about such disparities between intent and practice, the head teacher admitted that she had never really recognized the contradictions between her theoretical contentions and what actually happened in her classroom. By the end of the three month study, observable changes were beginning to occur: teacher/aides talked with students more about their art work, developed response and sorting activities using art reproductions as well as images from magazines (spoons, cars, cereal boxes, etc.), and relied less heavily on activities that followed a teacher-made model.

Art Education

Implications for art education are many. First, those of us who work directly with young children need to explore our own cultural assumptions and determine in what fashion and to what degree we are transmitting them to our students. Do we (intentionally or not) encourage a naturalistic mode of aesthetic production and appreciation which contributes to the continuing public aesthetic code of correspondence to nature in the visual arts? Are praising and displaying the preschooler's initial attempts at symbolic representation simply encouragement of the child's creative and developmental growth or does this action more potently begin a continuing transmission of cultural judgments about the nature and standards of art? Do we conduct critical discussions about the nature and importance of the role of art and artists in our own and other societies, even at the preschool and primary levels? Do we in any way attempt to assess the meanings which young children are developing about art?

Secondly, the questions raised above apply as aptly to those art educators involved in teacher training. Future art teachers need to become aware of the effects of their own formal education (as well as the effects of more informal agencies of cultural transmission such as the home and the media) upon their cultural knowledge and assumptions. Those of us involved in training art teachers should raise such critical issues. Equally important is increasing the awareness of the processes of aesthetic socialization in preservice and inservice preschool and elementary teachers. Denno's (1977) study showed that the profession of elementary teaching attracted persons who are politically conservative, conforming, and submissive. She felt that such characteristics caused teachers to reward similar conforming behavior in their students and discourage constructive deviation. Unless such teachers are led to examine their own beliefs

about the nature of art, one can expect to continue to find a prevailing reproductive code of aesthetic transmission in classroom structure and interactions between teacher and student.

Third, those of us involved in developing and implementing art curricula must examine choices made concerning inclusion and exclusion of particular activities and objects for response. Should we continue to emphasize the fine arts of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and the United States, strengthening the public view of art as a basically hedonistic, elitist adjunct to real life? Should we continue to emphasize the making and exhibition of artifacts (Janesick, 1982) to the exclusion of critical examinations of the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced?

In sum, an examination of the processes of aesthetic socialization observable in the education of the young child reveals a variety of modes of knowledge transmission, many apparently unintentional or, at least, unexamined. Recognition of the modes and effects of these transmissions is of continuing importance to the practice of art education.

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