

Arts Education: A Sociological Perspective

Art education in elementary and junior high school has become a topic of conversation more recently because people are beginning to question the worth of art programs at such young ages. Many people, educators mainly, feel that there should be a more rigid core curriculum for students, and that arts and languages should be replaced with more studies in mathematics and science-type classes. The sociology of arts education has been left virtually untouched by sociologists over the years and therefore is quite undefined. The general belief is that education in itself exists not only to instill knowledge, but also as a tool of socialization. Without the learned practices gained in the lower levels of education, children would have no idea how to behave in society later in life. While there are many different aspects of socialization that one must go through, art in particular stands out to me as a means to develop cultural and social aspects of a person or group of people. Art education is on the way out and this will cause a steady decline in the quality of life that future students will have.

Art helps to infuse children with a sense of culture. The arts can be used to boost the esteem of a group and create a sense of accord as well as actualize social solidarity and lead to social advancement (Chalmers 1974). When children use visual stimulation to illustrate what they are talking about at a young age, they learn about each other and they learn how to interact with each other, or “play nice”. These learned activities will serve them later in life, as they grow socially. In education, the arts can be used for a variety of functions, which could involve the expression of children’s reactions to the world around them or their reactions to their own thoughts and actions.

In Management, one of our basic principles is a communication model in which there is a transmitter and a receiver. Art works in much the same way; the artist is the transmitter and the audience is the receiver. The audience then gives feedback to the transmitter and the process starts over again. This is another form of socialization, in which different parties interact with each other. Art education is based around a visual culture, and this is growing more and more important with each passing day as students from all levels are continually learning from visual sources (Freedman 2000). Students use art not only to express certain things about themselves, but also about the world around them. They use it to express topics such as love, friends, beliefs, religion, work, war, and an infinite other number of topics. These elements are all part of their social being, their social world, and therefore can be represented in any form of art that the student chooses.

Society has always been unbalanced in terms of education and the inequalities that are found in education are the reason that some people are denied the ability to participate fully in civilized society. Art education largely examines cultures of the world and educates students on these cultures, and teachers, historians, and sociologists have noticed that in the battle for funding, schools have abandoned their quest for educational richness and have swung their focus towards the economical aspects of schools (LaChapelle 1984). Due to the fact that schools have seriously cut funding for their art and music departments, children are not learning as much as they should be in elementary school. This translates into less knowledge at higher levels of education, and students are less prepared to enter the collegiate world. When students are not ready for college, they

suffer academically and socially because they are not socialized to the norms that are found in college atmospheres.

Sociologists who followed the Marxist perspective thought that if they were educating people in the arts, and encouraging people to make art for sale, it was just another way for them to create consumables. These consumables would then be sold and it would only contribute to our capitalist society. They did not support the continuing education of the arts for fear that it would only propel our society further into its capitalist ways. Marx believed that art was not one of those things in life that was truly important, and he argued that art only gave people expression of pain and suffering without actually providing them with relief.

Not only does art education help people grow creatively, it is also a necessity of everyday life. People live each day using symbols that they do not even realize they are using. Take a sunrise or a sunset for example: there is a scientific explanation for a sunrise, but then there is the descriptive quality of art, which attempts to explain sunrises and sunsets. Without teaching in the arts, people cannot properly express themselves and their visions. This inability to express a thought will not make a very good public speaker in the future. In high school, students study “humanities”, or the appreciation of art, and while this is nice in theory, what really is being gained from this? Yes, they have been convinced that art is fantastic, but haven’t learned much about the “why” of art. They haven’t learned why the artist has created what was been created, and are not learning of human emotions, but simply the art of seeing art. Many people do not realize the symbolism that is found in art, they do not recognize it. This is because they are not

taught to analyze and understand that which they are seeing. They see a sunset in a painting as just that, a sunset, whereas those who have taken art education classes recognize it as more – a sign of new life, the death of someone, a new and innovative thought. Without proper training, people cease to think critically about anything. They don't learn to analyze it, and they don't learn to try and understand what is happening in the artist's mind. They aren't being socialized to the thought process – to the analysis of specific situations (Chalmers 1974). Without being socialized to the thought process, students can't tell you how something happened or why it happened. They can't tell you what a person was thinking when they said or created something. This analysis of objects, writings, or words is part of the socialization of humans. People need to be able to analyze and communicate their analysis to others effectively.

The Declaration of Independence assures each person the right to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. It guarantees all people the right to art, as long as people view and understand art to, in some way, make life more pleasurable, then it is a liberty, and a pursuit of happiness. These rights were given to all people, and children should be allowed to explore these rights as well as every undergraduate student, every graduate student, and every adult that wishes to pursue these dreams (Freedman 2000). If the constitution didn't give these rights to all people, then many fields would be deemed useless or unnecessary such as art, music, pornography, film director, novel author, etc. etc. People would have to take only disciplines, which were seen as useful and appropriate for the individual person. We would not be living in a democracy. The fact that we live in a democracy gives each person the right to choose to his or her own liking

which areas of study they choose to pursue. This choice that we have been given is a form of socialization in that it gives people the freedom to choose for themselves whatever they would like, and they are therefore learning the cultural norms of modern society (Freedman 2000).

The No Child Left Behind Act has had a big influence on the educational system, and in particular the art education aspect. The NCLB Act outlines a core curriculum which does involve art, but its primary emphasis is on math, science, and reading which could inadvertently lead to the focus of attention and resources on these areas, while art education, music education, etc. could be lost in the shuffle. This act has been a controversial issue among many educators recently because they are afraid that schools will, instead of leaving children behind, leave their education behind (Meyer 2005).

In elementary school, many schools have “show-and-tell” in art class. Students create something one week, and the next week they present their creations to the class. In this way, children learn at an early age how to interact with other people in different situations. Knowledge of the surrounding society can be learned through the arts and otherwise unavailable information is obtained or reinforced (Chalmers 1974). The fact that children can choose for themselves what they like and do not like, and are not told which is better, gives them a sense of self, an identity. These identities will carry these independent children through their lives, and they will continue in society to choose for themselves instead of being told what to think and when to think it. Many scholars have worked together over recent years to increase the amount of diversity seen in the arts and to make sure that cultures are accurately represented (Freedman 2000). This diversity in

arts education ensures the fact that students will learn about other cultures in the world, in which case they will have been socialized to diversity. This is an important part of the socialization of children, especially, because the ways that they are taught as younger children are the ways that they are going to grow up with and embrace. Cultural diversity is a key issue in society, and always has been, and the sooner these children are introduced to different cultures, the better off they are going to be in the future. They will have a more widespread knowledge of many things, and therefore will be able to contribute more to society as a whole.

Art aids disabled young people in developing a sense of self, which gives them a place in today's society. Art allows these disabled students to overcome the systems of oppression that fight against them daily (Taylor 2005). Many consider those with disabilities unable to create the same artworks as people who are "normal" or without disabilities, when in truth, through intensive training, people with disabilities often have more to say. They create what they know, and they know a lot of pain and suffering. These disabled artists have been oppressed for years and years and their way of reacting to this oppression is to create pieces of work that reveal certain parts of life that have, in the past, been kept hidden to the public. The stereotypes that these artists deal with are what they try to overcome through their art. One student, E. Hardy, created a nude self-portrait in which he is laying/leaning on a platform, with his amputated leg, putting himself on display (Taylor 2005).

Works Cited

Chalmers, F. Graeme. *Art Education*. "A Cultural Foundation for Education in the Arts". Vol. 27, No. 1. (Jan. 1974).

Chalmers discusses how art is not viewed in a social context enough, and how it affects culture in many different ways. Culture is what shapes the role of an artist, and this culture is learned through the educational system. The arts, when applied to education, can be used to encourage a group of people or to express a point of view. Chalmers talks about the socialization of the thought process and the future consumers, the students of today.

Freedman, Kerry. *Studies in Art Education*. "Social Perspectives on Art Education in the U.S.: Teaching Visual Culture in a Democracy". Vol. 41, No. 4. (Summer 2000).

This article examined different perspectives on art education that include race, sexual orientation, and cultures. The article doesn't examine one perspective specifically, but rather gives a diverse presentation of multiple viewpoints. It talks about the difference between art students' expectations and what they are actually getting in their education. Freedman discusses the need for education in a social context and the necessity of critique for social growth.

LaChapelle, Joseph R. *Studies in Art Education*. "The Sociology of Art and Art Education: A Relationship Reconsidered". Vol. 26, No. 1. (Autumn 1984).

LaChapelle talks about Durkheim's theory of alienation and how it pertains to the artist as well as the focus on the aesthetic and the effect that that has on the art world. His focus was mainly on the sociology of art and what that has to do with the creative world in modern art societies. He is sure to point out the need of a sociological part of the study of creativity in a modern society or culture. He feels that art education in general needs to be fixed and needs input from a newly increasing study of the sociology of art.

Meyer, Lori. *National Association of State Boards of Education*. "The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts in America's Schools". Vol. 106, No. 3. (January/February 2005).

Meyer focuses her article on recent research done on the effects of art education in school age children. The study that the Board of Education conducted showed that those with education in the arts were significantly better off than those without proper training in the arts. She talks about the No Child Left Behind Act and its effect on the core values of the educational system. She then goes on to outline recommendations for the school board in order to ensure a complete curriculum.

Taylor, Margaret. *Disability & Society*. "Self-Identity and the Arts Education of Disabled Young People". Vol. 20, No. 7. (Dec. 2005). Taylor & Francis.

Taylor's writing focuses on the need of an art education and form of expression for those with disabilities. She uses examples of current students of the arts in order to express how it is such a strong outlet for them, and how they can express themselves in ways that they never thought possible. She interviewed these students in order to discover how the expression that they were able to create affected them and found out that it affected them in profound ways. She talks about the potential empowerment of an art education and the great feeling of satisfaction that these students get out of their work.