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Opposing Views on Child Art:

Examining the Historic Influences and Context for the Opposing Views on Child Art Within the

Discourse of Art Education

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As with all discourses, the field of art education has experienced several ideological shifts concerning the topic of child art. Throughout the discipline's history, educators have continually advocated opposing beliefs about children's artwork, which not only reflected their individual attitudes but also resonated with the social contexts from which they were postulated. Moreover, within the field such ideological exchange has significantly shaped the preferred pedagogical practices. The following offers an exploration into two assemblies of art educators whose views on children's artwork are significantly different, and consequently advocate opposing curricular models. The first assembly of art educators whom this paper will discuss concern themselves with a view of child art fostered through what Eisner (1967) deems a "process-oriented expressive" model (p. 21). Whereas the opposing group of educators, specifically Elliot Eisner and Arthur Efland, view children's artwork through the lens of cognition and claimed that the learning of art is a cognitive endeavor heavily rooted in epistemological arguments of philosophy and psychology.

To begin this exploration of the opposing views concerning the topic of child art, it is critical to first define the term, and then draw upon this definition in later discussions. Efland (1976) defines child art as "a spontaneous, unsupervised form of graphic expression" (p. 47). To this definition Wilson adds that children's artwork embodies an aesthetic playfulness, resembling "game-like" qualities (cited in Efland, 1976, p. 74). With that, Wilson (2007) asserts this playfulness exists because young children have not yet mastered the conventions for art making and thus demonstrate a "cultivated roughness" (p. 135). When creating art at a young age children are not yet fully aware or preoccupied by professional standards, which have historically governed much of the production of Western artwork, including for example the preference for realistic representation. But rather, child art exhibits an unpolished and unrefined lushness.

Interestingly, according to Leeds (1989) this awareness of the child and consequently the curiosity in studying children's artwork did not begin to appear until the 1880's. During this period, the discourse of art education, as we understand it today in a contemporary classroom context, began to develop. However, in order to understand contemporary practices it is critical to reexamine the foundations upon which they were built, specifically looking at the child for whom it was conceived.

Wilson (2007) identifies the origins of child art as the classroom of Austrian educator Franz Cizek. According to Wilson, as "the father of child art" Cizek's work during the late 19th and early 20th centuries influenced the manifestation of children's drawings and shaped the collective standard of how child art should look (p. 136). Cizek's pedagogical method was driven by the concept of creative self-expressionism. In other words, Cizek's own view of the child was shaped by the philosophical tenets of modernist thinking. Wilson (2007) writes that child art and modernism "have always been inextricably linked" (p. 134). To clarify, children's artwork and modernism partake in a symbiotic relationship in which one is intrinsically entangled around the other. Within modernist ideology every child was seen as an artist, and according to Wilson (2007), "within some quarters the child was even thought to be the paradigm modern artist" (p. 134). In this context, children's artwork was acknowledged as an entity apart from the adult world, something not yet jaded by the ramifications of a mature society. This distinct division between adult and child worlds may have been a reaction against the lack of acknowledgement of childhood during the medieval period. Leeds (1989) explains:

The idea of childhood... corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from adult... That is why,

[in the medieval world] as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny, or cradle-rocker, he belonged to the adult society. (p. 93)

However, this attitude began to evolve during the 16th century and culminated in the 19th century with the acknowledgement of childhood as a state of “otherness” in which the child should be “protected, studied, and pondered” (Leeds, 1989, p. 94).

During this evolution views held about the child fluctuated between two dichotomies. One on hand, children were believed to be lovable and pure creatures to be protected from the corruption of society. Whereas, on the obverse, Leeds (1989) writes that children were seen as “irrational animals who need to be brought along toward civilized adulthood as quickly as possible” (p. 94). During the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau expanded this view in his book titled *Emile*, in which he crystallized the notion of childhood as a state of being separate from adulthood (Leeds, 1989). Rousseau emphasized the qualitative differences between adults and children, postulating a romantic view of childhood as the “ideal state of innocence” (Leeds, p. 94). His theories later became the foundation for many forms of child-centered education. More specifically, within the field of art both Franz Cizek and later Viktor Lowenfeld embraced this child-centered model, and, through this model advocated for a curriculum that fostered creative self-expressive activities.

According to Duncum (1982), Cizek’s Juvenile Art Class intended to emphasize the belief that the child is an innately creative being, and hence, children’s artwork was understood as the tangible materialization of this creativity. Using this view the child was revered as a “radical non-conformist” (Wilson, 2007, p. 134). Or, in other words, Cizek’s view was influenced by his convictions that young children embodied the modernist tenets of artistic expression that included “spontaneity, originality, individuality, creativity, and

unconventionality” (Wilson, 2007, p. 134). Cizek advocated, “the child comes into the world as creator and creates everything out of his imagination” (Duncum, 1982, p. 32). In other words, Cizek’s view of child art embodied the Rousseauian creed, and this desire to protect the creative innocence is clearly reflected in his work with the Juvenile Art Class.

According to Duncum (1982), Cizek likened his role of educator to that of a gardener. Cizek believed that if children were presented with the proper conditions to grow and mature, they would do so naturally, declaring that the root of pure creativity lies within young children. Duncum writes, “Cizek believed the art educator is like a gardener, tactfully removing the weeds that would, if allowed, strangle a child’s innate sensitivity” (p. 32). In this metaphor weeds are the adult influences which children clumsily try to imitate. In other words, Cizek not only held the conviction that children do not need adult influences when creating a work of art, but also extended this to decree that such influence was harmful. So put differently, in the role of art educator Cizek implemented an art curriculum that later was identified as a precursor to the “hands-off” doctrine popularized in the United States by art educator Viktor Lowenfeld.

According to Burton (2001), art educator Viktor Lowenfeld, like Cizek, “cautioned against all forms of influences drawn from adult art” (p. 35). Lowenfeld argued for an art education which promoted “self-identification with experience,” emphasizing a child-centered pedagogy (Burton, p. 35). For Lowenfeld art education became not a subject to be learned but rather a process to foster the creative growth of a child. Lowenfeld’s view of child art influenced his approach to teaching in that he believed art making was imperative for creative self-expression. Burton (2001) explains that “Lowenfeld wished to protect, what he believed was indigenous to all young people, and it was their right to construct individual meanings and speak in their own voices” (p. 35). This child-centered, pedagogy advocated by both Cizek and

Lowenfeld, opposes curricular structures and educational philosophies advocated by the second assembly of educators who viewed art as a cognitive discourse, more specifically the work of Elliot Eisner and Arthur Efland. To clarify, Eisner and Efland both stressed an epistemological understanding toward the field manifested in a discipline-centered approach.

According to Dobbs (2003), during the 1960's educator Jerome Bruner proposed a new pedagogical theory he termed the "Process of Education," which later laid the foundation for his discipline-centered approach to teaching. Bruner's discipline-centered approach stressed the importance of assimilating the knowledge and skills that define each individual field of study (Dobbs). Put differently, Bruner argued "the inquiry of a specific field would reveal the 'structure' of the discipline, including its basic organization, principles, characteristic tools, and technical vocabulary" (Dobbs, p. 703). In 1965, Manuel Barkan presented Bruner's discipline-centered pedagogy to art educators at a national seminar held at Penn State University, where he stressed the idea that a discipline-based education fostered both systematic and sequential learning experiences. Barkan advocated that when translated into the fundamental domains of art the pedagogy would include: art making, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. Barkan's influence and efforts at the Penn State Arts Seminar culminated with the establishment of Discipline-Centered Art Education or the DBAE approach. Dobbs (2003) writes that the DBAE pedagogy focused on promoting student inquiry of the "human experience," by providing occasions for interdisciplinary learning (p. 704). With this, art educators Eisner and Efland simultaneously promoted that the field be accepted as a discipline founded in cognition.

Efland (1992) defines cognition as "propositional thinking with verbal and numerical symbols" (p. 20). Historically, this definition of cognition was only associated with academic subjects that relied on the use of logic and reason, for instance the study of mathematics.

However, during the 1950's psychologist Jean Piaget redefined this long-standing classification of cognition and proposed a more contemporary theory. Piaget's theory examined the mind's development of higher order thinking and suggested the concept of constructivism (Gage & Berliner, 1998). Modeled after the biological processes of adaptation, constructivism links art making and cognition by emphasizing the belief that children "construct their realities through learning" (Duncum, 2006, p. 15). Using this model, Eisner put forward a view of art education that opposed Cizek and Lowenfeld's earlier practices in which children were seen as "budding flowers" (Eisner, 1973-1974, p. 5). Rather, Eisner advocated:

Artistic development is not an automatic consequence of maturation... art teachers have an enormous contribution to make to the growing child by helping him to keep visual explorations going. In schools, with their great emphasis on reading skills and the recognition of words, there is a tendency to underplay the education of perception. (p. 6)

In other words, Eisner's beliefs opposed prior views, which argued that children develop best in art if left to their own resources. In fact, rather than expressive experimentation, Eisner (1973-1974) argued that art educators should be trained to "help students release the repressed and unconscious emotions into spontaneous verbalization and art production" (p. 8). Moreover, Efland (1976) believed in the intrinsic justifications for teaching art, advocating that the pedagogical methods should emphasize that art is a discourse, which draws upon the cognitive sciences. To simplify, Efland (1976) believed art education should not "become regarded as time-off for good behavior or therapy" (p. 50). With this, both Eisner and Efland focused on implementing art curriculums, which echoed the conviction that the learning of art is a cognitive endeavor.

However, in drawing this contrast between the two assemblies of art educators, (Cizek/ Lowenfeld and Eisner/ Efland) I am not implying one view as superior to the other, but rather situating the beliefs in historical context. Both assemblies held differing views about the child and children's artwork because of the framework in which they worked. Cizek and Lowenfeld were reacting against the authoritarian regimes and thus gravitated toward an art education that encouraged creative self-expression among children. In this educational approach Cizek and Lowenfeld insured what they thought to be the protection of pure creativity by providing students with little adult influence and instead allowing the child to come to fruition on their own accord. Where as, on the obverse, Eisner and Efland worked within a context where the field was moving toward embracing the belief that art education is a subject with epistemological foundations. As the discourse of art education continues to evolve, simultaneously so will the views of child art. Today, in a post-modern context, the field of art education is currently experiencing a restructuring of curriculum as a result of our post-modern contextual influences.

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