Children's Views on Art in the Primary Grades, K-3

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Abstract

This study examined some of the kinds of knowledge that primary students have regarding art. Approximately one hundred students participated in the study. The researcher visited their classrooms, sat among them, and interviewed them as they did their art work. Although the students appeared to have an accurate grasp of the methods for working with art media, they were not very knowledgeable about ways to judge art. At all grade levels, the students' knowledge was somewhat inconsistent and not articulated very well. The students exhibited both unique meanings and socially shared meanings in their discourse and confirmed the importance of art teachers as agents of socialization in the process of learning about art. What students come to know about art requires the teaching of organized and comprehensive concepts.

A major accomplishment of childhood is the acquisition of some of the socio-cultural knowledge of the society into which one is born. This is facilitated through social interaction or the process of socialization. A major agency for socialization and the transmission of socio-cultural knowledge is the school where children have formal encounters with the cognitive symbols that comprise knowledge and encode various subjects.

One of the purposes of this study was to use the school as a setting to examine some of the kinds of socio-cultural knowledge that primary students have acquired about art. A second purpose was to illuminate how the knowledge is conceived and framed. A third purpose was to examine some of the cultural assumptions embedded in the students' knowledge.

Basic questions pursued in the study were: What is art? What do you do in art? Why do you do art? What is an artist? Are art teachers artists? How do you make what you're doing? Where do you see art? How can you tell if art is good or bad or pretty?

The perspective taken in this study is derived from symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology. One of the points central to this perspective is that human beings are able to shape experience
with meaning. According to Brown (1977) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), human experience and thought is given form through metaphor. Consequently, we can create highly symbolic worlds wherein we situate our daily activities. In anthropology, these symbolic worlds are termed culture (Bird, 1973). Yet, all of human experience is not predetermined by culture. Each individual is able to create and frame his or her own personally meaningful experience. Culture, however, does provide an individual with coordinates of meaning and frames of reference that one needs to know in order to adequately participate in social life. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe the relationship between society, culture, and the individual as a dialectical process. Scribner (1985) takes a related approach.

A key to learning about the symbolic structures of human experience is language. Language is the major vehicle by which human thought and experience are given form and meaning and by which they can be shared. Language provides a ready-made frame of reference or template for interpreting individual thought and experience (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). Through language, children take on the socio-cultural knowledge created by their predecessors in a taken-for-granted way. What is at issue here is the interface between society and the individual. Within this interface, a great deal of knowledge can be assimilated, constructed, and internalized by a person without rethinking it or examining it.

Method

This study was both descriptive and interpretive; it involved participant-observation and interviewing. The methodology used was phenomenological. Phenomenology is a way to inspect the intentional structures of human consciousness and is especially appropriate to the study of culture and social knowledge (Luckmann, 1978). Phenomenological method calls for two procedures: 1) a description of the contents of consciousness, and 2) an analysis of the contents from a reflexive or critical stance. In this study, the interviews proceeded mainly in an
unstructured manner to allow the researcher to take advantage of any line of thought which emerged during dialogue. The interviews were taped and later transcribed, collated, summarized, and analyzed.

**Data Base**

Students in kindergarten through third grade participated in the study which took place in live classroom situations. The exact number of participants is difficult to determine because many students offered information during someone else's response. The approximate numbers of students were 14 from kindergarten, 14 from grade one, 21 from grade two and 44 from grade three. The students attended nine elementary schools which were visited during two years of student teaching supervision. Not every student, class, or grade participated in the study due to the researcher's schedule, student teacher placements, class length, and the accessibility to and willingness of students.

**Results**

This section of the paper summarizes the ways that the students' knowledge is conceived and framed, and examines some of the cultural assumptions embedded in the students' knowledge. The focus here is upon how art is typically thought about or expressed by these students in the primary grades, and what some of the socially-based frames of reference in this thinking imply.

**Summary of Knowledge**

The concept of art in the primary grades in this study was framed primarily from an objective stance. Art is specific objects such as paintings, drawings, and projects. It is an activity and it is a place or time for working or making things. Particularly prominent in the students' conception of art is the term, stuff.

What one does in art was conceived in terms of activities that are typically engaged in by artists and presented to children in the primary grades. The students painted, drew, made constructions, planned designs, or worked in clay. As observed by the researcher, these activities resulted in the production of objects like Mother's Day cards, Christmas cards, illustrations of an event in the story of the three bears, animal
pictures, books about spring, stained glass windows, pictures of Santa Claus, portraits, styrofoam sculptures, teapots, and ashtrays. Art is done in the primary grades for the following reasons: celebrating holidays, making gifts for the family, beautifying the school, enjoyment and fun, learning things that adults know, learning to listen, doing what teachers want, to get better at art, using the art room, for a profession or hobby, and a way to fill time.

Kindergarten and first grade students emphasized external forces as important reasons for doing art whereas the second and third grade students emphasized learning as a reason for doing art. Some unique framings did occur. A kindergarten student talked about art in terms of giving a piece (not peace) of mind when you grow up, a third grade student offered that art is making things that you imagine, and another third grade student said that art was experiments. The children's responses to the questions, what artists did and who were artists, revealed both unique and socialized concepts and frames of reference.

Artists do paintings, draw pictures good, draw buildings and houses, design, make things and stuff, take pictures, make pictures of people and planes, make faces out of clay, put stuff in books, and draw pictures without rulers. They can be teachers and help you make stuff. Artists try to get famous, win rewards (not awards) for their work, get ideas in museums, and make things that don't make sense.

Artists do these things to decorate their homes, to make things look pretty, to do work, to make money, to put art in museums, for a hobby, for fun, for a living, to fill their spare time, and the enjoyment of working with a specific medium. There are different kinds of artists, too. There are: explore artists, clothes artists, wood artists, clay artists, architects, and makers of cars. Typically, parents, neighbors, and teachers provided models of an artist. Other children were also identifiable as artists. One student mentioned that Leonardo DaVinci was a good drawer.

Art teachers can, sometimes, be considered as artists. They don't necessarily have to be one in order to teach art. Typically, art teachers do a lot of art, make stuff, hand out stuff, draw, tell you what to do, teach you art, show pictures, and give you ideas. The results revealed
that the children were familiar with typical media such as crayon, pencil, toothpicks, clay, and paint. Concepts about process were framed, for the most part, in culturally appropriate ways. Painting is done with a brush that has bristles and working with toothpicks to construct a sculpture requires that you stick them in styrofoam, glue, or cardboard. For crayon etchings or scratch-it pictures, one has to press hard with the crayons, and then paint over the crayon with black. When the paint is dry, an image can be scraped into the surface. Some of the students knew that clay can be formed into ashtrays, teapots, pots, or anything that you want. They also knew some of the proper techniques for working with clay. Their knowledge of the firing process wasn't accurate, however.

The responses to where art can be seen came mostly from the third grade. The students said that art can typically be seen all over in the city, in museums, on the school walls, in one's home, in picture stores, in the art room, in the planetarium, and in the library.

The questions about what makes art good, bad, or pretty revealed a diversity of concepts. Art can just be good. It can be good if it is perfect or looks real, if the person making it works hard or considers the way it should be done, and if one likes it or people stare at it because it is unusual. Also, if the person making it did not use a ruler, draw with a pencil, but painted directly, and the work is neat and not messed up, it can be thought of as good. Further, artists themselves determine if something is good as do others who say that it is. Something is good if it is in a museum. What is more, an expert such as a scientist can be asked to determine what is good art.

Art is bad if it is sloppy or messy, the colors are not right, nobody looks at it, somebody says it is bad, the person looking at it does not like it, it looks bad, or if it has erasing marks all over it. Scribbles are not good nor is putting a lot of stuff all over the art work.

Art is pretty when a person does his or her best or if the work has different colors. A person looking at it can tell if it is pretty. A design with flowers is pretty and a design with leaves and water might
be. Several students in the third grade noted that some persons, like artists, experts, or scientists, are more qualified than others to comment about the worth of art objects.

Cultural Assumptions

Cultural assumptions are concepts and meanings that underlie or are embedded in the shared knowledge of a society. They are also generally taken for granted. Such concepts are not likely to be thought about critically in terms of their origin, meaning, and implications for understanding a phenomenon.

Within the students' knowledge about art, there were many cultural assumptions. Only four of them that the researcher considered to be problematic will be discussed. These are: 1) art is mostly making stuff for fun, decoration, or gifts; 2) artists are good drawers or painters who do art for fame, money, or fun; 3) art is in museums or on the walls; and, 4) good art is neat and readily determined through looking.

The first of these—thinking of art as an activity involving the making of stuff for fun, decoration, or gifts—can be related to the ideas of art as process of making objects and art as means of self expression through media manipulation which have been highly prized by the advocates of child-centered education. This conceptualization is a somewhat misleading and dysfunctional guide to understanding the art world. Artists and other persons professionally involved with art in our society talk about it, theorize about it, study it, and make judgments about it. Art entails cognitive activity and purposeful thinking of various kinds. For example, neither impressionism nor minimal art can be adequately comprehended from a process frame of reference. This is not to say that children ought to understand impressionism or minimal art, but to suggest that perhaps they ought to know that thinking inspires the making of art.

The framing of art as fun calls attention to the aspect of enjoyment either because art is an inherently pleasurable activity or contributes to a pleasant environment when it is displayed. These meanings were emphasized during the Aesthetic Movement that was popular around the turn
of the century. They also provide some of the theory upon which modern art is based. Art as just plain fun, though, serves little purpose in understanding art.

While the concept of gift-giving and bringing school work home for parents to see may be appropriate in the context of celebration, ritual, and reinforcing values, it is not useful information about art. Gift giving in the art world is generally confined to the giving of collections to art museums. It is not clear how the notion of art as gift-giving in the primary grades would contribute to an understanding of fine art as it is perceived in our society.

Undoubtedly, the phrase "making stuff" is descriptive of what goes on in art, but it is neither articulate nor knowledgeable. Referring specifically to ceramics, sculpture, or printmaking is far more adequate and does not seem to be beyond the ability of primary students.

The second assumption--artists are good drawers or painters who do art for fame, money, or fun--has a number of concepts embedded within it. There is the notion that skill and ability is required of an artist. There is the idea that drawing and painting are preferred art forms, and the conception that if artists are skillful enough, they can become well-known and admired. These meanings are reminiscent of those applied to artists during the time when training in the academy was popular. The framing of experience in regard to artists at that time was in terms of standards of performance by which artists and their works could be given acclaim. Such meanings in themselves are not helpful in understanding art if the sources for these ideas are never made known to the students and remain at a taken-for-granted level.

The money and fun concepts are reflective of economic and aesthetic considerations also rooted in the nineteenth century. Artists became purveyors of creative works embodying significant form. This frame of reference does not adequately address problems and issues in art today.

The third concept--art is in museums or on walls--has overtones of the fine arts and the practice of painting in particular. It holds that art is only visible in, and confined to, specific objects in specific places. In part, such a conception can be derived from the students' own school art activities; they, oftentimes, paint pictures and hang them up
for display. This concept does not allow for some of the current thinking about art. From this frame of reference, it would be difficult to comprehend phenomena such as "Spiral Jetty" or "Running Fence." Furthermore, from this frame of reference, art lacks a broad perspective that might include an understanding of the built environment and material culture in general. By framing art in such a narrow way, children become intellectually separated from most of the art within their own culture.

The fourth concept--good art is neat and readily determined through looking--relates to a number of notions. One holds that there are standards by which one can evaluate art works; another is the idea that everyone ought to be able to understand art without relying on someone else to explain it. There are traces here of a democratic approach to art and a kind of empiricism wherein knowledge can be arrived at through visible evidence. The Arts and Crafts Movement contributed to the conception that art is for everyone, and the spread of science as a way to understand the workings of the natural world is perhaps the root of knowing through looking. Insofar as these meanings are used to comprehend art work in the late twentieth century, they would not provide very reliable knowledge. Standards for evaluating art, other than formalism, have been in flux, and contemplating Richard Estes' or Duane Hanson's work, for example, without the benefit of knowing about photo-realism or environments leads to, at best, only a simplistic understanding of these artists' works. More adequate conceptual tools need to be shared with the children.

Conclusions

In this study, it is proposed that students' comments indicate that teachers are instrumental in socializing them to art knowledge. Social interaction with other students also leads to the formulation, support, negotiation, and availability of meanings that come to be attached to art experiences.

The image of art presented by the primary students in this study appears as bits and pieces of knowledge that are, as Schutz (1970) noted about social knowledge in general, somewhat incoherent, inconsistent, and only partially clear. The language used by the students to express art
knowledge is very generalized, nonspecific and not very articulated. Much of the knowledge that the children have is taken-for-granted as evidenced by the large number of "I don't know" responses when asked why something was so. Their knowledge was also distributed unevenly. Some students appeared to have clearer conceptions of art, artists, and so on, than others. Both personal and shared knowledge was in evidence. In the different categories of questions, it can be noted that technical knowledge about working with a medium was the clearest and most socialized. The fuzziest and least credible knowledge was that dealing with art evaluations. Overall, it was apparent that these students have internalized some parts of the socially available concepts about art held by the culture in general. If our mission as art teachers is to help students become more knowledgeable about art, we ought to give considerable thought to the content of what we teach and to the processes we use to extend children's frames of reference regarding art.

Notes

1. This study was supported in part by a faculty research fellowship, SUNY Research Foundation.

2. A version of this paper was reported at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York City, 1982.

3. Copies of the taped interviews with the children are available upon request from Nancy R. Johnson, Art Department, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana 47306.
References


