Aesthetic Socialization and the Young Child

Sally Hagaman

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?
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 than 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 that 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

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 discuss-
ion 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 educa-
tionalist 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 contra-
dictions 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 activi-
ties 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) encour-
age 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 pre-
schooler's initial attempts at
symbolic representation simply
encouragement of the child's cre-
ative 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 assump-
tions. Those of us involved in
training art teachers should raise
such critical issues. Equally
important is increasing the aware-
ness of the processes of aesthetic
socialization in inservice and
preservice preschool and elementary
teachers. Denno's (1977) study
showed that the profession of
elementary teaching attracted
persons who are politically conserva-
tive, conforming, and submissive.
She felt that such characteristics
caused teachers to reward similar
conforming behavior in their stu-
dents and discourage constructive
development. 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.

References


Sally Hagaman is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.