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Author(s): Arthur Efland
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THE SCHOOL ART STYLE: A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

ARTHUR EFLAND

It's Thursday, and the fourth grade class is happily marching to the art room. The children are glad, because for a whole hour they can forget about reading and mathematics and take up with the enticements of colored construction paper, papier mache, paint, and clay. The teacher greets the art teacher with a cheery "Hi, Mona. Am I glad you have them now. They are higher than kites". Then she says halfway apologetically, "I hope you won't mind, but Johnny has remained in the room to finish his reading. He was out a lot with flu, and he's fallen behind." The art teacher really does mind, but she has been on friendly terms with this teacher for a long time, so she lets it go.

In this fictional account a phenomenon that recurs with great regularity in the life of an elementary art teacher was depicted. The art teacher is the recipient of a double message. On the one hand she is valued as a member of the school staff by students and professional peers; yet, she also is told that her subject, art, is not as important as are other subjects. In the example above she and the classroom teacher acted as though they believed this to be true. Even so, her services are valued. Time spent in art provides students with needed release. The teacher is relieved from the duties of maintaining control over a large, slightly unruly class, and hence is free to provide remedial reading to a youngster that had fallen behind.

That art is not regarded as the most valued of school subjects is driven home with repeated regularity in hundreds of thousands of incidents like the one above.

If art is less valued than reading, why does the school try to find time for art? Why is it missed when it is not in the curriculum? What I want to focus upon, then, is the phenomenon of school art, what it is, and what it does.

School art is first of all a form of art that is produced in the school by children under the guidance and influence of a teacher. The teacher usually is not an art teacher but an elementary classroom teacher (NEA, 1963, pp. 24-26). Though student work done with art teachers differs in artistic complexity from that done with classroom teachers, the definition that I'm advancing includes both. School art is not the same thing as child art. Child art is a spontaneous, unsupervised form of graphic expression usually done outside of school by children for their own satisfaction or in response to a need felt in an environment other than the school. Wilson (1974) identified the characteristics of child art. He says:

> This art has seldom been allowed into our highly controlled art classes. It is the spontaneous *play art* of young people .... It has little of the polished lushness of art classroom art, but once one learns to look at tatty little drawings done in ball point on lined paper, a whole world of excitement unfolds. From play art we can learn why young people make art in the first place and why some keep on making it while others stop. (p. 3)

Wilson's paper focuses attention on child art as a phenomenon through the study of a single practicioner in the work of an eleven-year-old boy named J.C. Holz. Historically, teachers like Franz Cizek of Austria thought they were bringing child art into fuller development by their teaching, but actually they created a new style, the

school art style. Wilson describes school art with terms such as game-like, conventional, ritualistic, and ruled-governed. "Conventional themes and materials are fed to children which result in school art with the proper expected look" (Wilson, 1974, pp. 5-6). While Wilson characterizes the school art style, he leaves open the question of why there is need to invent a style that has little or no counterpart either in the personal spontaneous expression of children or in the culture outside of the school. What is so amazing about school art is that it doesn't exist anywhere else except in schools, and it exists in schools around the world. The school art style is international in scope (Asihene, 1974; Glover, 1974; Suleiman, 1974).

The three studies referred to above document the fact that African schooling practices, for example, tend to resemble the curriculum provided by former colonial overlords, in these cases the art curriculum of England. Ghanian children, in one instance, were seen illustrating English nursery rhymes like *Little Bo Peep*. These writers interpret such manifestations as evidence of Western influence upon their respective countries, but the persistent presence of such alien influences in their educational institutions, some fifteen years after independence, calls for another explanation — one that takes into account the fact that the school as an institution has a latent tendency to assert its autonomy and authority. It does so in these cases by retaining the alien influences. Any educational material would have sufficed, provided that it was sufficiently obscure or irrelevant to the population surrounding the school.

Most of us are familiar with the products, themes, and media given play in the school art style. The products range from tempera paintings on newsprint applied with large brushes to string paintings; string printing; dried-pea-mosaics; tissue collages; fish-mobiles; and masks of every size, shape and description. Themes range from topics like "Playing in the School Yard" (Lansing, 1972, p. 446), "Picking Apples" (Viola, 1949, p. 134; Lowenfeld, 1952, pp. 116, 125), and "I am at the Dentist". (Lowenfeld, 1952, p. 94). Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentine's Day are observed with products in the form of cultural symbols.

School art is an institutional art style in its own right. It is not the first such style. There is a church art and a corporate art, and there is a museum art. All of these art styles deal with different subjects and themes, have different social functions, and involve different people. Church art is perhaps best understood in the context of how it enhances the act of worship. Corporate art is best understood in the context of its merchandizing function, while museum art is best understood in the context of curators, connoisseurs, and art lovers and what they do in the presence of the art in the museum collection. School art presumably should be art that is understood in the context of its educative function. Institutions like schools can be and have been treated by anthropologists and sociologists in their own right (Dalke, 1958). These institutions develop internal social structures (Merton, 1968), channels of communication, and the people involved in these cultures behave in certain ways that are mediated by the use of symbolic forms. Hence we can say that these institutions frequently develop symbolic artifacts to facilitate these activities. These artifacts are sometimes called art.

Now I am getting into a problem! The school presumably exists to transmit a cultural heritage including the knowledge, beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior that are prized by

the society that established the school. Part of this heritage is the art of the culture. Why, then, does the school develop a new and different art style that is only marginally related to the heritage? Why does the school, which is the agency providing the transmission, proceed to invent a new and different style of its own? My perplexity is compounded by the fact that the school art style does not seem to be a pedagogical tool for teaching children about art in the world beyond the school, though this is its manifest function, to be sure.

When mathematics is taught in the school, there is some correspondence between what is taught as mathematics and the mathmatical understandings at large in the minds of men and women in the world outside of the school. This is less so with art, where there is little resemblence or relation between what professional artists do and what children are asked to do. To answer the riddle I am going to rely on some anthropological assumptions. First, all art as an artifact originating within particular cultures or subcultures tells us something about those cultures within which they originate. Fischer (1971) cited evidence that there is a correspondence between the social structure of a given society and certain formal attributes of its art styles. The products of the school art style as artifacts of a school culture should be able to tell us something about that culture that may, on first look, not be obvious. Thus, the social structure or religion of a vanished people can sometimes be reconstructed from small fragments of physical remains such as potshards or carved bone. Art forms are made in response to a constellation of situations that arise within a culture, and hence these can be read as evidence about the culture itself. The products of the school art style, no less than the style of ancient Egypt, can be interpreted as evidence to support claims we might wish to make about that culture. If a culture is egalitarian or hierarchical in its social structure, these facts might show up either in some aspect of a product's form, or are explained by the social circumstances for which the particular work was made or by the social conditions under which it was to be perceived — when and by whom. If this is true, then it should follow that the school art style is like any other style in that it expresses the culture within which it originates. Let us turn the statement around and ask it as a question. Can the existence, indeed the apparent need for a school art style, be explained by the structure of social relations or the structure of beliefs that operate within the school? Do the forms that school art takes express these cultural components? If this is so, then art teachers need to face the fact that what is frequently taken to be the content of the art that is made in school isn't about art as it exists beyond the school; it may be more a function of the school life-style itself. This is not to say that school art is bad or mistaken in its objectives. Rather, it is an attempt to explain the facts as many professional art educators have observed and decried them with repeated regularity over the last fifteen years. One is the fact that art education remains a peripheral concern within general education. (Eisner, 1972, p. 1). It is one of the last subjects to be added to the curriculum and the first to go when funds are short. Another perennial fact is the continuing predominance of studio art instruction in both elementary and secondary schools (Barkan, 1962). This exists in spite of the fact that the profession has gone on record supporting critical and historical study (NAEA, 1968).

We have in the past attempted to explain these facts by alluding to anti-aesthetic tendencies in American culture going back to the Puritan fathers, and we have attributed the

reluctance to engage students in critical and historical approaches to study in the arts to an incipient anti-intellectualism among rank and file art teachers. Placing the blame within these sources has the effect of getting the profession off the hook. Blaming it on the culture is like blaming it on providence, leaving the fate of art education in the lap of the gods beyond the ken of human volition. This is a fatalism that says that nothing can be done — a position I am not willing to accept. Blaming it on the anti-intellectual traits of art teachers is a little like blaming the crime on the victim.

The Hidden Curriculum Problem

There exists a literature that is written and spoken by school officials, teachers, and school board members. It is a collective attempt to define the school's purposes — what it attempts to accomplish for the individual and society. The literature attempts to state the ideology or philosophy of the school with statements about the worth of the individual, the democratic process, equality before the law, fair play, respect for law and order, scholarship, free enterprise, individual initiative, and the like. The school's rhetoric of service is usually stated in the form of goals accomplishing these general aims. These statements express the manifest functions of the school, i.e., those which the persons involved in the school recognize and accept as the right ones. Schools have *latent* functions (Merton, 1968) which go unrecognized even by those who carry out these functions. Thus, Illich (1971) described the fact that most people think that a school's manifest function is the cognitive development of the students, but, in his view, its latent function involves socializing the individual into accepting the authority of the school as a prelude for accepting the authority of other institutions. Once he accepts the authority of the school, he is able to accept the authority of the corporation, the military, and the welfare bureaucracy. The school's rhetoric of service seems, sometimes, to obscure these latent functions which go unrecognized. For this reason we can use this rhetoric as a benchmark for purposes of analysis.

In my view the presence of the school art style can be explained as a result of the conflicts that arise between a rhetoric articulating the manifest functions and the latent functions which go unstated. In art education our manifest functions have to do with helping students become more human through art (Feldman, 1970) by having them value art as an important aspect of their lives. The typical art program operates in a school where students are regimented into social roles required by society. If the school's latent functions are repressive in character, what effect does this have on the art program? It's my speculation that the art program's manifest functions are subverted by these pressures. As the repression builds, art comes to be regarded as "time off for good behavior" or as "therapy."

Illich's views were stated with extreme passion and vituperation which sometimes outstripped his facts, but in a critique sympathetic to Illich, Gintis (1973) cited some historical studies that lend corroboration to the Illich thesis. For example, one study traced the organization of the American school and that of the American corporation as both evolved their hierarchial forms of social organization. One conclusion made by Gintis was that the school's structure was patterned after the corporation rather than the society as a whole. In essence then, the social relations of the American school are described as democratic in their service rhetoric though in actuality they more closely approximate the hierarchic organization of the modern corporation.

Because the school is compulsary there are no genuine democratic options, i.e., children do not have the option of not attending school. In that sense it is more obligitory than military conscription where at least one can refuse service on grounds of conscience. In that light, Cass (1974) noted that the teaching profession was the third most authoritarian profession now being practiced, succeeded only by the police and the armed services.

Functions of the School Art Style

1. Making the service rhetoric credible.

One of the functions of the school art style is to provide behaviors and products that have the look of humanistic learning. I don't know if humanism involves the use of a given look, but I would wager that in the popular view art products that would be deemed humanistic would be those having an "unregimented," "irregular," "individual" look. School art activity would have to be designed to produce such products, yet within a predetermined range. A class where everyone draws the same view of the same leaf (see Gombrich, 1960, p. 148, Illustration #106) would not be tolerated as an accepted practice today. Teachers know in advance the look of the products they want and what they don't want. Usually they do not want pictures with a copied look or comic stereotypes. Abstract, free form or scribble designs would be sanctioned within their expectations as monsters would be. As long as the art program seems to be producing products that have a free and creative look, school persons can say that life in school is not just a cognitive matter. Man does not live by bread alone. Thus, while mouthing these homilies and even believing them, the school with characteristic alacrity is free to pursue its hidden curriculum of socialization.

The self-same creative activities may not be as free as they look. Children are after all required to take art. They cannot copy or imitate which is an option that a free individual may wish to exercise; they must use the media provided them, and they must experiment with it in certain ways to produce the look that their teachers will reinforce. Some of the qualities involve filling the space, using clean colors, spontaneous brush strokes, looseness as opposed to tightness, etc. The art that is produced is suggested by the teacher who commissions it and motivates the students to accept the commission. The teacher is also the client-patron for the products produced and is the dispenser of rewards for commissions completed within specifications. In other words the teacher is in charge of the game, and it is not so very different from the other games that are ordinarily played within the school. Art teachers, like all teachers, assert the authority of the institution; and if, in the eyes of the system, they are good teachers they will be able to turn on the creativity and turn it off again in time to clean up and get the children back to math and reading.

2. The Morale Function.

Art is supposed to be easy and fun. Though most art teachers find such talk perjorative, the fact of the matter is that art is one of the areas that is used to vivify school life and break up the deadening routine. Much art production is associated with school holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day. The evaluators for the Arts IMPACT Program in the Columbus public schools, for example, noted that there is a statistically significant increase in pupil attendance on days when the program occurs over days when it is not present (Arts Impact Evaluation Team, Note 2).

The school uses art as therapy, minimizing the psychological cost of institutional repression. This assertion may help explain why it is that when art

teachers try to make their subject more rigorous or intellectually challenging, such efforts meet with resistance. The last thing that many art teachers feel they can do is to make art another academic discipline. This latent social role may well explain why art teachers have difficulty introducing art criticism or history into their programs. The expectations that children, classroom teachers, and administrators have built up through the years disallow any weakening of the therapeutic functions of art.

Formal Requirements of the School Art Style

Because art has acquired some of the latent functions described above, the question that now must be answered is: Why are these hidden functions furthered by the particular school art style that we see? Asked in the reverse way, the question is: Does the presence of these hidden functions of school art help explain its stylistic attributes? I will answer the question by writing a prescription for an art style that would serve these latent functions. (a) The style would need to be one that is relatively free of cognitive strain. It needs a lot of manual activity rather than one that involves the use of the head. The avant-garde styles like conceptual art certainly would not be desirable. (b) The products have to have a range of identifiable differences which the client-patrons of the style can detect. No lookalike art is acceptable here. The products should be ones that can be made in a short time. The range of allowable variations in differences should not tax the decorum of the school. (c) The media should be resilient, easily manipulated and controlled so that they yield a wide range of products with a low order of skill and dexterity. They should be perceptually inviting, i.e., colors bright, interesting textures, etc. The media should be nontoxic and easily cleaned, since clean-up presumably is an essential part of the art learning experience. (d) While some stylistic influences creep in from the comics, from illustrations in children's books, and from the more sophisticated art styles of professional artists, all of these should be kept to an absolute minimum. All forms of such influence are seen as destructive to the child's individual creativity. That artists like Duchamp, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Picasso, and Cézanne have on occasion copied without undue damage to their creativity is not a relevant matter. What the child may have on his mind for his expression may be the Snoopy symbol in Peanuts, but such manifestations need to be discouraged by the teacher who alone knows what the art of children should look like and, what's more, knows how to get it to look like that. These prescriptions are required to bring into being a style which squares with the school's service rhetoric in some important ways. The prohibition against copied forms and outside influences functions to keep the art looking child-like, a look that is accepted by parents and classroom teachers as evidence of the school's humane intentions of helping to advance creativity and individuality. The media that are used cannot help but produce a range of products that cannot possibly be alike. Competence in school art is condoned, but it is usually ascribed to parental pushing and, hence, is possibly regarded as a source of harm (Lowenfeld, 1954).

As it happened, history played right into our hands, because such a style was invented for school use around the turn of the century. It was the style that Cizek invented when he thought he found a method to further child art. He identified all the components: easy materials like colored paper and paints, a range of subjects and themes to remind the children of what they are supposed to do, a prohibition against copying, or even looking at other art. It

struck America between the wars when schools moved for a time into a child-centered orientation. The style became associated with what was to become accepted as a liberal stance in education. Previous school art was regimented and authoritarian in its form and content. The new style, by contrast, was a more vivid and freer expression. Cizek changed the game plan; and, hence, the school art style changed. In some ways, however, it serves the same functions that it always had.

Another important reason why the style was readily adopted was simply the fact that it made few professional demands on the teacher. Teachers did not have to know much art to teach it! They had only to follow Cizek when he said of his method "All I do is take the lid off, when most teachers clamp it on" (McDonald, 1971). The fact that artistic competence seemed not to be a prerequisite enhanced the popularity of the method, because the school could have a liberal, humane, and creative art program without adequately trained teachers. The school could look good while its fundamental commitments are based in a curriculum with a hidden agenda of repression.

Conclusions

Vincent Lanier (1972) made the observation that teaching practices in the school have remained static for the last several decades. The goals change from time to time so that we justify our practices by alluding to the importance of creativity in one year only to be followed by some other rationale in another. Yet the school art style has remained essentially the same for the last forty-five to fifty years. To be sure, some of the flavor of contemporary art finds its way into the classroom, harboring the illusion that the curriculum is changing. Society outside of the school changes, too. Children rarely have the chance to go to grandma's to pick apples, and the snow that they roll into snowmen is polluted with the exhaust fumes of 80 million automobiles. In the face of these perplexities one would expect to see something else happen in the art programs of the school. What I suspect is that the school art style tells us a lot more about schools and less about students and what's on their minds. If this is so, then maybe we have been fooling ourselves all along. We have been trying to change school art when we should have been trying to change the school!

Arthur Efland is professor of Art Education, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

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