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Art Education in Taiwan

Wen-Shu Lai

This summer, I went back to my native country Taiwan and visited a children's art workshop. It is a workshop outside school system, which offers drawing and painting classes to 6-12-year-old children.

The art teachers gave students clear, direct instructions about what to draw and how to draw. The students copied whatever the teacher drew step by step. Students didn't spend much time on decision making and reflection upon their personal experiences.

During the class, I came up to each drawing table to see students' works in progress. I would have said, "What a great drawing this is!" if I had seen only one of their drawings. But, I saw fifteen to twenty at once, and all of them looked very similar.



Figure 1. City - Drawing 1.



Figure 2. City - Drawing 2.

The teacher provided students with solutions even before they asked any questions. The students learned skills from the teacher. But what about idiosyncrasy? Does the drawing have personal meaning to them? Does this kind of studio experience have negative influence on their creativity? I believe copying or modeling is one of many ways to learn art. But, copying or modeling only makes sense when children move from that point to a further step of meaningful art making.

Why don't Taiwan's art teachers recognize the importance of individuality? Why do they view production of art as industrial mass production? Do they do this consciously or unconsciously? Do they realize that they transmit culture, belief, and values of the society through teaching? Are they aware that what they teach students will eventually be internalized and become part of their students' personalities?

Clifford Geertz's question, "How is it that we all start out originals and finish up copies?" (MacGregor, p.192) is very thought-provoking. We know that creativity is the main force to make positive changes in society. On the other hand, conformity is the opposite force to keep society stable and unchanged. In other words, conformity hampers the progress of society.

The visit to this children art workshop in Taiwan is a good starting point for me to examine art education in Taiwan within the social and cultural context. Using the Western perspective to view art education in Taiwan might be a mistake if the researcher doesn't know Taiwan's sociocultural context, which is very different from that of Western societies. As Vygotsky pointed out, "higher mental processes are a result of social interaction, particularly with more experienced members of society.... an individual's learning efforts are embedded in both an interpersonal and institutional context of culture" (Newton and Kantner, p.167). Therefore, the approach to teaching art in Taiwan is related to the ideologies and values held by the people - especially by the Taiwanese government officials and educators

Brent Wilson makes it very clear "that art occurs at the intersect of the ideologies and values held by teachers, children, the art world, the world of education and a number of less visible worlds as well" (MacGregor, p.191). If the approach adopted by art educators in Taiwan disadvantages children's artistic, mental, and moral development, I think it would be necessary to examine Taiwan's educational system and the philosophies held by the government leaders and educators in Taiwan. Also, it would be pointless to look at Taiwan's education without the references of her economic, political, and cultural development throughout history.

When I was a student in Taiwan, from elementary to high school, every classroom had pictures of Sun Yat-Sen (the Father of Nation) and Chiang Kai-Shek (the President). We had to bow to them as well as to our teachers before a class began. We were told to serve and be loyal to our leaders; be obedient to our parents, the principal and teachers in school. We were taught to sacrifice the individual for the good of the whole nation. Conformity to group norms is

encouraged on all levels of learning. More than two decades have passed since then, but education in Taiwan has not improved or changed much. Not long ago, a report from Taiwan's newspaper explained that a junior high student asked his English teacher if he could read any English book other than the textbook during the class time because his English ability was far more advanced than the content of the textbook. (This student was born and grew up in United States and just moved back to Taiwan with his parents.) His English teacher rejected his request and told him that it would be unfair to other students if he were allowed to read other books in English during the class time. Conformity to group norms is more important than individual development. That's what most educators in Taiwan believe.

Why are "conformity", "obedience" and "loyalty" emphasized so much in schools of Taiwan? To answer this question, it is necessary to review the history of Taiwan. From 1895 to 1944, Taiwan was a colony of Japan. For fifty years, most Taiwanese were conditioned to Japanese educational goals, under which children were convinced that the education they received was for the sake of the country. Children were told that they were Japanese living in a part of Japan. In 1949, Kuomintang (the major political party in Taiwan since then), with 2 million refugees, fled the mainland of China for Taiwan. Kuomintang found that the discipline used by the Japanese in schools would help to improve the highly unstable political status and economic impoverishment of Taiwan. Education became a tool used by Kuomintang to control society and people. Family and state ethics were mandatory and indeed were worked into the curriculum and into school life (Wilson, p.16, p.157-8).

Richard W. Wilson in his book "Learning to be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan" (1970) pointed out that the educational system in Taiwan attempts to train children to identify with, and invest loyalty in, the state. Teachers are discouraged from and avoid teaching concepts of creativity, individuality, freedom and rights in school. Through school education, government leaders attempt to stabilize their political status and transmit their ideology. To government leaders of Taiwan, education is a means of social control rather than a means to cultivate independent thinkers.

If people were obedient and not questioning, it would be easier to reach the goal of "state unity." Punishment, group membership, leader and follower relationship, purposeful channeling of hostility, and educational materials are means used to control and train children in Taiwan. In his research, Wilson pointed out: "In the first grade of the city public school, when told to draw pictures of the out-of-doors, 23 of 69 students included the national flag as some part of the picture" (Wilson, p.79,). He also mentioned that "the (national) flag on the cover of the first through fourth grade reading textbooks is put there purposely to draw a connection between children's groups and the flag" (Wilson, p.170).

Wilson's research about the political socialization of children in Taiwan was carried out in 1966-67. The findings of his research are still true and visible in Taiwan's society today. Conformity and loyalty to groups and leaders are still valued by people there. This can explain partially the approach adopted by the art

teachers in the workshop of Taiwan, which I visited this summer. Children felt that they were accepted by their group and found identities with it by following its rules. To them, there is no motivation to be unique or to be special.

If we want to see changes in art education in Taiwan, education reformation needs to take place first. If we want education reformation to happen, the thoughts and attitudes of government leaders towards education have to change first. Any decisions about education policies should be made according to the principles of justice and liberty. Using education as a means of social control violates individual's freedom and rights. Each individual should be free to choose between different values and beliefs. As Mill said in his book "On Liberty", "freedom of thought and opinion should not be curbed by collective authority."

It is very clear that there is no **true** freedom of thought and opinion on Taiwan campuses because of the intervention of collective authority. John Rawls in his book "A Theory of Justice" wrote, "...the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth." Therefore, the reasons such as "unity of state," "economic development" and "social stability" cannot justify the government's intervention in the education in Taiwan.

When we ask "Why teach art in school?", "What to teach and how?", "What do we expect our children to learn?", all these questions point to the questions: "What kind of people do we want our children to become?", "What kind of world do we really want to live in?" and "What kinds of educational programs do we need to address these questions?" (Delacruz and Dunn, p. 52). We have to acknowledge teaching as cultural and social intervention. So teaching is not just teaching. Through teaching, we do transmit culture and define the values in our society.

We should not point out any particular direction and ask students to follow it. Offer them all the possibilities and information we know, and let them make their own decisions. If we educators do too much for our students, we will hamper the cultivation of individuality at the expense of social progress. The less intervention from teacher, school, and government, the greater is the chance that each student will have a sense of his or her own worth and know how to manage his or her life meaningfully.

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