

‘WHAT IS ART?’ FOR CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract – *Art as a concept often operates within a particular culture. Through social interaction with adults, children build up a fund of social knowledge, which influences their own interpretations of art. This paper compares the findings of different studies examining children’s perceptions of art, which took place in different geographical (Los Angeles, New York, Nicosia/Cyprus), ethnic/ cultural (Whites, Latino, African-American, English speakers, Greek speakers), socio-economic and curriculum contexts. Despite the significant disparities observed in the contexts under review, striking similarities are noted in children’s perceptions of art. These results have implications for the way we seek to understand what art is for children. More importantly, though, they highlight that art has a universal meaning for children and as such it can be used as a means for understanding, appreciating and accepting diverse cultures.*

Introduction

There is no easy way to define art and this issue is often hotly debated:

‘Walking through a gallery I stop to view a work of art that has caught my eye. The work consists of a simple box with an interesting formal quality about it. It contains a delicate arm that moves methodically across a rotating paper scroll tracing a meandering path. I look for the plate to identify the artist and I am disappointed to find that it is missing and that the work, therefore, remains the creation of an anonymous artist. As I leave the hall I discover an identical work in the next room, causing me to blush as I realize that the object of my interest is a device for monitoring the humidity and temperature levels in the museum. How was I to know if this exhibit was, or was not, art?’ (Elliot, 1997).

Defining art is a challenging task. Both philosophers and art educators (Weitz, 1970; Goodman, 1977; Dissanayake, 1988; Davies, 1991; Anderson, 1995; Elliot, 1997) have raised arguments about the very nature of art, which are inextricably meshed with ontological, interpretive, and evaluative issues. Decisive answers cannot be expected given the complex and fundamental situation. Defining art is very important for art education—art and art education are inexorably interrelated—because its precise nature will define the content of what should be

taught (May, 1993). This paper does not advocate in favour of any given definition; that is not its purpose. Rather it is concerned with what children as recipients of art lessons in primary schools make of art. While there is much debate among art educators and philosophers of what is art, there is limited research of what children believe art is. Understanding children's perceptions will benefit practising primary teachers in their art teaching. Existing literature (Johnson, 1982, Stokrocki, 1986) suggests that children may have limited perceptions of art and that the role of teachers is to understand these and move pupils forward by introducing activities that aim to expand their horizons.

At the same time, researchers and art educators support the view that the terms used by pupils to define art reflect their teachers' attitudes and subsequently those of the social context that they are located (Johnson, 1982). In a sense it is argued that children develop structures of meanings for interpreting art and art activities based on what is socially acceptable (Hamblen, 1984). Thus, one may hypothesise that children coming from different social contexts may have different perceptions of what is acceptable for art. This paper compares the findings of four studies (Johnson, 1982; Stokrocki, 1986; Jeffers, 1998, and Pavlou, forthcoming) that deal with pupils' perceptions of art. Johnson's (1982) study develops a socially/culturally grounded position on what children know about art. Johnson examines 'the meanings that children used to define the nature of art, and to reflect upon the social knowledge and cultural assumptions that they share about the visual arts' (1982, p.62). Stokrocki's (1986, p.10) thesis for studying young children's artworlds is founded on the belief children's perceptions of art 'are based on their knowledge of art history and aesthetics and conditioned by their parents', teachers' and subcultural influences'. Jeffers (1998) shares Hamblen's views that children's perceptions of art are predisposed and based on 'socially relative learned expectations' (Hamblen 1984, p. 21). Pavlou (forthcoming), too, believes that teachers condition, to a great extent, children's perceptions of art and that by examining these perceptions teachers can reflect on their practice and on the kinds of art meanings that they transmit to their pupils. Bearing in mind the cultural context in which the author has worked (Pavlou, forthcoming) and the cultural contexts of the other studies (Johnson, 1982; Stokrocki, 1986; Jeffers, 1998) it was hypothesised that pupils would provide significantly different definitions of art.

Comparing studies of children's perceptions of art

The studies mentioned in this paper—and specifically those by Johnson (1982), Stokrocki (1986), Jeffers (1998) and Pavlou (forthcoming¹)—deal with children of different ages and/or at developmental stages. Johnson's study (1982)

included children in Grades K-12; Stokrocki's study (1986) included second graders; Jeffers' (1998) study involved fourth graders; and Pavlou's study (forthcoming) included sixth graders. To make meaningful comparisons, children of similar ages are presented together starting with the second graders of Johnson and Stokrocki, moving on to the fourth graders of Johnson and Jeffers, and ending up with the sixth graders of Johnson and Pavlou. Before comparing children's perceptions of art, each study's methodological framework is briefly presented.

Johnson (1982) asked 251 children the question: 'in your opinion, what is art?' or 'what do you think art is?'. The children attended art classes in 17 schools in four districts located in south-eastern New York and of them 21 were second graders. The question was asked during tape-recorded interviews conducted in the art room while classes were taking place. Stokrocki (1986) gave 25 second graders a questionnaire that asked in part: 'what is art?' The children attended an art class of an elementary school of average size in a working class, industrial community of a mid-western city of USA. The second graders in Johnson's and Stokrocki's studies most often defined art in terms of making and doing (activity-based perceptions), e.g., 'chalking and creating' and 'it's like making stuff and learning about art'. Some defined art as object(s), e.g., 'pictures', 'paintings' and 'stuff'. Other children defined art as a place where things were made. One difference between these two studies is that Stokrocki mentions that some children considered art as a hedonistic activity ('I like art', 'art is fun', and 'art is nice').

Jeffers (1998) conducted a study with 22 fourth graders. Children were asked: 'what is art to you?'. The participants attended school in and reflected the ethnic diversity of Los Angeles County. Latino, Asians, African-Americans and Whites were well represented. Most participants were working class and lower-middle to middle class. Also, 23 additional definitions of art were obtained from case studies conducted by pre- and in-service teachers. These teacher-researchers interviewed children, usually in their home settings and asked them to define art. Johnson (1982) included 31 fourth graders in her study. Fourth graders overwhelmingly defined art in terms of doing and making, e.g. 'paint, painting and drawing' and 'making designs and shapes'. Most children referred to paintings and drawings. Some children in Johnson's study used the word 'stuff'. Few children described art in terms of time and place while children in both studies referred to art as 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. Also, there were some children in Johnson's study who did not offer any definitions of art.

In Pavlou's (forthcoming) study 24 sixth graders were asked the question: 'in your opinion, what is art?', or: 'can you tell me, what do you think art is?'. The children attended art classes in six schools at the Nicosia district, Cyprus. The question was asked during tape-recorded interviews conducted in a quiet room while the rest of the class was having their art lesson. Interviews were conducted

in groups of four after pupils completed an attitude scale for art experienced in school. All children were of Greek-Cypriot origin coming from lower-middle to middle socio-economic background. All sixth graders in Pavlou's study defined art in terms of doing, making or expressing, as did sixth graders in Johnson's study (Johnson included 27 sixth graders in her study), e.g., 'draw things on paper', 'make things by using your imagination', 'show your emotions', 'express your ideas' and 'express your feelings'. Sixth graders in both studies refer to different art forms such as painting, collage, sculptures and pottery. When referring to the content of art, they referred to 'things', 'stuff', 'pictures', 'ideas' and 'feelings'. Several children noted that art was 'nice', 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. Very few children in both studies referred to art as something that happened in a particular time and place, e.g., 'it's a subject we do in school'. In addition, few children in Pavlou's study referred to art as something that could prove to be useful as a hobby or profession when they would have grown up. Few others talked about the kind of thinking art required, which was more pleasurable than the kind of thinking needed for other subjects: 'you have to think in art, but it's not the kind of thinking that you do in Maths', 'you do not think so hard, like you do in mathematics, e.g., in equations, or in Greek when you write a text', 'you don't have to tire yourself thinking'.

Explaining the differences in content and context

Overall there are few differences in the types of meanings that children used in these studies to describe what art was for them. Therefore the hypothesis that children living in different cultural contexts would provide different definitions of art (when asked 'what is art?') was not supported. This is made explicit next by presenting all the differences and giving possible explanations that account for them.

One difference involves the use of the word 'stuff', which appeared quite frequently in all but one studies (in Jeffers' study there is only one reference), e.g., 'art is doing or making stuff'. Johnson notes a declination in the frequency of the use of 'stuff' as children get older (Kindergarten to grade 10). Jeffers asserts (1999, p.42) that the absence of 'stuff' in her study tended to indicate that the use of 'stuff' 'could be considered as an idiosyncratic, rather than a developmental issue' as suggested by Johnson. Jeffers' argument is supported by Pavlou's study where children used quite frequently the Greek word of '*pragmata*', which can be translated as either 'stuff' or 'things'.

Another difference is the perception of art as something that happens in a specific time and place. According to Johnson as children get older they seem to refer less frequently to art in terms of 'when' or 'where'. Stokrocki and Pavlou also

reported that there were children who defined art in those terms. Again this does not appear to be a developmental issue but rather an issue connected with children's art experiences and the conditions under which these have taken place. In particular in Stokrocki's research, second graders had their art lessons in an art room and in Pavlou's study children who referred to art in terms of specific time and place had art lessons with an art teacher in an art room. Fourth graders in Jeffers' research did not receive art lessons in an art room from an art specialist and thus they were not to be expected to conceive art as happening in a special place and time.

One more difference is that few second and fourth graders who participated in Johnson' study did not provide any definition of art. In fact, Johnson reported that a few participants at each grade level responded that they did not know. Jeffers also mentions that even though a couple of children initially responded that they did not know, after some thought they were able to offer a definition when asked 'What is art to you?'. Jeffers posited that this could not have been an indicator of lack any knowledge of what art was but rather that participants did not know how to formulate his/her definition, or did not know what was expected of him/her. There are some data in Pavlou's study that support Jeffers' position; that participants wanted to reply according to what they perceived it was expected of them to say. For example, after a sixth grader responded to the question 'in your opinion, what is art?', she quickly added: 'is that what you wanted us to say?'. This indicated that she wanted a confirmation of what was expected of her to say. In addition, a couple of teachers in Pavlou's study also replied 'I don't know', when they were asked to define art. Certainly this was the case of people who were unsure of what was expected of them to say rather than people who lacked any knowledge of what art was. After giving them more time to think, they did provide definitions of art. In fact, in few cases the researcher found herself reassuring participants that there was no right or wrong answer to help them relax and provide their definitions of art. In both Jeffers and Pavlou's studies participants were interviewed on a number of relative issues whereas Johnson asked a single question, which might have made it hard for participants to offer alternative answers.

Few children in Pavlou's study referred to art as being something useful for them either as a hobby or a profession. This type of meaning was not reported in any other study. One explanation of this is that before the interview, children were asked to complete an attitude scale (Pavlou, 2003). The scale aimed to examine children's attitudes towards art experienced in school and included four key dimensions (sub-scales). One of them dealt with how 'useful/important' children considered art to be and reasons for that. Children who made references to the usefulness of art were in line with the statements in the scale.

Finally, a more important difference is the perception of art as an intellectual activity. Few children in Pavlou's study referred to the kind of thinking art entailed, which was characterised as being different from the one needed for subjects such as Maths and Language and more enjoyable. This type of meaning highlighted the fact that children conceived art as an intellectually demanding activity, an activity that did not deal only with feelings but also with thinking. There is not a readily explanation of why few children in Pavlou's study had this particular perception of art while children in the other studies did not. This is the most recent study and perhaps it reflects a more current wide spread assumption of art as an intellectual activity. However, it is worth pointing out that children were interviewed in groups of four and this group dynamic helped children to elaborate their ideas further because they were able to respond to what their classmates were saying by either agreeing or disagreeing or elaborating further. This perception was mentioned by one member of the group and the rest of them agreed and added a few comments of their own.

It is apparent that most differences in children's perceptions of art can be attributed in the methodological contexts under which the studies were undertaken. Some children were asked to give written definitions whereas others were interviewed. Written definitions tended to be shorter than the oral ones. In some cases children were interviewed by teacher-researchers in the comfort of their homes whereas in others they were interviewed in schools by the researcher. Definitions given by case study participants in Jeffers' study were more expansive, inclusive and richer, than those given by Johnson's participants. Moreover, some children were interviewed individually and others in groups of fours, something that made them feel more relaxed with the researcher as they were in the company of their classmates and thus they gave more colourful definitions of art than those mentioned by Johnson.

Common perceptions of art

Children's perceptions of art as a creative activity (e.g., 'draw', 'paint'), which is intrinsically rewarding (e.g., 'fun', 'enjoyable', 'interesting') was strongly evident in all the studies mentioned in this paper. Older children (fourth and mainly sixth graders) also referred to the expressive role of art (e.g., 'expression of feelings/ideas'). These perceptions emphasise that (a) the process is equally important as the end-product, and (b) art is intrinsically motivating—an argument that is lately often forgotten in art educators' effort to argue in favour of art's role in the school curriculum. Although one has to acknowledge that art education is not only about children's own making and ability to create, but it also involves

critical studies, awareness of the making of others, and culture (Discipline Based Art Education), children in all studies refer mostly to art-making when asked to define art. One may argue that this is due to the limited vocabulary and knowledge that young children have. However, older children (fourth and sixth graders) are not expected to lack the vocabulary to express themselves about art and can improve in reasoning tasks, which involve judging if a definition of art is adequate by employing criteria of logic and relevant examples (Russell, 1988). Another explanation is that children were not engaged frequently enough in other activities—apart art-making—such as art history, art criticism and aesthetics (Greer, 1987) to consider these activities as part of what constituted ‘art’ for them. Children’s emphasis on art making (within the school context) may also suggest that children rarely had opportunities to view art in other places, such as galleries and museums (this was certainly the case for the sixth graders in Pavlou’s study).

While it seems reasonable to find differences in children’s perceptions of art, which can be attributable to differences in the research procedures and methods of each study, it was surprising to find so many similarities. In particular, participants received art instructions in different cultural and educational contexts (e.g., art curriculum, the existence of an art room or not, teacher’s qualifications, etc.). One reason for examining children’s perceptions of art is to help teachers better understand them and plan activities that aim to expand them further. But these similarities tend to support the view that a teacher (or a curriculum) has little impact on pupils’ definitions of art. Is this really the case?

Hamblen (1986, p.21) supports the thesis that ‘artistic perception is a function of learned expectations’, which are socially specific learned. All the studies were carried out in an attempt to understand children’s perceptions of art and at the same time the influences of the socialisation process. Therefore, we need to interpret children’s definitions of art in light of these expectations. That is, Jeffers (1999, p.43) argues that the question ‘what is art?’ should not be considered as ‘an open-ended question about an abstract mental concept; rather, it is laced with expectations and can be perceived as a test question having an acceptable answer’. Evidence of this was apparent when participants wanted a reassurance of their answer, e.g., in Jeffers’ and Pavlou’s study. In particular a teacher who participated in Pavlou’s study found it utterly ridiculous that the researcher (a teacher with post graduates studies in art education) was asking him, ‘what is art?’. In amazement and failing to grasp what lay behind the question, he replied: ‘you are an expert, don’t you know? Why would you want to hear to what I have to say?’ This response suggests that the teacher probably saw the question as inauthentic. Perhaps if he was asked ‘what is art about?’ or ‘how do you feel when dealing with art?’, he would have provided a more genuine response. So, one explanation of the similarities found in these four studies is that participants tried to formulate free-

risk responses according to what they believed it was expected of them to say. That is, when children were being asked to define art, the real question was what others had taught them art was. If this was the case a rephrasing of the question might have been necessary, or even a series of questions would have been more helpful in understanding better children's perceptions of art.

Still this explanation does not fully explain the significant thematic similarities in children's definitions of art living in different times and places. If pupils responded to the question according to what their teachers or others have already taught them, does this suggest that they have been taught the same things? Based on the importance of socialisation and wide spread assumptions/ideas about art, one could answer 'yes', that is primary school teachers appeared to have conditioned art to have a similar meaning to the children included in the studies under investigation in this paper (although it is highly questionable that teachers in different parts of the world were using very similar approaches to the teaching of the art subject). Another possible explanation is that in defining art children did not try to distinguish it from non-art, but they tried to highlight its value for them and how they were 'using' art. And this value and 'use' of art had to do with being able to create paintings, drawings, things, etc, and thus express themselves (the latest was emphasised mainly by sixth graders and older children). These 'activities' were not influenced by their gender, age or cultural background.

Children's responses to the question 'what is art?' illustrate vividly—and not just theoretically—that art is a common language to all children around the world because art appears to have the same meaning for children coming from different ethnic, cultural, social backgrounds. These common perceptions of art can serve as a starting point for teachers operating in diverse cultural contexts to introduce artefacts from different cultures. And when talking about 'introducing' art, I am not simply referring to accepting information about cultures but using these perceptions of art as a means to promote mutual understanding between cultures and people who might otherwise feel there are few things that they can share. However, often things are more complex. It is often the case that when art education is concerned with the formal (e.g., colour, shape, texture, space) rather with the cultural aspects of art (e.g., traditional artefacts), it becomes easier for the common perceptions to emerge. Building on these common perceptions, however, provides the best possible basis for promoting understanding, appreciation and thus acceptance of different cultures and people². The theoretical framework is there: the need to learn 'in art', 'about art' and 'through art' is constantly emphasised by different art curricula around the world. Not all three roles of art education are reflected in pupils' understandings of art, and the expressive rationale (learning 'in art') for

teaching art seems to be stronger than the reconstructive (learning ‘through art’) or scientific rationale (learning ‘about art’) (Siegismund, 1998). This implies that in order to expand children’s perceptions of art, teachers will have to incorporate cultural experiences in their lessons and not just offer activities that represent the productive nature of art.

Conclusion and directions for future research

This paper raises issues on, at least, two levels. At the first level, it aims to interpret the implications of the similarities identified among studies that asked children to respond to the question ‘what is art?’. At the second level, it acknowledges the limitations of the question asked and suggests ways to overcome them. So, the paper emphasises that based on research findings, it may be proposed that children from different parts of the world share similar perceptions of art, which can help teachers plan activities that would aim to introduce various cultures to them. As teachers we need to understand these perceptions and our role in shaping/expanding them. And this brings us to the second point of the paper, that, it may be necessary to change the form of the question and replace it with more genuinely evocative questions. Questions referring to the way pupils use art, what is art about, the way they value art and the way they feel when making art or responding to art are crucial for revealing clearly pupils’ perceptions of art. Changes in the form of the question(s) may empower a deeper understanding of pupils’ perceptions of the nature of art.

Further research is needed to examine how one can build on children’s perceptions of art in order to help them understand, appreciate and accept different cultures. Moreover, any attempts to compare children’s perceptions of art from different parts of the world need to be based—at least—on having the same questions asked and—at best—the same methodology used, too. At the moment the only common question asked is the question under investigation in this paper. Discussions around specific artworks would be valuable in understanding further children’s perceptions of art, but these should not be confused with aesthetic attitudes (for example, kinds of art that children prefer most, e.g., realistic vs. abstract art). Jeffers (1998) showed reproductions of artworks to children to choose their least and most appealing artwork and Pavlou (2003) asked children to bring their own artworks and talk about them. However, these findings were not useful for comparison purposes. An agreed set of reproductions of artworks—among researchers/art educators—will promote a better understanding of children’s perceptions of art in any future research.

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Notes

1. In Pavlou (forthcoming) I refer to pupils' perceptions of art as these were revealed through their response to a specific question (in your opinion, what is art?) but also through their overall responses to an entire interview and an attitude scale designed to measure children's attitude towards art. For comparison purposes, in this paper I refer only to pupils' responses to the specific question, 'in your opinion, what is art?'
2. A very simple example of this can be the teaching of the visual concept of pattern. For example, one may introduce this concept through direct observation of the natural or man-made environment of the children and then move on to the observation of traditional patterns first within children's own culture and then within the culture of other (e.g., traditional artefacts, folk clothes, decorations of mosques or churches). These pieces of information can be the beginning of an understanding of other cultures.

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