

When interests meet rationality – Some Glimpses of another Reality of Arts Education

Michael Wimmer/Vienna

At the beginning of the 20th century Eugenie Schwarzwald, a Jewish bourgeois woman from Cernowitz - a multicultural city on the eastern margins of the late Austria-Hungarian Monarchy - established in Vienna a number of private schools, in which the arts played a prominent role. Particularly young women with middle-class background got the chance to learn together with Arnold Schönberg or Alfred Kokoschka to become acquainted with what modern art was about at that time and by that to develop their own artistic creativity.

For many school bureaucrats at that time this new way of schooling was seen as an affront, disturbing the maintenance of the traditional system. Nevertheless a number of school reformers of the “Red Vienna” movement heading the education board celebrated the Schwarzwald schools as the most important innovation for school development.

Thanks to “Langeweile ist Gift” (“Boredom is Poisonous”), the recently published comprehensive biography of Eugenie Schwarzwald by Deborah Holmes (University of Kent), it becomes evident also for a broader public that efforts to make the arts a core issue of everyday schooling are nothing new. The experiences of these schools give enough proof that the arts can have a positive impact on school development (and by that on unfolding the full personal potentials of the learner). Between Eugenie Schwarzwald and us there are more than hundred years. Consequently the question comes up why this knowledge did not lead to a fundamental rethinking of the importance of the arts at school.

Arts Education in Times of “Cultural Vandalism”

Let us change the focus to learn what is going on today: the winner of the Turner Price for Contemporary Art in 2012, Elizabeth Price, acknowledged in her acceptance speech the importance of arts education she received in a comprehensive school in Luton and compared it with the current situation: “It's incredibly depressing when you hear people say that a girl from Luton who goes to a comprehensive school, might no longer imagine to become an artist and did not get the same opportunities as I had”. And Jude Law in his price announcement even spoke of “cultural vandalism”, flagellating the current English government for marginalizing the arts in school.

I do not know if education minister Michael Gove has read Holmes's book. But when he extinguishes the arts, theatre and music in the General Certificates of Secondary School (GCSEs) , commenting that only “hands-on” subjects like mathematics, sciences and languages have to be seen as relevant when it comes to the evaluation of the necessary qualification for the future labour markets, he obviously is willing to neglect the discourse on the importance of the arts in all kinds of learning processes since Schwarzwald's times.

Accordingly the complaint volte-face of current English education policy is seen as a severe backlash at least among all of those who made England an exemplary

country in conceptualizing a new generation of arts education programs which had a major impact on school development throughout recent years. To implement the respective programs in a sustainable way they were accompanied by countless reviews, assessments and evaluations. The intention was to produce a kind of knowledge which goes beyond the individual beliefs, wishes, hopes and expectations of the individual activists and enables a more objective and rational justification for why, and in which way, under which circumstance, the arts play an important role in education processes.

And now we have to more or less painfully observe that for Gove and his friends all these arguments do not matter and are seen as irrelevant for their policy making. It would be easy for the arts education community just to argue that the new politicians in power would be silly and/or ignorant and not able to understand the consequences of the rational arguments. Maybe the opposite is true and they understand quite well but come to different conclusions when interests thwart rationality.

About the Political Use of Arts Education

There is another uncomfortable instance which relativizes the belief in commonly understood rational arguments. It lies in the fact that most of the dictatorial regimes of the 20th century, fascism or communism, particularly emphasized the provision of comprehensive arts education programs. In many of the countries concerned, a close-meshed network of public music schools, often also theatre, film or dance education institutions, guaranteed the provision of a full range of arts education programs not only for the talented few but for the broad majority of the population. There is a lot of programmatic evidence that it was obviously in the interest of the political leadership to make use of the arts mainly to stimulate political consent.

Even when we may say that this kind of ideological overload was the main reason for arts education provision during this period it is even more astonishing that most of the substantial infrastructure with its privileged institutions broke down after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Obviously the implementation of democratic standards did not ensure – quasi automatically – the maintenance or even improvement of this kind of infrastructure as a kind of trans-political attainment. In many cases the opposite happened when the turmoil of transition led to the redistribution of public resources (not only for this specific public task) together with the emergence of naïve hopes that the market would compensate demand.

What can we learn from these observations? One conjecture follows the evidence that there is no simple correlation between democratic achievements and the provision of arts education to everyone belonging to the democratic community. Instead we have to accept that arts education is considerably defined by the political culture in which it takes place. Following the conclusions of "The WOW Factor" the differences do not just lie in the status of economic development but at least equally importantly in the political interests that are dominant.

Yes, it is true that the global arts education community has spent a lot of effort to develop a common rationale which would enable a better standing of arts education in the national societies. At the same time we have to admit that even in highly advanced democratic societies, based on legitimacy, reasonable acting and

transparency, politicians come to decisions which are against all good arguments bought forward by the arts education community.

Main Driving Forces from the Beginning: Capitalism and Middle Class

Again a few glimpses into the past might be helpful to better understand, why this can happen.¹ In a contribution of M.A. Stankiewicz on “Capitalizing Art Education”² I found the statement: “British, European, and North American modes of art education developed with the rise of capitalism and emergence of a middle class”. He argues that it was the rise of a dominant middle class – since then the main supporters and beneficiaries of arts education provision – keen to not only take part in the production of financial but also of symbolic capital (Bourdieu) in an appropriate (national) setting they could culturally identify with.

From an Austrian point of view this claim went together with the establishment of quite an extraordinary cultural infrastructure - such as the Vienna State Opera, the Golden Hall of the Vienna Musikverein, the Burgtheater or the Federal Museum of Art History - which up to now dominates the image of Austria. The architecture of these institutions represents glory and power. And the participation of the “upper Viennese society” in their programs was not just because of a passion for the arts but because they represented a claim of societal and political dominance. According to these institutions, arts education was not only about “learning in the arts” or “learning through the arts” but about learning to belong to the leaders of the state or not. By the way: this function as a selection mechanism to organise inclusion and exclusion by means of the arts found its equivalent in the differentiation of the school system with schools for the “elites” and for “the rest”.

Of course this selection regime between a minority of “cultivated” and a majority of “uncultivated” members of the national societies became weaker in the course of the 20th century but – and this is my point – it is still in the minds not only of political decision makers but also of the arts educators. And of course – most importantly – it is also an essential part of the self-image of youngsters coming from proletarian or migrant family backgrounds, whose lifestyles are not represented in the existing cultural infrastructure.

As a consequence, quantity and quality of arts education provision is still grounded in the existence of a middle class regarded as representing the existing societal values at their best. And the story of arts education in the last hundred years is also a story of the social significance of the middle-class (my assumption is that the biggest proportion of art educators are still representatives of the middle class aiming at making “them” like “us”).

In this context I found it alarming when the leading expert on elites (at least from a German perspective), Michael Hartmann, recently produced evidence that among the economic elites the significance of the arts in conversations is considerably decreasing while sports and wellness gain importance.

¹ see in detail: Wimmer, Michael (2010): Reflecting on the Domain of Arts Education, Vienna

² Stankiewicz, M.A. (2007): Capitalizing art education: Mapping international histories; in Bresler, Liora: International Handbook of research in arts education, Dordrecht, P 7

But the danger does not only come from above. To weaken the traditional hegemony of the cultivated middle-class there had been – again as a realisation of political interests – efforts to better take into account the large majority of the so far excluded. “Arts for All” is just one expression of the search for new and more appropriate ways to make the arts relevant in learning processes for those who did not get it with the mother’s milk. As far as I could observe, programs like “Creative Partnerships” in England exactly followed this intention when enabling learners specifically from underprivileged backgrounds to deal with the arts – not to become part of the middle-class concert and theatre audience but to make use of the arts for their personal and professional development.

Which brings me to the second perspective of Stankiewicz, in which he identifies capitalism as a driving force for arts education provision from the very beginning. Looking closer, we can observe considerable contradictions which are evident modern capitalist development. In the field of arts education, the first euphoria of the utilization of arts education of the 19th century found its antithesis in a romantic, idealistically driven and child-centred counter-movement (mainly within the emerging frame of “progressive education”) as a means of self-expression. As such, arts education became an expression of anti-capitalistic, more anti-modern critique of industrial societies by proponents who feared all kind of threats to individual freedom caused by the implementation of a technological rationality. When respective proponents tried to formulate a comprehensive alternative to the capitalistic dominance they became – often too late – aware that their ideas were instrumentalized by fascist ideologies integrating this kind of idealistic arts education into the propaganda measures.

In 1989 at the latest these approaches were considered vanished. Market orientation became dominant in all societal fields and also in arts education. “Globalization” or “neoliberalism” were seen as synonymous with the need to adapt effective arts education programs to utilitarian philosophies. Accordingly new buzz-words appeared, increasingly replacing “the arts” (suspicious to represent an old system of elitism) with “creativity” or “innovation” (which everyone is full of by definition). In order to stimulate growth and employment everyone should be empowered to become an inventor and a creator, even more so when increasing numbers of workers, hitherto engaged in repetitive working processes, were replaced by machines and stimulating people’s creative potential was seen as the only remaining productive exit strategy. Some theoreticians even went a step further, trying to instrumentalize arts education not only for the “creation of creators” but also for the education of consumers when – at least in their concepts – arts education would nowadays mainly take place in shopping malls.

The Possible End of Generation Contract – What Does this Mean for Arts Education Provision?

The big political promise was about making everyone a member of the middle-class. Therefore everyone had to accept without alternative the economic dominance which will lead to universal prosperity in a pluralistic, classless society in which everyone is free to fully realise his or her potential. In socially balanced circumstances everyone will have the same chances in finding access to the traditional cultural infrastructure (which is not the case) and everyone will have the same chances to make a good living by using his or her creative potentials (which is also not the case).

But in recent years this promise has been losing credibility. There is increasing evidence that we are not going to land in an equal society, but that the divide between rich and poor is instead growing dramatically and that access to cultural institutions could not become more equal when the level of education still massively influences the participation in cultural activities.

The biggest disappointment of course lies in the increasing number of unemployed people, including those who had a good education, maybe full of arts education provision. Astonishing rates of unemployment of young people - in some EU-countries between 30 and 60 per cent - make clear that arts education is not an appropriate solution to the current crisis in the labour markets. Moreover, we are confronted with the termination of the contract between the generations which simply stated that the more education available (with and without the arts) the better the chances to find a job.

We can observe a deep commotion of the middle class, which feels increasingly unsettled in terms of economic wealth and accordingly of influence and power, when even its reproduction is not any more guaranteed. As only a minor result, its representatives fail to maintain the traditional cultural infrastructure.

My assumption is that the fundamental changes in everyday life of many people will lead (or here and there already have led) to an equally fundamental need to rethink the arts education system. As far as I can see, their main actors have up to now avoided the political implications, although those implications have been and still are constitutive for their professional thinking and acting.

There is no Single but Different, Often Conflicting Rationales for Arts Education

If we would take them into account, we would better understand that the decisions of Michael Gove are by no means irrational if we can accept that he represents particular political interests (which in a democratic competition do not represent "all") and that the idea of the single rationale for arts education provision is a myth.

Instead of that, my contribution wishes to create awareness for the assumption that from the very beginning there had been a variety of often contradictory rationales for the introduction of the arts in education processes. In the name of manifold interest groups, there were appeals to traditions, to the contribution of the arts to the development of intellectual capacities, to practical skills and competences, or to the arts as a means of fostering ideals and promoting morality. Exactly this diversity of arguments seems to be up to now symptomatic of a deep-rooted ambivalence toward the educational significance and value of the arts.

All these different rationales are honorable. But they can only be fully understood when the particular, often conflictual political interests behind these rationales become clear. Arts education per se means nothing without adding who provides arts education, and for whom, and in which political and social circumstances. It is provided. In this context it seems quite a challenging statement when Anne Bamford in "The WOW Factor" argues that arts education = without specifying what, for whom,

in which way, with which results - does not produce per se positive effects (even when her arguments followed a slightly different direction).

Let me end with a question. Recently I found quite an irritating quotation which went like this: "Men want to rule the world, women want to make it more beautiful". This goes together with the fact that the large majority of arts educators is female. Now I would like to know if this is by accident or by nature - or is it because of the ongoing disproportion of economic, social and by that political status of men and women, as seen particularly in arts education?

At least Eugenie Schwarzwald a hundred years ago would have had a clear answer.