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Marie-Pierre Chopin, Jérémy Sinigaglia

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Art education: a bulwark against the post-democratic trends of modern states?

Critical approach

Marie-Pierre Chopin, Université de Bordeaux, CeDS

Jérémy Sinigaglia, Université de Strasbourg, SAGE

Introduction

The reflection for this communication started from a fairly simple fact: the appearance for ten years, in France, of a new objective for art education at school the development of "the critical mind" of pupils or students, future citizens. This critical mind would have become a necessity of so-called post-democratic societies (Crouch, 2004). Art could constitute a bulwark against a set of excesses or threats that the children will encounter in their life (proliferation of fake news, various forms of politico-media manipulation, etc.).

The terms "critical mind" explicitly appear in 2015 in the reference text on the "path to art education", in which the function of art is « to develop the faculty of judging and critical mind », « to express an aesthetic emotion and a critical judgment », « to exercise a critical look at his practice » and « to learn critical thinking skills ».

Extracts from the decree of 1 July 2015 on art and cultural education path (Official journal on 7 July 2015) (National Education, France)

« to develop the faculty of judging and critical mind »

« to express an aesthetic emotion and a critical judgment »

« to exercise a critical look at his practice »

« to learn critical thinking skills »

This critical aim of art education is consistent with the recent evolution of educative policies in France. The teachers' reference text on professional skills requires them to "help students to develop their critical mind skills". Likewise, the text about the "Common Knowledge and Skills Base" sets the primary objective to open the knowledge and the "judgment and critical thinking/mind" of pupils.

Extracts from the reference text on professional skills of teachers (Official journal on 7 July 2013) (decree on 1 July 2013 ; BO on 25 July 2013)

« to help students to develop their critical mind skills, to distinguish knowledge from opinions or beliefs, to be able to argue and respect thinking of others »

Extracts from the "Common Knowledge and Skills Base" of teachers (Official journal on 2 April 2015) (decree n°2015-372 on 31 March 2015)

« The common base [...] open the knowledge, form the judgment and critical mind, based on a rational knowledge of the world »

We propose today to take a critical look at this recent development of critical mind in the field of art education. Our work is based on two types of data survey: an analysis of archives, including the early 70s to the present day, focusing on art education; and an ethnographic research on an art education project.

First, we will show the historical context of the emergence of this "new" finality for art education. Then, we will question the effects of this critical finality, starting from an artistic and cultural education project we analyzed.

1 – About the critical dimension of art education: an history of cultural policies in France

As we said, the notion of critical mind appears recently. But Nonetheless, the critical dimension of art education (that is, the idea that art allows to develop "agency" and ability of people to think critically), is quite old. That's we propose to show going back to the history of art education policies.

It's possible to identify three phases in the evolution of these policies: the first, in the late 60s and the 70s, is marked by the "contained" influence of popular education movements; the second, in the 80' and early 90', is rather a phase of professionalization and relative depoliticization of art education; the third, begins in the late 90s and may appear as a phase of re-politicization, but far from the collective and activist dimensions of the 60s-70s.

1960'-1970': a politization under control, the neutralization of popular education movements

Since the end of the 19th century, popular education movements have considered art and culture as a means of promoting collective emancipation. The terms "critical thinking" or "critical mind" were not used, but the idea is close: the goal of these activists was to provide citizens with "cultural" tools to think critically about the world. This is how many groups of intellectuals and artists developed political and cultural projects, outside the bureaucratic field, such as the popular universities (in connection with the intellectual field) or the *Théâtre du peuple* (in connection with the artistic field). This political function of art and culture is still found in all popular education movements, from the 1930s to the 1960s, in France.

One of the first steps in the institutionalization of modern art education policies is the famous Amiens congress of 1968. A somewhat "romanticized" story tells that this symposium is at the origin of the miraculous meeting of militants of popular education movements, national education actors, and politicians, gathered around a common observation and a shared desire to step outside the classical framework of education.

It's a bit true, but it does not exactly reflect the historical reality.

In fact, this conference is mainly organized by an association of scientists and especially politicians, gathered around the idea that science can enlighten governments. Popular education is much mobilized to "legitimize" the discourses produced, but the popular education activists themselves are largely absent from the organizers and participants of the conference. Or, in any case, they are "invisible". This is entirely consistent with what happens in the following years, a certain "depoliticization", or at least a form of "politicization under control", of art education, which is no longer the strongly militant discourse of popular education.

Nevertheless, in this period, art education is addressed to pupils and students who can be "educated", as citizens, through art and culture.

In the early 70s, the first projects set up in schools, jointly by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, were designed to form a critical attitude toward the mass media,

especially television, present in almost every home. This quotation from a report of the congress of Amiens shows this well: a kind of oscillation between the question of the individual and society:

"To speak of cultural training is to place as a primary goal the formation of a being: knowing how to inquire, reason, communicate; responsible, free and de-alienated but at the same time communitarian; balanced, knowing to discover his art of living by an adjustment constantly recreated to the changing environment".

1980'-1990': an assumed professionalization and depolitization of art education

In the 1980s, Socialist Party came to power, and the Ministry of culture made reforms to speed up the professionalization of the artistic field, including in the field of art education. This is the result of a certain bureaucratization of the field of production of cultural policies: the first generation is more "militant" (with the belief that science and culture can help to move towards a better world); this one is more technocratic (with the main concern of making the state works well, even if ambitions have to be revised downwards).

During this period, "cultural mediation" grew, and professionals gradually replaced activists of cultural action. These two groups do not have the same story, their members do not have the same professional trajectories, and therefore they do not see their "mission" in the same way.

This has two consequences for art education:

- On one hand a certain depolitization of the aim of art education, even stronger than before: now, art education aims to transmit knowledge about art. The individual and collective emancipation, is pushed in the background and word "critical" only appears to talk about the criticism of artworks;
- On the other hand (and this goes together): there is a redefinition of the "publics" of art education: they are always pupils (from primary school to high school), but now they are more specific groups (the poor, the inhabitants of popular districts,...). It is the same in the other fields from the 1980s, with the increasing of targeted policies.

End of 1990 '- 2000': a paradoxical repolitization

Gradually, since the end of the 1990s and especially in the 2000, the term "critical mind" appears in the official texts. For Minister of culture Catherine Trautmann (member of the Socialist Party), art and culture "perform an indispensable function of critical questioning of our time" (1999 speech). Fifteen years later, the Minister of National Education Najat Vallau Belkacem (also member of the Socialist Party) says that art and cultural education allows "the development of the faculty of judging and critical thinking" (2015 speech).

NB : this periodization is probably a bit broad, and she could be refined by showing how the focus is more and more on the individual, all along the 2000' (with the affirmation of the notion of skills (from the reforms of education policies in 2005, under a right wing government. with the ideas of "foundation of competence", "common knowledge base", "personal skills booklet", etc.)

In a certain way, we can say that it is a kind of "repolitization" of art education. And in any case, it is an assignment of a social and political function, after about two decades rather focused on properly artistic issues. But this politization is very different from the approach promoted by activists of popular education. It is not a question of giving individuals critical tools to work for collective emancipation; the "new" goal remains at the individual level.

In this context of post-democracy (with fake news and all forms of media manipulation), the objective is to give the citizens "individual skills" to decrypt the media messages ... but at no time, the subject is the collective emancipation. This matches perfectly with the neoliberal turn of public action in France, and with the development of new public management, which is a very individualistic approach of the state action, focused on competition and elitism. It is also very consistent with the development of cognitive psychology and neuroscience approaches in the field of education, which promotes a very individual approach to transmission, including in the fields of art and culture. These transformations are also prevalent in educational policies, with the rise of the notion of "skills", which is used to "evaluate" the work of students, individually.

2 – How teachers and pupils deal with these recommendations: the case of an art education project in France

This historical approach will now be linked with outcomes of an ethnographic research conducted in 6 classes of primary school in France (about 130 pupils) in 2018 and 2019¹. We analyzed an art education project (a dance project) called (in french) « Esprit de corps_critique ». This name links two ideas: on one hand the fact that the body can be the place for a mind development (threw the dance practice); and on the other hand, the fact that this mind should be critical. The project is thus based on the idea that threw the body (and the dance movement), pupils could develop their critical mind.

« Esprit de corps_critique » project (EDCC)

EDCC project was designed by a team of the National Center of Choreographic Development (NCCD), an important label for cultural organization in France. The NCCD is an intermediary between cultural policies and people engaged in art education projects (teachers, pupils, artists). Lauranne, the project leader, also top manager of the NCCD, explains how the EDCC project occurs:

Lauranne : The project starts during the french presidential election on 2017 (...) Are artists able to influence the development of the critical mind of citizens? This question was important because today each citizen get used to lies and fake news... information is given in a sort of dangerous instantaneity. It started in this situation. All the professionals of cultural organizations are proud to say that they are able to influence the development of the critical mind... But, is this real?

During 5 weeks, pupils and their teacher work with:

- **An artist (choreograph and/or dancer of a company).** 8 hours are allowed to dance workshop, based on the show of the company. Each class see this show during the project;
- **A journalist, dance critic.** 6 hours are allowed to a writing workshop in order to teach the basics of the analysis of a dance piece. At the end of the project, each class prepares a collective critic of the show they have seen. Students discover the practice of dance criticism.



¹ En 2019, les observations ont été réalisées avec une jeune chercheuse étudiante en master : Loïcía Collot.

At the end of the project (dance workshops, writing workshops, and discovery of the show), the project managers organize a debate with the pupils of all classes. During this "Débat d'idées" (Debate of ideas), pupils have to talk about the show and more generally about dance, sharing their point of view in an argumentative way.

Two outcomes about the critical aim of the project EDCC

The corpus of the research is based on 90 hours of observations, 8 interviews, and a set of quantitative data not used for this presentation²):

Table 1 – Corpus of the ethnographic research on the project EDCC

Observations (90h)	48h of art practice workshop 36h of writing workshop 6h of show on stage
Interviews (8)	2 designers of the project 6 teachers
Other datas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-tests and post-tests with the pupils • Grilles d'évaluation des niveaux scolaires et des effets subjectifs du projet • Survey questionnaire on families • Survey questionnaire on teachers

Outcome 1: What pupils can learn in this kind of project

For the designers of the EDCC project, critical mind is a generic skill, allowing pupil to understand his relationship to the world. In fact, this project allowed pupils to live a particular experience and it is difficult to say if this could develop generic skills, dispositions to think in a critical way. In fact, an a priori didactical analysis (Brousseau, 1998), show that the production of a discourse about a show is, finally, linked to a competence of critical apprehension of an artwork (here a dance show). We've to note that this competence is precisely the aim claimed in art education policies in the 1980s (the 2nd period identified above). In the case of dance, the body experience coupled with the discourse of journalists (not the one of teachers, this is an important point) could allow the achievement of this specific objective. The statistic survey, always in progress, should show if all pupils, regardless of school level, socio-cultural position or out-of-school cultural practices, take advantage from the project in the same way.

To summarize this first outcome, in the EDCC project, the aim potentially achieved is the development of a critical approach to artwork. However, threw the idea of "critical mind", it was more directly a critical approach to the world which was aimed by the designers.

² Ce volet de la recherche, réalisé avec Loïcia Collot, repose sur la passation : 1. de pré-tests et post-tests auprès des élèves pour construire des indicateurs possibles de l'esprit critique et produire des comparaisons de mesures ; 2. des questionnaires aux familles pour caractériser les positions socio-culturelles des élèves, les pratiques d'éducation familiales et leur pratiques culturelles ; 3. Des grilles d'évaluation et des questionnaires aux enseignants pour caractériser les positions scolaires des élèves et les pratiques éducatives des professeurs.

If, of course, a critical approach to artwork could generate a critical approach to the world, in the long run, this distinction between what was officially aimed and what was probably achieved, is important. It invites us, not to think that teachers, artists or journalists committed in the project failed in their mission, but rather to question the relevance of such broadly objectives for art education, at least on two aspects: first, is it possible to develop this kind of disposition in such short times?; and more generally, we could imagine that the assignation of this kind of objective could have some counterproductive effects. The second outcome seems to confirm this hypothesis.

Outcome 2: Art pushed in the background?

The second outcome is based on the "a posteriori" didactic analysis of the project. It concerns the effects of the fact of bringing the development of critical mind to the fore.

Although the teachers immediately became fully committed to the project at the start of the year, with great enthusiasm for this critical dimension, the observations show that they were more prudent as it progresses, including into the debate organized at the end of the project. In 2018, 4 classes were committed in the project (we observed only two): but only one class accepted to participate to the debate. All the teachers were skeptical about the interest of it:

Isabelle (teacher, primary school): We had to organize a debate, a discussion between all the pupils. And, all the teachers, we all have the same point of view. Me, I sent a mail to my colleagues, only to them, not to the NCCD (she laughs), and like me, they didn't know what to do ! The leaders of the project want to have a restitution of what we did, but I don't think that putting all the classes together is a good idea. Because it was the same project, but with different people. I don't know what we can really share... And the kids, they'll get upset, agitated...

One way to understand Isabelle's words is to say that the announced official objective (to develop the critical mind) has occupied such a place in the project that teachers feel as a pressure the obligation to account for the supposed effects of the project: to be able to debate about artwork and more than this. The interviews with the teachers show their disarray (and that of their students), faintly, to see this cognitive and linguistic aim supplant artistic aim: knowing and practicing dance.

Elsa (teacher, primary school) : To be honest, when I talked to the pupils about this restitution, they looked at me with great big eyes, like this! [We laugh]. I explained that there were four classes, for a debate about the critical mind. I felt they were confused...

Everything happens as if the aim assigned by the art education policies (to develop the critical mind of the pupils), led Elsa (but more widely all the teachers of the panel) to focalize so much on this dimension that art were pushed in the background. "Critical mind" became, in this project, a kind of new object of teaching.

Conclusion

To conclude, this communication showed that the critical dimension of art education has been reconfigured through the fifty last years. For 10 years, the idea that our society became post democratic served as a justification for a new relationship between art, education and critical exercise. But, by imposing the very specific notion of critical mind (reinforcing the idea of an individual cognitive ability), it could paradoxically contribute to making art a secondary subject of artistic education.