

Stories of Becoming an Art Educator: Opening a Closed Door

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes recollections of my personal experiences in Israel and their interplay with my decisions as an art educator. These stories are examples of how the borders between the professional, the personal, and the institutional are blurred. Becoming and being an art educator in a country which is deeply affected by a long-standing, deep-rooted, stubborn, and violent conflict, I struggle to find ways to teach art in a meaningful way and to react to the culture of conflict through critical art pedagogy.

Becoming an Art Educator

The question of what is involved in the process of becoming a good art teacher guides many of those who teach and research preparation programs for art teachers. Some of the curricular deliberations are concerned with the necessary knowledge and skills art teachers should demonstrate in art making, visual culture, art history, art criticism, art teaching methods, pedagogical skills, child development in art, art education theories, and research methods (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002; Burton, 2004; Day, 1997; Eisner, 1994; Erickson, 2004; Freedman, 2003). Other curricular decisions stem from developing teachers' identities and voices (Giroux, 1988; Greene, 1995; May, 1997). The process of developing teachers' identities engages with discourses and the knowledge we utilize to make sense of who we are, who we are not, and who we want to become (Britzman, 1992).

The term "teacher's identity" as it is used by post-structuralist theorists suggests that the "self" is constructed rather than grounded (Spivak, 1987). It implies a holistic outgrowth, often elusive, of a set of embedded processes and practices that concern the whole person. It is shaped in and across social and cultural contexts by various interdependencies among person, context, history, and teaching (Britzman, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Olsen, 2008).

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As part of my research dissertation I collected tales of Israeli art teachers and studied the ways they negotiated their teaching identities within and against their schools' normative discourses. I learned that being and becoming an art teacher involved an ongoing process of negotiation between personal and professional experiences, knowledge and beliefs, and the school's discourse. Their beliefs and identities couldn't be separated from the socio-cultural environments and the discourses in which and through which they were constantly (re)constructed (Cohen Evron, 2004). Our identities as teachers are neither fixed nor are they an inventory of knowledge or technical procedures of teaching experience. We continually reconstruct our views of ourselves in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching. Furthermore, we bring to our teaching profession our personal and institutional biographies (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Sivertsen, 1994). Our biographies in part account "for the persistency of particular worldviews, orientations, dispositions, and cultural myths that dominate our thinking, and in unintended ways, select the practices that are available in educational life" (Britzman, 1991, p. 3). Therefore, personalities, interests, weaknesses and personal life experience are important components of our becoming and being teachers. They influence what we do as teachers, how we interpret what happens in our classes, and how we continue to shape our teaching (Anderson & Holts-Reynolds, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

This study is concerned with my own teaching identity and is based on self-narrative research. As such, it includes stories which do not necessarily accumulate into a whole biography; rather, it is a collection of short descriptions and accounts. They are significant because they are one way of defining the self (Josselson & Lieblich, 2001). Like any stories of past events, they are explicitly reconstructed by me as the person who experienced them. They make sense of life experience by connecting the personal occurrences with meta-narratives of community and history (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Neisser, 1994). They describe some of my own stories of being and becoming an art educator in Israel. I reassembled stories of my personal experiences

in this place and their interplay with my decisions as an art educator. Examining processes whereby self-narratives are produced, poststructuralist discourse extends the possibility for empirical researchers to focus on the condition of social practices and cultural patterns (Sondergaard, 2002). Drawing from this discourse, the study enlarges the range of the socio-cultural environment of becoming an art educator beyond the school's discourse. While contextualizing my personal experiences of living and working in Israel, I do not intend to offer generalizations about other art teachers' ways of becoming in this country. In the coming sections I will provide stories which describe recollections of my personal experiences in Israel and their interplay with my decisions as an art educator.

Contextual Voices: Facing a Culture of Conflict

When I gave birth to my tiny premature twin baby boys, the first person who greeted me was the cleaning lady in the operating theater. She congratulated me: "Mazal Tov, two soldiers are born!" I heard her blessing with horror. At the moment of their birth, their future roles as part of the Israeli military had already been declared². She affirmed the institutional and social expectations that involved the readiness to kill or sacrifice their lives on behalf of the country, and my readiness as their mother to educate them to this end. Like Adrienne Rich (1976), I resist the idea that by becoming a mother of boys I have to accept the army's assignment of raising my sons to become combatants in a militaristic society.

The story of this random blessing provides a glimpse into the culture of conflict within and against which I live and teach in Israel. The culture of conflict constructs national identity and pride, builds collective memories of past traumas and celebrates Israeli heroism (Bar-Tal, 2007). It influenced not only my maternal experiences but also the challenges of being an educator in this country. In deep-rooted, stubborn, violent, and ongoing conflict which exists in places such as Israel, the conflict becomes an inescapable part of daily life for the

2 At the age of 18 Israeli-Jewish men are conscripted for three years and Israeli-Jewish women for two.

members of the communities, and it constructs and influences their experiences and their social world (Ehrlich, 2013; Salomon 2002). Such a conflict is characterized by existential fears, and an "us and them" mentality. It is accompanied by negative collective images about the other³ who is perceived as a carrier of hostile intentions, unaddressed historical grievances and traumas, economic asymmetries, and the frustration of collective human needs such as identity, security, recognition, dignity, participation and justice (Raviv, Oppenheimer, & Bar-Tal, 1999; Salomon 2002; Spyrou, 2002).

As part of the culture of conflict, systematic efforts are undertaken within the public education system, both in terms of curriculum development and pedagogical practices, to prepare Jews⁴ from kindergarten through high school to fulfill their military duties. Building collective memories of past Jewish traumas and celebrating the Israeli heroism inherent in Jewish myths and holy days are presented as neutral knowledge (Gor, 2005). Such educational practice creates nationalist subjects and eliminates any discussion of shameful acts of the past, such as atrocities and violations of human rights (Salomon 2002; Spyrou, 2002). Many efforts and resources are dedicated to increasing the number of combat soldiers graduating from high school. The preparation of combat soldiers became one of the most important goals of Israeli educational policy as one learns, for example, from the announcement of Gideon Saar, the Education Minister, to the press on December 1, 2009:

Our nation was helpless for many generations and therefore condemned to persecutions and annihilation. Today, as well, there is no existence to Israel and its citizens without the army's force of defense. But the army service is also a virtue. It expresses the values of giving

3 The other in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict includes the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular: those in the occupied territories and the 20% Palestinians who live in Israel and are Israeli citizens.

4 The Israeli school system segregates Jewish students who are taught in Hebrew from Palestinian students who are taught in Arabic, from kindergarten through high-school. Orthodox Jews have a separate education system, which does not encourage the students to join the army.

and contribution to all and is a melting-pot of the Israeli society. ... The mission we set for ourselves is to return the Israeli society to itself and that is why I have set the encouragement of army recruitment as one of our goals, and like in any other matter we formulated a practical working plan in conjunction with the IDF to achieve this goal. I see a great importance in the cooperation with the army.

www.kav-lahinuch.co.il/Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/sken.doc

Promoting educational programs which have “emotional” goals such as adopting different attitudes toward the culture of conflict, cultivating mutual understanding and social solidarity (Simon, 2001), unlearning stereotypes, or raising questions concerning militaristic norms all involve taking risks. In times of national conflict, universal sympathies, or studying a conflict by learning the narratives of both adversaries are condemned and regarded as dangerous (Noddings, 2007).

Opening the Closed Door

My beliefs and knowledge as an art educator were partially constructed within and by the art communities to which I was exposed during the 1970s as a student at art school (Cohen Evron, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). They were influenced by art teachers who were leading artists in Israel and provided up-to-date knowledge about the local and international art world. My entrance at the age of 20 into an art school seemed a foregone conclusion. As the daughter of a well known Israeli painter,⁵ it seemed as though I was following in her footsteps. It accords with cultural myths and expectations that artistic talents and orientations run in the family. But I didn't experience a continuum. Although I was born in a house with paints, brushes, and canvases, they belonged to my mother's studio, a forbidden territory

5 My mother, Ruth Schloss (1922- 2013), was born in Germany and escaped to Israel during the Nazi regime. Her paintings depict those who were voiceless and marginalized in Israel such as internees in camps of new Jewish immigrants from Arab countries during the 1950s, Palestinian refugees, children and women (Tamir, 2006).

for me as her child. In this “room of her own”⁶ that provided the separation she needed from the family's interruptions, she painted every day, all day, in the manner of a blue-collar worker. Therefore, entering art school was for me more of an experience of crossing boundaries and opening a closed door to a world into which I could previously only glimpse.

Once I entered the forbidden territory and became part of the Israeli art community, I was mostly exposed to the discourse of art for art's sake of the post-minimal and conceptual art of the late 1970s. I became immersed in a very different art world, with different values from those of my mother, and guided by US American art magazines such as *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *October*. The art school's habitués provided me with a critical gaze at my mother's German Expressionist style of political-realistic paintings. At the same time, I was aware of alternative art paradigms than those which became my artistic language. This awareness enhanced my critical point of view regarding the new world that became the central component of my own identity. I was grateful to learn the language of art, to think through art, to be encouraged to dare, to be creative and to give voice to myself. It became my desire to introduce others to the wonders and pleasures of this art world. Nevertheless, I resented the narrow view inherent in art for art's sake and looked for something more meaningful. I found it in art education.

Critical Art Pedagogy

After graduating from college I attended an art workshop that proved to be a major influence on my teaching. It was comprised of artists from various disciplines including architects, sculptors, jewelry designers, and painters whose teaching methods combined art, politics, and education (Cohen Evron, 1987). The workshop was located in a small town of low-income Jews who had immigrated to Israel from northern Africa, Yemen, and Iran. Students from elementary and

6 *A Room of One's Own* is an extended essay by Virginia Woolf (1929). The essay is considered a feminist text arguing for the time and space women, like men, need to produce creative works.

middle school attended this art workshop during their school day, accompanied by their classroom teachers, for an hour and a half every week. Our curriculum was constructed around project-based learning related to real-life issues, and we used the arts to deconstruct local and global social issues. Using art materials, we gave the students opportunities to represent real-life issues in a controlled way, and to create alternative situations to those they had actually experienced. In several of the projects we used reconstructed reality as a stage for role-playing. For example, we reconstructed a robbery that had occurred in a nearby grocery.⁷ With the artists' help, the students rebuilt the local grocery to scale and installed sculptures of the people involved in the episode, including the grocery salesman, the robber, the policemen, and other clients. While dealing with questions of representation of the scenery in three dimensions, the students interpreted this violent event and gained control of it. Their identification with the life-scale figures they designed was interrupted when they were asked to perform the event, acting out the roles of figures in the grocery other than those they had actually constructed. Their role-play of robbing the reconstructed grocery was interrupted again when, at critical moments, they had to freeze the drama for photographs taken by their peers. These photos became part of an article that described their version of the event in a newspaper they produced themselves. The activity was rounded off with the distribution of this newspaper to the local community. Through representation and construction of the real in an unreal situation, the students could examine and reexamine their reality, gaining different perspectives of it. It provided the students with opportunity for studying their own world and developed a critical view of the mechanisms that construct it (Aronowitz, & Giroux, 1991).

Through this teaching experience I learned that while trying to pursue a contra-hegemonic agenda there are ways we can use the process of

creating art as an effective means for analyzing our reality in a critical way, without falling into an authoritarian pedagogy (Duncum, 2008). Expanding our teaching beyond visual vocabulary and self-expression, we related to the social functions of art that allow us to question widely-accepted concepts, ideas, and theories. This way of implementing critical art pedagogy involved the students in real-life issues rejecting the instrumental⁸ and supposedly objective knowledge that supports myths accepted by the hegemonic culture (Cary, 1998). It was this teaching experience that helped me understand Paulo Freire's argument about the process of education:

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring conformity to it *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (1970, p. 16)

Theorizing these critical art teaching experiences became central to my pedagogy and writing. I started to collect stories, examples, and theories of art education that provide us with opportunities to re-conceptualize our identities and to reconsider our own positions. Through creating and investigating art and visual imagery, these art teachers followed Paulo Freire's (1971) rejection of teaching as transmission of knowledge (Cohen Evron, 1987; 2005b; 2009).

Facing the Culture of Conflict as an Art Educator

Becoming an art teacher at a middle school, and a teaching supervisor at an art teachers' preparation program, I could not ignore the political mechanism of the educational system of which I was part. Being political became a significant component of my identity as an

7 Other examples of teaching are: we dealt with consumerism by reconstructing car production, social and environmental issues by designing neighborhood models, and the democratic process by creating an election campaign for prom queen and king.

8 Instrumental knowledge is an approach to teaching that positions knowledge as dispensed without disruption of the information or questioning and active engagement of the learners. It is measured by the students' ability to reproduce received forms of knowledge (Britzman, 1991).

art educator, not only because any content included or excluded in the curriculum is a political choice (Apple, 1993; Giroux, 1981; Shor, 1992), but because of the culture of conflict that characterizes Israel and its educational system, as described above. Although displaying nationalistic symbols and images that contribute to the construction of Israeli students' national identity and collective memory (Nora, 2002) is part of art teachers' routine work in schools, the majority of the art teachers I encountered were not aware of their role in the culture of conflict. Most of them also ignored the influences of the violent conflict on their students' experiences and social world (Raviv, Oppenheimer, & Bar-Tal, 1999).

As part of being a political art educator I started to collect stories and practices of those art teachers who tried to address the challenges this conflict situation provoked (Cohen Evron, 2005a; 2007; 2008). Their teaching wasn't limited to teaching about art, to accumulating knowledge and ways of expression, but learning from it in the light of tacit understandings students derive from life experience and the mass media (Britzman, 1998). Their strategies differ in terms of their goals and in the risk inherent in their effort to engender moral commitment to cultivating mutual understanding and social solidarity between the parties to the conflict (Simon, 1992).

I was particularly interested in art teachers who aimed at creating situations that questioned what is otherwise taken for granted. Their pedagogy dealt with political art and imagery without detaching it from the violent conflict, and aimed at unsettling the students' simplistic dichotomy of "us" as good versus "them" as evil (Cohen Evron, 2005a, 2008). Their practice can be identified as pro-social and social activist (Duncum, 2009). Using visual inquiry, these art teachers were seeking to unlearn some of the biases and stereotypes and uncover the socialization process that disseminates the official nationalistic narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Raviv, Oppenheimer & Bar-Tal, 1999). Relating to visual images as fragments that depict life, these art educators emphasized the ways the imagery – displayed in schools as well as in the media and other sites of public pedagogy

– influences and constructs our identities and understanding (Giroux, 2006). They utilized the visual images as a departure point for questions raised by Roland Barthes (1957) such as: What and who is represented and what is ignored? Whose view is represented and whose is ignored? What are we looking at? How do we look at this image? What can we understand from it?

Deconstructing visual images of Israeli heroes, soldiers and role models involves reexamining the images of the students' fathers, brothers, and neighbors. Therefore this process engaged more than visual inquiry and understanding "the ambiguities, conflicts, nuances and ephemeral qualities of social experience, much of which is now configured through imagery and designed objects" (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 821). In examining these images, the students are not engaged with the pleasures of transgressing rationality (Duncum 2009), but rather are challenged by the difficult task of questioning their worldviews and the myths that construct their understanding of their reality.

Taking Risks

Facing the culture of conflict not only by participating at demonstrations against racism and unjust occupation, but as an art educator, involves taking risks. Some of the risks of situating oneself outside of the accepted norms of society can result in the loss of one's teaching position at school and even in the university.⁹

Other risks are pedagogical: art teachers who apply critical pedagogy take risks by teaching "unpopular" subjects that call into question

9 Recent events reported in the news include a civics high school teacher who faced dismissal after questioning whether the IDF [Israeli Defense Force] is the most moral army in world. Published by Ahiya Raved 01.20.14/Israel News, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4478917,00.html>. During the 2014 war with Gaza, an Israeli university rebuked a professor who expressed sympathy for both Israeli and Gazan victims. "The matter will be handled with appropriate seriousness," says 'shocked' Bar-Ilan University dean after students, parents complain." Published by Or Kashti Jul. 29, 2014. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel/.premium-1.607888>

that which is taken for granted (Britzman, 1991). Violence and political art are not unpopular as such. It is the way they are presented – as problems connected to students’ life experiences – that arouse undesired and uncontrolled reactions. For example, as part of critical analysis of war photographs, one of my art student teachers showed her high school pupils a photograph of a premature baby¹⁰. At first the students reacted with empathy to the screaming baby. But when she told them that this was a Palestinian baby who died soon after this photo was taken because she was detained so long at an Israeli barricade, the students shouted “she should die, all the Arabs should die.” The inexperienced art teacher almost burst into tears. After the lesson, she reflected on how she should have reacted. As a critical pedagogue she did not want to use her authority and repress the students’ voices. Yet, remaining silent made her appear complicit with the horrible views expressed in her class. As an experienced art teacher I couldn’t provide her with an immediate solution, and felt just as helpless. As critical art educators we give up measuring immediate outcomes and settle for a more ambiguous educational process, which we cannot – nor should we try to – predict (Rogoff, 2008). Talking about and reexamining student experiences complicates the normative pedagogical situation because students are confronted with “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998). Students and teachers often resist difficult knowledge because it presents them with moral conflicts within their own reality and unsettles the worldview with which they were raised. Therefore, art teachers who raise universal sympathies or question in any other way the militaristic norms or the culture of conflict are taking the risk of having to face pedagogical difficulties (Cohen Evron, 2005a).

Conclusions

Raising awareness that those who have the power also have the privilege to decide who are and are not the heroes and legitimate victims of violent acts is considered a dangerous and undesirable educational task. Thus taking risks becomes another junction where the boundar-

ies of being and becoming an art educator blurred with my motherhood. My sons decided to resist the blessing they got at their birth. They sent a public letter declaring their conscientious objection to serving in the army in protest against the military occupation of the Palestinian Territories, and paid the price by being imprisoned and delegitimized by the majority of Israeli society.

Becoming and being an art educator in Israel intensified my urge to teach and research teachers’ positions that resisted and questioned the official hegemonic agenda. In my teaching and research I do not intend to highlight easy or naive solutions. But, without ignoring the risks involved, I believe in the importance of providing examples of teaching that use the power of art to question norms and conventions. Performing this kind of pedagogy entails blurring the borders between the personal, the political, and the professional, a blurring that was described by Maxine Greene in the following terms:

Neither the colleges nor the schools can legislate democracy. But something can be done to empower teachers to reflect upon their own life situations, to speak out in their own ways about the lacks that must be repaired; the possibilities to be acted upon in the name of what they deem decent, human, and just.

(1978, p. 71)

While my experiences in Israel shaped my conceptualization of art and art education, I believe that teaching art in a meaningful way without detaching it from our students’ life experiences and circumstances is relevant to art educators whose life experience differs from mine.

¹⁰ Taken by the Israeli photographer Miki Kratsman, 2002.

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