

Karen A.M. Thompson MA Community Arts

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Outline of Work and Title:

Critical Account of one relevant theoretical perspective and its potential for research being undertaken: Marxism; Childrens Voice in the Community with specific reference to participation in and organisation of Community Arts projects and the benefits thereof.

1,500 word essay

Assignment Two: Critical Account of One Theoretical Perspective and its Application in Research Being Undertaken.

“In one of his earliest treatments of ideology in *The German Ideology*, (originally published in 1845/6), Marx wrote as follows:

“The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the dominant material force in society, is at the same time it’s dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of material production, in general, subject to it....the individuals composing the ruling class....rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age. Consequently their ideas are the ruling ideas of the age.” (1963:p.93)

This passage clearly suggests that the predominant ideas common to a capitalist society, including it’s popular culture are those of the ruling class.”

*Marxism: An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture; Dominic Strinati*

Althusser, a French Philosopher (1918 - 1990), was a structuralist who wrote about Marxist theory in the 1960’s and 1970’s when interest in Marxism from an intellectual perspective was widespread. Althusser wrote about the influence of the school upon children. He wrote that education system and the school:

“takes children from every class at Infants’ school age, and then for years the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’, squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them.... A certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology....it is by an apprenticeship in a variety of ‘know-how’ wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the relations of production in the capitalist social formation [society], i.e. the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely produced. (ibid.; p. 148)’

*Marxism: An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture; Dominic Strinati*

There are huge benefits associated with giving children a voice in their community and involving them directly in decision making; giving young people of all ages credit for their ideas and creations has found to have had significant impact upon the community as a whole. This was demonstrated in Sharon Rafferty's work 'Giving Children a Voice – What Next? A Study From One Primary School', where children were given the opportunity to have a say in how their playground area was improved. Rafferty's work was strongly influenced by Roger Hart, PhD, Co-Director, Children's Environments Research Group (USA); who has worked extensively on developing protocols for children and young people's participation in projects.

Rafferty said in her report that

“Adult listening is not a strong point where children are concerned. Flekkøy, Norway's first children's Ombudsman, claims, as does Hart, that children are the most photographed and least listened to members of society.”,

and also

“It is interesting to note the effects that giving children a voice had on the different groups of adults. The difference in reaction depended on how the adults' own agenda matched or clashed with that of the children. In this case, these ranged from the very supportive (parents and community) to obstructive (local authority).”

These opinions are reflected by the writings of Althusser, (see above quote) who said that children are inducted in schools from an early age, through an 'apprenticeship' and had, “A certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology...” drummed into them, thus confirming the Marxist theory that the ideas of the ruling class, being the dominant economic force, also become the dominant intellectual and cultural force which shapes society. In the Case Study by Rafferty, the local authority became 'obstructive' when the children's involvement became an embarrassment as they wanted to sell a piece of land, which the children had taken on and developed as a nature reserve, to a property developer. This confirms the theory that the ruling class (in this case the local authority who have influence over education and the buildings and land utilised) also determine intellectual ideas by attempting to influence the children. In the case study, the children won.

We are also still perhaps battling with the notion that children, especially young ones, are unable to make sensible decisions; the common current perception exacerbated by the UK media that they are anti-social as teenagers and cause community problems, and also the view that children's art (including musical composition, performances, dance and drama) is of little value because it is part of their learning and has been done in school.

“Titman reported that 'whilst much of the research *concerned* children, relatively little material could be found which actually *involved* children. Perhaps this could be viewed as an indicator of the value, or lack of it, given to children.”

*Sharon Rafferty, Giving Children a Voice; The Elton Report, Discipline in Schools: Titman*

Added to this is the problem of schools being encouraged by Government Strategy and Policy to ensure that 'Core Business' and the curriculum is addressed above all else, despite considerable research by a number of institutions and organisations reinforcing the facts that children learn more and achieve higher results if they are encouraged to have their own voice

and think in an artistic and creative way, thus making them more capable and effective members of the community in which they live.

Mog Ball, in a report to the Joseph Rowntree foundation, writes:

“Rather than considering how schools can contribute to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas alongside their core business, the team considered that it might be more appropriate to ask: "What is it about schools' core business that enhances the opportunities of all children in all communities they serve?" and to act on that.

There is a need for central government to think through the role that it envisages for schools vis-à-vis families and communities and to consider how links with broader social policy are to be managed in the light of that role.”

*Mog Ball's (1998) report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, School Inclusion*

On a local level much has been published in terms of children's voice and the benefits of parents participating with children in community art projects, but those same studies show it is still difficult to get support, funding and participation. The increasing number of initiatives and projects which involve them, show that children and young people actively enjoy being involved in decision-making processes at school and in their community. The development of positive outcomes and enhancing the public standing of Community Arts Projects which are created and produced by young people and those who assist them is a vital part of reinforcing these ideals and being pro-active in providing a voice for young people, especially where The Arts and Culture is concerned. Youth Culture is just as valid in society as any other, and has a big influence on fashion, music, film and media.

Dominic Strinati writes, in his introduction to *Theories of Popular Culture*, that

“...democracy means that not only is everyone entitled to full political citizenship, but potentially everyone's cultural preferences are as valuable and as worthy of being respected and fulfilled as those of traditional elites. Furthermore, education, as part of this process of democratisation, means that the capacity to be able to engage more fully in cultural activities – the abilities to read, write, discriminate, demand, know, understand – become more available, formally at least, to more and more people.”

He goes on to discuss the differences between elite culture and art, and popular folk culture, and mass culture. The theory of mass culture and mass society, he states is usually based on a division between past and present. He proposes that,

“The division is normally taken to refer to a process of social change which is conceived of as a transition from a 'better' or preferable past to a degenerating and uninviting present and future.”

It would seem from recent media reports that the general public are afraid of 'youth'; they are reluctant to approach young people, fearing that they may be mugged or assaulted by large gangs of teenagers. This myth has been affirmed by the mass media, thus making it very difficult for groups such as Youthtastic in Workington, who want to provide facilities and resources for young people, and to give them a proper voice within the social and political community, to get a 'fair hearing'. This is perhaps why the proposals for a Youth centre in the Cumbria ballroom was turned down by Allerdale Borough Council, due to petition presented by local residents of the area stating that the Youth Centre would lead to an increase in crime, drug taking and anti-social behaviour in the area, and that Youth Centres should be located nearer to the main housing areas and estates . The idea from

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Strinati that social change which is ‘conceived to be ... a degenerating and uninviting present and future’ is demonstrated through the irony that over 40 years ago, in 1964, proposals were presented to Workington Town Council for a Youth Centre in the town; the proposal was turned down on the grounds that the town was an unsuitable place for youth to congregate, and that the centres should be located in the housing areas to serve the youth in the immediate local community.

In a letter to Joseph Bloch in 1890, Frederick Engels wrote that, “According to the materialistic conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life.....history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a variety of particular conditions of life.....For that which each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no-one wanted.”

Engels has summed up here the very reasons why Community Arts Projects and giving young people ‘A Voice’ through this medium is, at times, fraught with problems. There are huge compromises to be made at all levels; and indeed sometimes what is achieved is, ‘something that no-one wanted’. Politics and the immediate agenda, including pleasing the electorate, has great influence over community projects.

In his description of how we make our own history, Engels also states that there are specific conditions under which we make that history. He states that, “Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, though not a decisive one.”

According to John Holden, Central Government in the UK still have issues to address at local levels, and need to provide additional funding to support the Arts and Culture so that it is not, “treated as marginal rather than being seen as central to the lives of citizens and to the achievement of local authority aims.....Building bridges between the local and the global – connecting our young people to the worldwide creative economy for example- is a key task for local authorities, and one where culture has a vital role to play.”

*John Holden, Head of Culture, DEMOS*

These theories and ideologies have potential for application in terms of researching the value of a voice for young people, and using Community Arts projects as a medium for this. The value of Arts Projects for young people themselves has been demonstrated and well documented in research, as has the benefits of involving young people in their community in a more inclusive and less tokenistic manner. (*Magic Moments; Room 13*) Research and Pilot Studies need to be carried out into what young people actually think *themselves*, and what *their proposals* are for addressing the current problems as seen from *their* perspective.

Once this is completed, the next concern to address will be how to get young people’s message across to local authorities and those who fund projects (currently largely instigated and managed by adults), in a way which has impact and gravitas.

Karen Thompson  
January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007

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