

The Educational Significance of Art – a Report from Experimental Research

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to present a strategy of the educational use of art in primary school grades 1–3. The strategy is being implemented in the form of a pedagogical innovation in a school in the Silesian province. It is based on joint perception of a work of visual art and musical material as well as artistic and kinaesthetic creative activity evoked by this perception. The text includes a presentation of individualising pilot experimental studies of a selected case.

Keywords: art, strategy of education, primary school

Introduction

Establishing contact with art is an ever-open-ended activity, for we are incapable of ever attaining complete knowledge about it. ”There are always new things to discover. Great works of art seem to look different every time one stands before them” (Gombrich, E.H., 1978, p. 33). These are cases of the **influence of art**¹, the first field used in education and considered in terms of reception. It is then that the perceiving subject creates a relation between art and its own needs. These are

¹ The meaning of art in the life of a human being is a subject I discuss extensively in: Katarzyna Krasoń, Ludwika Konieczna-Nowak (2016).

mainly, but not exclusively, aesthetic needs, for the subject's analysis of art is based on a hermeneutic reading of the message coded in signs.

If we do want to point to the importance of art as it is perceived and utilised in personality-building by pupils, it might be beneficial to reach for the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who writes that an encounter with a work of art is "being struck with the truth" present in the work. Within this experience, a revelation of its own kind takes place. This revelation carries a principal message of actualisation. Gadamer claims that a work of art tells us "you need to change your life" (as cited in: Pawliszyn A., 2008–2009, p. 127). Thus, the reflection that takes place in the face of a work of art is beneficial for self-understanding and conscious decision-making, including change-related decisions.

As a work of art is an event constantly taking place in the perceiver's eyes (cf., Bal M., 1999), it is a virtually unlimited base for its experiences. While these experiences are read subjectively, they are intersubjectively marked by means of their multiplication. A work of art does not "tell its story" itself (Gombrich as cited in: D'Alleva A., 2005, p. 108). To reveal its meaning it needs to lend itself to reception, which means it requires an audience to invest it with meaning. For this reason, a work of art is always a space for intersubjective interpretation, an interpretation that negotiates with the artist, with convention, and with the recipient's horizon (it is a subject I discussed in greater detail in: Krasoń K., 2016).

Reception of art is transferred along channels other than perception and it requires more than mere knowledge, for in a situation of reception experiencing emotions and being moved are states appearing simultaneously. Irena Wojnar stresses that "organising individual, synthetic and dynamic, aesthetic experiences might become a basis for enriching a human being's integral personality. Such enrichment leads to an enhancement of their creative abilities, which are in turn expressed in the attitude towards making their life better and fuller, as well as towards outer reality. A human being might themselves remain as they are and become a creator of outer reality, or become a creator of themselves" (1966, p. 257). Perception of art is, therefore, a process allowing for an aesthetic experience (Ingarden R., 1960, pp. 289–313). Through symbolic messages and stories told, it reaches what is located in a human being's horizon, in their multidimensional experience (Dewey J., 1980) they gain throughout their life. We might say that "art teaches one to see the surrounding reality" (Kukuła E., 2006, p. 196) and allows one to orient oneself in this reality.

Another dimension of art in education is making art. In such cases we talk about the second field of using art in education – acting **through art**, which introduces the creative element. In this field, by undertaking expressive activity,

the student becomes a creator. The second field – educating through art, which appears in the context of general education, corresponds well to the anthropological understanding of art, which places its origin in a human being's intrinsic, psychobiological ability to “artify” (Dissanayake E., 2001). This ability results from a naturalistic, specifically Darwinian view of art called adaptation, which considers art as a psychobiological ability innate in the human species. I believe that adaptation, seen in anthropological terms, does not embrace all aspects in which the creator might benefit from creating. The reason for my belief is that such adaptation fails to include all aspects of transgression, i.e. reaching beyond one's abilities.

J.S. Bruner lists stimulating conditions for creative activity, which can be treated as guidelines in designing occasions for this type of activity for early-school-aged pupils. These are: entering deep into one's individuality, readiness to depart from the obvious, detaching oneself from existing forms, freedom to subordinate oneself to the object of creation, and finally an emotional attitude to and spontaneity of acting (Bruner J., 1973, pp. 208–217).

This study is an attempt at establishing a possible strategy for organising the process of actualisation of pupils' creative potentiality. The stimulating situation is going to be based on working with a work of visual art and a quasi-theatrical activity drawing from this work of art. The strategy relies on the inclusion of an education that creates an integral mixture of different art fields. In my opinion, such an education ought to be applied to the youngest, we must begin as early as possible, i.e. as early as the pre-school and primary school grades 1–3.

A model of classes based on educating with art and educating through art

As mental representations are rooted in perceptive, motor, and affective experiences, the scope of the classes is going to include all these types of experience. The form of the classes is flexible and their respective elements are modifiable and interchangeable. The whole procedure is the basis for a pedagogical innovation consisting of an experiment carried out by the Department of Child Creativity and Expression Pedagogy, University of Silesia in Katowice. The experiment is carried out within the framework of the “Actualisation of modal and creative potentialities as key competences through integral cultural expression placed in visual arts in 1–3-grade pupils” project in cooperation with Primary School No. 1 in Mysłowice (Ministry of Education decision No. DKOW.WEPW.5019.15.20140).

The classes are divided into two major phases. The first one utilises an encounter with art in the form of visual (painting) and auditory (music) perception. The paintings presented in class are of the surrealist genre, by e.g. René Magritte, Salvador Dali, and Vladimir Kush, while the musical material is taken mostly from film soundtracks by contemporary composers, including Abel Korzeniowski, Hans Zimmer, and Alexandre Desplat. The choice of film scores was not accidental, as they are a medium for rather plain emotions, which allows for a non-ambiguous composition of tales based on pupils' readings and interpretation of the visual material.

Joining picture and sound simultaneously allows for a redundancy of coding to occur. Allan Paivio (1986) maintains that pictorial and auditory content in memory is stored in two systems exhibiting specific modality. Mental representations are in turn rooted in perceptive, motor, and affective experiences, which is significant for the present model. Therefore, there seems to be a purpose to a doubling of induction by means of joining picture and music, for "the factor which considerably modifies the effects of memory is the number of codes a stimulus evokes" (Dylak S., 1995, p. 50). It is also a good idea to create an opportunity for stimulation of the greatest possible number of sensory channels by means of the multisensory activation of pupils' activity – VAKT (Krasoń K., Jaszczyszyn E., 2006, p. 626). In such situations the whole brain is used and neural networks are more easily covered with myelin, which leads to greater transmission speed.

Another phase of the lesson is the co-operative creation of a scenario for a story based on children's associations and imaginations evoked during the 1st, receptive, phase. The core element of this phase is the negotiation of meanings within the group of cooperating pupils. We are aiming at a situation where all children's ideas are included in the story. What we find important is communication, adopting different points of view, but also the skill of self-presentation. Initially, this phase requires the teacher to participate mainly as an agent maintaining order in children's proceedings. Later on, however, the need for such a presence proves to decrease. Such a decrease is the main educational gain, as it tells us that children learn how to interpret pictures intersubjectively by means of the story scenario they draw together.

The last phase of the classes is yet another instance of decoding/encoding. This time the process is intersemiotic, visual signs are translated into bodily ones, accompanied by the music from the inspirational phase. The meaning of bodily-motor expression, which is an element of expressing oneself in the language of art, combined with perception is perfectly grasped by Richard Shusterman in his idea of *somaesthetics*. He writes that the emotional value of art, as any other

emotion, has to be experienced through the body in order to be experienced at all (Shusterman R., 2006). “Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensoryaesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman R., 1999, p. 302). A. Wańtuch (Wańtuch A., 2011, pp. 58–60) goes further and claims that thinking without the aid of the body is impossible.

The experimental sessions finish with children performing the short scenes they have prepared. It is during this phase that the pupils perform the rediscovery of meaning, enabling associations and comparing their reading of the inductive material (paintings and music) with that of their classmates. Every concept is accepted, we need to appreciate especially the originality of ideas and openness to other persons’ different views.

As stated before, the classes might be fragmentarily modified. Sometimes they are divided into two or three meetings, but either way, they always begin with reminding children about the inspiration.

The strategy of creative play enables real contact with works of art. Children become familiar with contemporary artists’ paintings and listen to the music which facilitates such a perception. The result of experiencing and interpreting the perceived works is the children’s creation of their own artistic utterance, original and independent of any external support. The pupils learn the language of art and fully employ their artistic potential.

Empirical implication – case study – individualising study

The aim of the study was to establish the effectiveness of the strategy of educating with art and through art. The findings are the result of an individualising experiment², an approach informed with a conviction that “every living creature is (...) a unique individuality” (Kępiński A., 2015, p. 314). Thus, if we aim at learning something about the human being, or, as is the case in the present study, at recognising the range of the actualisation of the pupil’s potential when they are exposed to an educational method, it can be easily observed that we ought to consider their uniqueness viewed from the position of complete focus on the person. Therefore, the study will consist in a case study viewed as an exemplification of the change in the person’s functioning from a qualitative perspective.

² The method of the study described in Krasoń K., Konieczna-Nowak L. (2016).

The experimental factor (independent variable) in the present study are classes based on a model using modern art and the child's activity based on art, which is meant to activate the studied pupil's creative potentiality. This potentiality will be analysed as an dependent variable.

The focal point of learning about a child's actions in class and of the individualising verification of the strategy's efficiency was the technique of collecting data in the form of observation (Angrosino M., 2007, pp. 53–63). Such an act of perceiving the pupil's reactivity, their ideas and ways of interacting with other members of their own group and members of other groups will enable an establishment of change in the pupil's actualised potentiality.

Case study: a seven-year-old boy

A boy with motor hyperactivity, having difficulty focusing on tasks. He has a need to draw attention, sometimes directly by asking questions to the person conducting the class. He demands acceptance, pays less attention to other pupils.

1) **The pre-test session** was inspired by a set of surrealist paintings, opened to the meanings assigned to them by children, together with John Williams's "Jurassic Park" film soundtrack.

- Perception of the work of art

During the inspiration phase the boy looks at the pictures only for a short while. He performs a number of strange and unnecessary movements. He pats his cheeks, bites his fingernails, crawls, and changes the place he sits in. He makes comments, but they are rather loosely related to the content of the pictures. While children verbalise their observations and associations evoked by the pictures being presented, the case in question imitates playing and the sounds of a trombone. He focuses exclusively on this imaged element, as if he has not taken note of other visualisations.

- Team drawing

The boy quickly finds a group of classmates to cooperate with while drawing a picture serving as the scenario for their own story. He would like to be the leader of the group, but he seems to lack ideas of what to draw, so other members of the group take initiative. Once everybody has finished drawing and their works are being collected, he tries, no more cooperating with his classmates, to draw something of his own.

- Movement

During the kinaesthetic activities, the boy does not contribute his own ideas. He willingly participates in tasks created by others, although he is unable to complete

them, due to quick loss of concentration. One can observe significant motor activity resulting from high levels of arousal and a lack of ability to focus attention on the story being created for a longer time. When the teacher³ makes him an important character in a theatrical scene (he is to be a captain), his motivation for performing the task carefully can be observed. However, he begins to exhibit behaviour directed against his classmates (trying to move them – sometimes by pushing), which is the first time he shows initiative. Unfortunately, he quickly loses motivation and begins to concentrate exclusively on attacking classmates, this time with no connection to the plot of the scene; he falls and rolls across the floor.

- Verbalisation

The utterance is cursory; it contains only isolated words or a few simple sentences. Only one element of the pictures is being referred to in detail. During the discussion of his group's story, he begins to speak before his teammates, but after a short while he asks somebody else to take over.

- Pre-test remarks

The boy shows no particular involvement in creative activities – either artistic, or kinaesthetic ones. He needs much attention and wants to be made special. If he fails to achieve that, he loses interest in an activity and does not try to act divergently.

2) **Post-test session** (after a year-long implementation of the strategy) modified musical inspiration Gerry Goldsmith's "Chinatown" film soundtrack (Love Theme)

- Perception of the work of art

While listening to and watching the presentation, the boy sits next to the teacher. He tries to concentrate, although some motor activity can be observed, nonetheless limited to fine motor skills. He also asks the teacher questions (about what is going to happen next).

- Team drawing

When the teacher asks pupils to create groups, the boy becomes excited, he runs around the room searching for his friends, he starts jumping once his group has been assembled. He is visibly cooperation-oriented. Furthermore, once the teacher encourages him to do it, he assists in distributing sheets of paper and coloured pencils.

When the group begins to draw, he focuses on others' activity. He asks his classmates what they are going to do; he wants to know it immediately. He speaks

³ The classes were taught by the author of the presented study.

more than he draws, although the verbalisation is convergent with the themes in the paintings of the inspiration phase. After a short while he begins to draw himself and creates something his classmates like (falling squares). Nonetheless, having drawn one square, he passes his pencil to a classmate, asking “show me the squares”. Concentrating on the activity, he carefully watches his classmate drawing. He tries to join the drawing once he has made sure that his square is a proper one. He cooperates and does not interrupt other team members. After the collective work is done, he grabs the picture wanting to discuss it.

- Movement

The boy recreates elements of the drawing, keeps connecting with his group. He does not want to modify respective scenes, he wants to recreate “as it was before”. He becomes attached to solutions, lacks flexibility of ideas. Once praised for something, he becomes fixated on repeating that element. When the kinaesthetic presentation has begun, he shows other children what they should do. When his classmates stop listening to him, he begins to jump, dance, spin around, and finally lies on the floor. His hyperactivity increases when other children want to play important characters as well. When the scene is to be finalised, he argues with the teacher, calling “it wasn’t meant to be like that”. One can easily observe his satisfaction derived from playing a leading part in a kinaesthetic scene. Such a situation is mobilising and it enables initiative, although the initiative is still tightly linked to the drawing.

When the boy loses a privileged position, his hyperactivity begins to show again. However, he does not lose interest in the composition of the kinaesthetic story.

- Verbalisation

The utterance has certain new and original components. However, once the originality has been recognised, the pupil ceases to look for new solutions and keeps talking about what has already been approved.

3) Observation conclusions

Analysis of pre-test and post-test sessions shows a change in the boy’s behaviour. His involvement in classes increased. Although it was still difficult for him to control his kinaesthetic hyperactivity, it was less expansive and caused less disruption in group activities. It was important for the boy to play a significant part. Distinction stimulated his activity, including creative activity, although this particular type was manifested mainly in verbalisation. His physicality constituted a mimesis of the content of previous narration. The greatest progress could be observed in his social functioning. The boy’s self-assurance translated into courage in interactions with the teacher. One can therefore infer that the strategy

of educating with art and through art proved especially important for the social potentiality of the case being studied.

Closing remarks

To conclude the attempt at establishing the role of art in education, I must stress the need for thinking about enculturation as a real procedure, routinely and consciously implemented at school. It should consist of providing the pupils with knowledge and tools necessary for orientation in artistic heritage, broadly understood. Thus, we ought to talk about well-organised education through or with art that includes creating proper conditions for the students to satisfy their needs by means of the form or expression they discover or create, which has been evoked with works and phenomena perceived. Aiming at that, we should focus especially on the process of actualising the pupil's individual, aesthetic and creative potentiality. The pedagogical significance of the strategy of working with a small child is seen particularly in the dimension of interpersonal flow, i.e. stimulation of the development of socialisation.

Art, being synonymous with integral action, perfectly combines with class actions. The classes are filled with varied activities. One can observe communication exercises, pupils' speech and conceptual range are being developed, and aesthetic sensitivity is being stimulated. Thus, education with art and through art achieves the integral actualisation of the pupil's potentiality.

The first observations made in class bring about reflections related especially to stimulating the participating pupils' social competences, but also their levels of divergence and, especially, their greater courage in situations of self-presentation, expressing their own opinions and improving the way they are verbalised. Education through art enables holistic development of children's potentiality, which is probably the strongest argument in favour of using it in Polish schools.

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