

# Perceptions held by teachers in designing and evaluating visual activities in preschool education: the assessment of “beauty” as a standard

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## ABSTRACT

*Visual activities in schools and especially in preschool education are quite often designed, implemented and evaluated by definitions relating to categories of “beauty”, as these are understood in every case. Consequently, the evaluation and feedback on an act of teaching are primarily assessed on the basis of an aesthetic quality. This accordingly creates a condition that defines the method for teaching visual education, and also influences the development of specific aesthetic criteria in children through their gradual adaptation to a specified standard. On the basis of this approach a formulaic perception regarding art and its teaching is to be found, whereby the work of art is defined on the basis of its form, which must comply to specific criteria with universal validity. Our aim is to investigate the aspects and the extent of this specific practice, and its impact upon the features and quality of the available activities; to determine the extent to which it is a conscious choice on the part of teachers and to what degree it is associated with the theoretical approaches of visual education. Our methodology is based upon interviews conducted with teachers that are active in the broader Patras region. These interviews were open-ended, and the interviewees were permitted to deviate by expounding their personal views and considerations.*

## KEYWORDS

*Art education, didactics, aesthetics and education*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Les activités visuelles dans les écoles et notamment dans l'éducation préscolaire, sont souvent conçues, mises en œuvre et évaluées par des définitions liées aux catégories de «beauté», car elles sont applicables dans tous les cas. Par conséquent, l'évaluation et la rétroaction sur l'acte d'enseignement sont principalement évaluées sur la base d'une qualité esthétique. Ceci crée une condition qui définit la méthode d'enseignement de l'éducation visuelle et influence également le développement de critères esthétiques spécifiques chez les enfants, avec leur adaptation progressive à une norme spécifique. Sur la base de cette approche, il y a une perception formelle de l'art et de son enseignement, selon laquelle l'œuvre d'art est définie sur la base de sa forme qui, quant à elle, doit se conformer à des critères spécifiques de validité 'universelle'. Notre objectif est d'étudier les aspects et l'étendue de cette pratique spécifique ainsi que son impact sur les caractéristiques et la qualité des activités développées. Nous cherchons aussi à déterminer dans quelle mesure elle constitue un choix conscient de la part des enseignants et elle est associée à l'approche théorique de l'éducation visuelle. Notre méthodologie est basée sur des entretiens menés auprès d'enseignants de la région de Patras,*

*une ville située dans le nord-ouest du Péloponnèse. Ces entrevues ont été ouvertes et les interviewés ont été invités à s'exprimer librement, en exposant leurs points de vue et considérations personnels.*

## **MOTS-CLÉS**

*Éducation artistique, didactique, esthétique et éducation*

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

If we assume that the main focus of visual education is for children to essentially and systematically encounter the phenomenon of art, the key issue would then be to investigate the suitable preconditions that would enable the realisation of this expectation. This would also dictate the necessity to investigate any parameters that may potentially hinder a comprehensive and authentic artistic experience in the actual school environment. Certain contradictions and inconsistencies however emerged at this point. Despite the fact that art subjects are enthusiastically and universally accepted, teaching practices are often determined by a series of stereotypes and restrictive perceptions concerning the role and function of art.

This paper endeavours to investigate a formulaic approach that is often encountered in school reality. This approach defines a work of art on the basis of its figurative features, which must meet certain “commonly accepted” criteria regarding “beauty”, and which teaching must then convey. Within this context, the teaching process is defined by the expectation of achieving specific aesthetic outcomes that are also considered as the safest proof of success in evaluating every individual activity. This approach is frequently encountered in preschool education, and has resulted in standardised visual activities in regards to the targeting and resource levels and its implementation methods. It accordingly dictates that visual education is as an institution for instilling specific aesthetic perceptions through the reproduction of aesthetic standards.

The aspects and range of this practice were investigated through a survey that was based upon interviews with teachers active in the broader Patras region, which is presented below. Our aim is to investigate certain key questions and individual parameters that will assist in determining the extent to which these approaches define teaching; how these are reproduced and justified; the extent to which these constitute a conscious attitude on the teacher's part and relate to the curriculum; and their relationship to the wider social environment that informally influences the school environment from the “outside”.

### **Visual activities in preschool education: coordination with the artistic process**

The child's involvement in the artistic process, which is the basis of visual education, consists of actions of a cognitive and creative nature and imposes meanings, practices and issues of an artistic nature upon the school environment. On this basis, artistic actions at schools of all levels have an apocalyptic nature, since they gradually lead to the composition of a consistent, coherent and comprehensive picture. It is not involvement in a superficial practice aimed at achieving specific results from an aesthetic point of view, but a more meaningful attempt to highlight and comprehend the diverse aspects of the artistic phenomenon.

A question that arises here relates to the role and the specific qualifications of the teachers that are called upon to teach art, especially when they are not artists. As discussed above, interventions by teachers are planned and organized according to the specific nature and features of the artistic activity. What are these features? The definition of art based upon the standard of “beauty” has over time been revised by both the aesthetic consideration as well as the artistic practice itself (Costantino, 2007; Mouriki & Vaos, 2010). According to

Danto, every piece has aesthetic qualities but does not necessarily constitute a work of art and a work of art is not identified as such on the basis of some intrinsic aesthetic values (Danto, 2003, p. 98, 120).

The artistic act, which also applies to the aesthetic experience, cannot be entrenched or standardized. Obeying expressive intention, artistic practice cannot subscribe to any overall methodological limitation and it evades all standardised and formatted interpretation. The multiplicity of approaches, expressions and meanings are inherent in the art phenomenon. In this regard, artistic education cannot be considered as adherence to a universally valid concept or as the standardisation of specific aesthetic values and criteria, but as a domain that accepts and promotes versatility, diversity and multiple meanings as inherent features of the artistic concept (Barret, 1970, p. 46-47; Berger, 1980, p. 32). In this context, the content of artistic education should be regarded as a fluid body of choices permitting many visual and multiple paths (Ardouin, 1997, p. 35, 38; Eaton & Moore, 2002; Vaos, Sotiropoulos & Berthoud-Papandropoulou, 2014).

Consequently, the teacher's role is not to standardise, but to facilitate the receptivity of various artistic forms and to gradually assist in establishing a critical and investigative attitude on the role and significance of artistic forms. If the teacher needs to find a “key” in any narrative on art, this may be found in the constant changes that have been documented from the beginning of human history down to the present times, in a fundamental and continuous change according to Gombrich (2005, p. 15) in the objectives, intentions, methods, ideas, values and attitudes. This continuous theoretical and material expansion of the basis of art emphasizes that the specificity of an artwork, if judged in accordance with a specific aesthetic criterion of morphological characteristics, risks ignoring a significant part of the creative act.

Our contemporary artistic production poses the challenge of an even deeper and more comprehensive appeal: it does not seem to exist a single framework or criterion, a specific expectation or method of composition, a clear directive or delineation on how to produce or perceive a visual creation. Artistic proposals that are difficult to delineate and where the undetectable attributes are the main challenge to the art that is created serve to highlight that the classical quest for “aesthetic beauty” does not appear to be applicable. Accordingly, the problem of detecting safe and aesthetic criteria in art is presented as a complex and intractable, if not irresolute problem. In this regard, artistic education should not be regarded as adherence to a pre-existing universal valid concept of art, especially in its classical expression, but as a contribution to an on-going, exploratory and contemplative debate.

It has however been noted that instead of finding a comparably “open” process in school practice there is a rather timid effort of entrenchment, in accordance with which we should continue to rely upon certain pre-existing secure and “objective” assessment criteria that can be uniformly employed in approaching artwork and evaluating the act of teaching. These criteria must primarily be sought in relation to the figurative features that are based upon certain rules for defining the concept of “beauty” derived from a fairly abstract and unspecified concept of the classical past.

Certain more or less coherent pedagogical narratives have been developed upon this vague basis, which have incited the respective practices upon which both the artwork and the attitudes towards it have been modelled (Parsons, 2002; Herburn, 2006, p. 8-9). It is considered that artistic creations must respond to clear stylistic rules upon which their value is assessed. The materials, shapes, chromatic relations, tonal values, and the organization of synthesis, are the elements that essentially confer artistic status. These narratives in their updated version derive their existence from modernist trends, while the idealized concept of “beauty” in the most outmoded version has degenerated into a school evaluation logic. The implementation of these criteria extends to all kind of objects, through their classification into

categories and graduations of beautiful or ugly that almost correspond to the concepts of right and wrong.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESULTS

As discussed above, it is apparent that the various issues are not assessed upon the same conditions in respect to aesthetics and education, the degree of artistic creation and the practical reality of art education. In order that we may further investigate such contradictions, we conducted interviews with teachers that are actively involved in preschool education, examining the extent to which the concept of “beauty” has been consciously standardised and given priority and the extent it determines the educational practices and experiences tendered. These interviews were of an “open discussion” format, whereby the interviewees were allowed to deviate from the questions posed by developing personal views and considerations.

Extensive interviews were conducted with thirteen kindergarten teachers in total. The key questions raised related to: 1. the extent to which they focused upon the final result in terms of aesthetics; 2. the extent to which the overall planning and organization of an activity was planned with the aim of achieving a particular aesthetic effect; 3. the “beauty” criteria that they have adopted and recognized; 4. the extent to which they intervene in children's activities to satisfy any aesthetic criteria that they recognize as acceptable; 5. the extent to which they feel that they are “bound” to produce something “beautiful” as a group in the classroom or individually; 6. the extent to which they consider that the concept of “beauty” is connected with art.

The results pertaining to those questions raised with kindergarten teachers were identified on the basis of three reference parameters: a) “aesthetically beautiful” according to the kindergarten teachers’ perception; b) “aesthetically beautiful” that they considered was formulated by the children; and c) “beauty” as they considered this concept is comprehended by the social environment. On the basis of these parameters we present below a compilation of our investigation results.

In relation to the question regarding the kindergarten teachers’ interest in aesthetic educational activities at the kindergarten, we must point out that almost everyone spontaneously responded that they are concerned with the aesthetic result and they in fact specifically focus upon this not only in the artistic activities but also independently of the cognitive region. The pursuit of “beauty” was also raised as a key parameter in managing and decorating the classroom (“I also like beauty in the classroom but I do not always see beauty as an end in itself”, “I am concerned with beauty in the classroom on the basis of my criteria, but I am not strict”).

In justification of this objective, the pursuit and recognition of the importance of “beauty” by the children themselves was stressed. Several kindergarten teachers stressed that teachers must be intuitive in advance about what children like and should satisfy their expectations (“I want the concept of beauty to arise from the children and I am satisfied when the child considers it is beauty”, “the aesthetic criterion arises from the children”). Almost all of the kindergarten teachers stressed that one cannot “escape” their own considerations (“We cannot avoid what we consider as beauty”, and they often proceeded to a generalization of the formula: “all people after all seek beauty”).

In response to the question regarding the extent to which kindergarten teachers organize activities in conjunction with the aesthetic result, such an attitude derives from their original position about whether and to what extent they pursue “beauty”. In the most of the cases, the aesthetic result takes a dominant position. A small group of kindergarten teachers

shifted their attention to the process and again raised the issue of the aesthetic effect on the basis of the criteria for “beauty” that in a way is raised by the children themselves (“as teachers we must ensure that we do not direct children and they should demonstrate what beauty is”).

In relation to the definition of the concept of “beauty”, all of the respondents very generally considered it as an amalgam of cultural, social and historical references. The criteria that were raised on some occasions allude to aesthetic values from the classical artistic tradition and on others to an unspecified personal perception of good taste (“I think that the concept of beauty is multifactorial and is assessed by cultural, historical and social factors” or “beauty is subjective related to everyone’s upbringing and experiences, however it is important that in a somewhat more objective way it is present in the classroom”).

In specifying the concept of a “beautiful” aesthetic result in artistic activities, some common figurative features arise upon which they focussed. These are identified by: 1) bright colours; 2) chromatic diversity; 3) clarity of forms; 4) absence of smudges; 5) vividness; 6) verisimilitude; 7) a happy environment; 8) harmony and symmetry. These criteria were highlighted by almost all the kindergarten teachers, even by those who believed that the preferences displayed by children should be given priority. In justification of the criteria, the assumption or even certainty in every case is that the same criteria are also raised by the children, without mediation and in a sense constitute the expression of a spontaneous and unprocessed “childishness”. It was also noted that the same criteria and features apply in the selection and artistic works present in the children. The “beautiful” aesthetic result is also considered as a function of the children’s capacities that are associated with the developmental stage and are developed on the basis of the family environment, the school’s influence, inherent inclination and practice (“beauty arises in accordance with the capabilities of each child”).

Some kindergarten teachers said they often feel that they were moving in a direction of also satisfying the aesthetic preferences of the wider school community, within the context of an informal school “tradition”, which as a consequence affected, according to their opinion, the criteria they themselves would hold, or would avoid holding, regarding “beauty”. It is accordingly stressed that the extra-school environment provides feedback and enhances such an attitude. Teachers often feel a kind of pressure to create objects of a decorative or celebratory nature, that relate with school celebrations and with transmitting some impressive general knowledge about art and artists. It is indeed not a rare occurrence for kindergarten teachers to directly intervene in children’s projects in order to “improve” the result of their work for the sake of adapting it to these widely accepted aesthetic preferences. Kindergarten teachers consequently feel that there is a strong informal commitment to satisfy whatever is considered “beautiful” or perceived as such on the basis of the occasional social norms.

It has been identified in all the interviews that the various actions and aspects of school life in kindergarten, as well as the manner of decorating the classroom is very often a stereotypical image of “beauty” (as an example they referred to identical decorative objects and handicrafts encountered in almost every school). They considered that the cause of this stereotyped image is mainly due to the commonly available designs and “patterns” that are widely circulated and exchanged amongst teachers. It is stressed that the promotion and reproduction of these patterns has also consolidated a certain image in the children. They also stressed that the sources they referred to in order to find new material for their activities are also identified by the same or similar models of “beauty” (these are “transmitted from one teacher to another, in magazines and on the internet where we find the same patterns, a practice that is convenient and easier, despite the fact that we know it is an easy solution”). Another parameter that was highlighted by almost all the kindergarten teachers

related to the difficulty, in terms of time-consuming labour for an individual to mass produce these type of creations.

In response to the question about the extent to which kindergarten teachers felt some kind of commitment towards a particular aesthetic effect that is recognised as “beautiful”, it was recognized overall as a common component in the answers by all kindergarten teachers that they had at some time and in certain cases felt this type of commitment arising from both internal and external school factors. The extent to which the concept of “beauty” is considered as being inherent in art provides a general guiding principle behind all action related to the kindergarten. Despite all this, all of the kindergarten teachers stated that they did not consider that a pedagogical theory suggests or supports this practice of reproducing identical forms.

At this point a contradiction can be spotted. Whilst all of the teachers recognized that this process of reproduction, which essentially occurs within the context of an interventional procedure, is erroneous, they nevertheless adopted it because they considered it an obligation that virtually defines the nature and character of their professional space. An equally controversial contradiction appeared in their attitude towards the question regarding the commitments that they feel were imposed upon them by the detailed curriculum. Despite the fact that kindergarten teachers positively recognized the “openness” that defined the detailed curriculum and the fact that there is no guiding principle or pedagogical commitment in realising the actions related to “beauty”, it was evident in the interviews that there is a quest for some type of directions and instructions in this regard.

The pursuit of “beauty” is justified by a section of the teaching community as an incentive for enabling children. The “beautiful” form motivates children to perhaps understand better the message it conveys, is a remark that the teachers base on their experiences in the classroom (“we have to produce something beautiful because it must appeal to children”). In support of this argument kindergarten teachers also invoke pedagogical theories, by arguing that children especially in this age group, construct new knowledge and this process is as much about cultivating the aesthetic criterion (“it is dictated that at this age group we should cultivate their criterion for beauty, since the child learns about beauty through the kindergarten teacher”). In response to our question about attempts to intervene in children's projects so that the aesthetic result is in a sense consistent with “beauty”, there was almost unanimity amongst kindergarten teachers, which also aims to satisfy children. More specifically, even though most kindergarten teachers stressed that they avoided interventions, interventions were however used for the purpose of “pleasing the children”.

In response to the question regarding the extent to which the perception of “beauty” by kindergarten teachers is intertwined with art as a main objective, their responses were totally affirmative; they considered that “beauty” is a key requirement of art. It is accordingly apparent from the interviews that whatever relates to “beauty” may be easily described as an activity relating to art. It was however noted by kindergarten teachers themselves that there was an inability to document the path in pursuit of “beauty” through art. This weakness is associated with a relevant knowledge deficit, which was often also presented as the main cause for avoiding actions relating to art and by extension a distancing from the pursuit of “beauty” as an aesthetic category. Regarding their abilities to provide art activities, almost all kindergarten teachers referred to the concept of personal “talent” as a key element in their educational activities, which they identified as a special ability in a field related to art. Within the context of developing this mechanism, the issue of the adequacy or otherwise was not considered as an element of training but as a “gift” (“The classroom is excellent because it has talent in painting”).

In interpreting the causes that lead to the “easy resolution” of stereotypes, kindergarten teachers have identified the lack of specific training and of frequent training in

the field of artistic instruction as the main cause that leads to a type of job insecurity. They have also highlighted the lack of relevant supporting material that reinforces creative expression and supports their educational work. It should be noted that a small number of kindergarten teachers, especially amongst junior kindergarten teachers, have stressed that this trend of reproducing stereotypical forms trends must be decreased, since different types of information are now available on activities that are more attuned to contemporary artistic creation (“we need to demonstrate what we do at school, without stereotypes, which I consider no longer exist to the same extent”).

There were also some variations to the established positions and practices, mainly amongst new teachers, but also from experienced teachers who have been teaching for a long time. Several innovative actions, initiatives and contemporary syllabuses attract the interest of kindergarten teachers who attempt to implement these syllabuses in the classrooms, whilst endeavours to implement even innovative methods are not rare. These findings highlight also the emergence of a trend that is capable of launching a general change of attitude towards the role of kindergarten teachers at an educational and social level. Despite the fact that a small number of teachers was surveyed, and consequently their responses simply provide some indications on the subject under research, a trend is obvious towards a pioneering opening that favours experimentation, a personal relationship with the seen object, and releases children from all stereotypical approaches or aesthetic qualities that may or may not be relate to “beauty”.

## DISCUSSION

According to our research data, we can summarize the perceptions of teachers on certain key points. Kindergarten teachers comprehend and interpret everyday life in the classroom in a particular manner that often engages with various forms of the “beautiful” approach. The identification of “beauty” with the artistic function is the basic substrate upon which specific considerations are structured regarding the planned artistic activities that are offered, and other activities in which art is involved. Strong commitment to the aesthetic result is not only observed in artistic activities, but also extends to every cognitive region as well as the management of space. An informal commitment towards a stereotype image of “beauty” is moreover reflected in the attempt of teachers to meet parental expectations and the school and social environment. It has been ultimately recognized that there is confusion regarding the overall role of kindergarten teachers, which is easily questioned and there is a delay in training and continuing education on the theory and practice of the visual arts.

The findings of course are not intended to be critical of teachers, but attempt to provide additional data in the debate on how artistic activities are provided in practice. The recognition of the fluidity and the multiplicity of artistic functions is a prerequisite for all other assumptions and is to be placed at the starting point of any educational mediation (Gaillot, 1997, p. 16; Daucher & Seitz, 2003, p. 23, 25). The evolution in art is based upon continuous ruptures with the constituents of a model and teaching must highlight an area with a huge range and variety that is constantly changing. The specific contribution of art education as well as the tools and components of our educational mediation must be discussed here. The aim is to awaken an attitude that is more active, critical and stochastic towards every visual form and any human creation.

Embarking on a perception with predetermined aesthetic criteria of universal validity regarding “beauty”, may be effective in respect to clarity, but could never be generally acceptable. Figurative features are interesting components of the visual analysis; however, by focussing solely on these aspects every act of creativity is weakened in respect of its other key

aspects and reference to anything other than itself is alienated. This approach also involves a significant contradiction; while it seemingly appears to be geared towards the final product, it is actually weakened in two ways: it excludes the possibility of children to highlight and process their own ideas and prevents them from reflecting their own unique visual idiom.

What is ultimately reflected is the manner in which the teacher rather than the child comprehends each subject. This creates and reproduces school aesthetics representing a fake “childishness”, where the works produced are identical and provide no opportunity for discussion or commentary. Children become addicted to a neutral and passive attitude, to the extent that they are required to use ready elements that respond to a specific and identifiable code. The obvious embarrassment that accompanies any encounter with other types of visual formalities, usually leads to a convenient attitude of rejection, self-censorship or a hypocritical devotional confrontation.

The real challenge that is posed by the artistic process – that is also imposed upon the teaching field – is the inability for an individual to contemplate its results in advance (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 65). The artistic act in school is not designed to produce “beautiful” objects, neither does art. A key point accordingly is that artistic education should not be treated as something that consists of coding and reproducing specific aesthetic values, standards and criteria, but as a domain that not only accepts, but also depicts the variability, variety and meanings that are the inherent characteristics of the art phenomenon. This implies that the goals that are set on each occasion by the teacher are not concerned with the determination of a particular result from an aesthetic point of view, but define a field of research that encompasses many parameters and aspects.

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