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A Need to Find Effective Ways of Raising the Profile and Status of the Arts in Education

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Abstract

While education in the arts is not a panacea, what ails many schools, the arts require a place in the curriculum. Aim of this article was to investigate the educational activities focusing on the interpretation of art in schools in Poland. Theoretical knowledge is not sufficient. Currently, a key factor in the shift towards education of art is undoubtedly visual culture. Its omnipresence is felt. We arrived to the conclusion that the present education of art is based on disciplines such as visual arts, which is for young people further communication language for aesthetic and artistic education and meets their needs.

Key words: visual arts, visual culture, education

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Introduction

Education in the arts is an integral part of the development of each human being. Those who have studied learning processes throughout the ages, beginning with Plato, have emphasized the importance of the arts in the education process. Arts education refers to education in the disciplines of music, dance, theatre, and visual arts. Study in the arts is integral to our society. They are a part of the cultural heritage of every Poland. The arts are what make us most human, most complete as people. The arts cannot be learned through occasional or random exposure any more than math or science can. Education and engagement in the fine arts are an essential part of the school curriculum and an important component in the educational program of every student in university.

1. An acknowledgement of the key role of the arts in the curriculum

Advocates for art education have long been striving to establish the visual arts firmly as a subject of study in school curricula. In recent decades, they have made inroads toward that end at both the national and state levels. To all those who value art, this may seem like good news, at least from a distance. On close examination, however, there is cause for deep concern. For, while many schools have been taking steps to integrate art education into their curricula, serious art of high quality has been rendered more and more marginal to the content of their programs. It is being largely displaced by often trivial works of popular art, as well as by cultural artifacts of all kinds--selected more for the hidden sociopolitical messages that can be wrung from them than for their expressive power or esthetic value. A key factor in the shift to art education has undoubtedly been visual cultura. Proponents of visual culture education pay lip service to the fact that visual culture includes art. If one reads carefully, however, it is clear that they are more interested in other forms of cultural expression than in estimable works of painting and sculpture--to which they impute no greater value or significance than to a magazine advertisement, a documentary photograph, or a child's toy. Some adopt the phrase "art/visual culture education," indicating that they would make no "sharp distinction between the visual arts and visual culture." (Freedman, Stuhr 2006). According to Freedman and her fellow advocate Patricia Stuhr (2006), "Visual culture is the totality of humanly-designed images and artifacts that shape our existence." (Freedman, Stuhr 2006). In their view, The increasing pervasiveness of visual culture, and the freedom with which these forms cross traditional borders, can be seen in the use of fine art in advertising, realistic computer-generated characters in films, and the inclusion of rap videos in museum exhibitions. The visual arts are part of this larger visual culture, including fine art, advertising, popular film and video, folk art, television and other

performance arts, housing and apparel design, mall and amusement park design, and other forms of visual production and communication. Invariably, it is the non-art elements of visual culture that these educators are most apt to focus upon.

2. The background of art education

From ancient times art education constituted an element of general education. However, the amount of art classes and their specificity differed significantly depending on the spirit of particular periods. It is well worth mentioning that up to the 19th century education in general related to a limited part of a society, mainly boys from a middle and high class. As a result, not many people including artists were provided a systematized and complex art education.

In the 20th century art education was subject to diverse ideological stances which shaped the then culture and education. For example in the USA “during the war art education was seen as a means of preserving and defending democracy and, indeed, Western civilization itself” (Efland, 1990, p. 231) and the process of making art was seen as a “part of the War Effort” (Efland, 1990, p. 230) comparable with working in a factory or sewing military uniforms.

After the Second World War capitalist countries such as the USA, Great Britain or France followed the principles of educational progressivism developed by a famous American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey, which assumed that children learnt much better in real-life activities with other people than memorizing theoretical rules or text. It is no wonder that art education was also influenced by this view. “The pedagogy of art education, which encouraged personal growth through self-expression, was part and parcel of progressive practices. Curiously, this repeated the situation when art teaching was deemed suitable for privileged classes, but not for the poor” (Efland, 1990, p. 229).

Although, communist countries led by the U.S.S.R guided by a completely different philosophy seemed to value the fine arts or at least their soc-realist version, communist art education did not change its status as a subject necessary only for a limited group of students. Polish art education may serve as a good example of this tendency. In the early 1960s a Polish art theoretician and educator Stefan Kościelecki prepared an innovative educational program aiming at introducing modern visual education and enhancing the status of art classes in schools (Kościelecki 1975). Despite its initial success, the program was not implemented in Polish schools. Why? Kościelecki was strongly opposed to art education focused on a contemplative character of art, where a viewer is supposed to find the indefinite beauty of an artwork (Kościelecki 1975). Since this attitude implies that art is

a domain of experts who are able to recognize something not recognizable for ordinary people. Instead he postulated art education based on optics, visual perception, the knowledge of form and color, visual sociology, art history and technology (Kościelecki, 1975, p. 48-53). Because: “Contemporary art education has to prepare students to visual perception of all natural, technological, scientific and artistic phenomena alike. (...) It has to be related to new technological developments, to the world of art and works of art from different periods, continents and cultures, to artistic activity and space-time imagination, to structural units and to seeing and thinking in visual categories” (Kościelecki, 1975, p. 30).

Not having introduced the program of visual education Polish communist schools squandered the chance of raising the status of art education as an area of knowledge and experience necessary for everybody. For years art classes were beneficial only for gifted students who wanted to become artists, designers or architects.

Has something been changed?

3. Analysis of polish contemporary art education

Let us start from checking how much time is devoted to art classes in the Polish school curriculum.

In the first three grades of a Polish primary school all subjects are taught together within one frame of integrated education. It is the teacher to decide what is the most important in the context of a particular group of children. Unfortunately, we may have an impression that among other skills such as writing or reading visual competences appear not to be so important and may not be developed enough. Subsequent grades – 4th, 5th, and 6th make children attend art classes two lessons per week. Going to Junior High School (which lasts 3 years) is connected with the limitation of time devoted to art classes. Although the curriculum provides 3 lessons per week but art education is grouped together with music education. Consequently, many headmasters to make things easier decide to teach art for three semesters and music for next three. In high school art classes are replaced by a subject entitled “Knowledge about culture” which only partially deals with visual sphere and as its name suggests takes on a theoretical character.

Although the above description is very cursory, it makes us realize the first and at the same time the most fundamental problem of Polish art education, namely its marginalization. Polish students during their twelve-year education are at best able to attend art classes for 6 years. Nevertheless, it is also possible that they can enjoy art classes for only 4 years.

Let us scrutinize the art curriculum to discover what Polish teenagers can get to know during their junior high school classes.

The authors of art curriculum “Art in Junior High School” (Internet source no 1) emphasize a high level of integration among art classes and other humanistic subject, which makes pupils acquire a holistic knowledge not divided into particular disciplines. From a broader educational point of view, integration of visual skills separated by the characteristics of particular subject is undoubtedly legitimated (Hrehová, 2008, p. 132), but in this particular case, it means limitation. Since some of visual issues are supposed to be only mentioned during art classes because they are to be discussed during Polish or history classes. We may raise a question here about the visual or artistic competences that Polish or history teacher can have, but I would refer to this problem later. The main aim of the curriculum “Art in Junior High School” is to shape interests in art and to provide students with appropriate skills and knowledge (Hrehová, 2008, p. 120). The curriculum includes 7 following thematic groups:

- 1) Means of artistic expression (artistic activities with different materials, techniques and forms),
- 2) Art history (from Baroque to contemporary art),
- 3) Folk art,
- 4) Visual environments and applied forms (rationality, functionality, esthetics),
- 5) Visual communication (graffiti, computer graphics, aesthetics of advertisement, informative function of graphic sign),
- 6) Contact with works of art (art in media, press, television, the Internet),
- 7) Knowledge of theatre and film (the importance of film in constructing reality, theatre as a culture centre, body language, creating theatre and film needs) (Internet source no1).

It seems that the curriculum itself is structured well and satisfies the needs of contemporary education. Unfortunately, its implementation appears to be almost impossible due to limited amount of time. What is more, “The activities conducted during art classes in many schools are determined to produce some artistic subjects rather than to develop an interest in this discipline, which may have an adverse influence on the process of artistic thinking. Children start achieving success acting according to imposed formulas. The unquestionable cause of this state of affairs lies in a stereotypical way of thinking about art classes as about subjects of secondary importance. This way of thinking has not been changed after the educational reform but, on the contrary it has deepened the indifferent approach to the role of art education in developing and shaping particular attitudes in developing sensitivity and aesthetic needs among young people. Educational authority through cutting down the time devoted to art classes, strengthen the headmasters, teachers and parents in this conviction. Consequently, it is believed that fine arts and music can be taught by everybody, and in many schools they are treated as extra classes that fill in teachers’ obligatory teaching hours. What is more, today it is almost impossible to employ

an art or music teacher due to educational system divided into primary and junior high school, which hinders to provide those teachers a full time job or sometimes even a part time job. This problem is often correlated with the lack of suitable classrooms and didactic materials essential to teacher's work" (Internet source no 2).

The above remarks are supported by students' opinions. The mentioned below comments have been found on the youth Internet portal.

"I hate this class!!! I have such a great art teacher that probably has not graduated from art school and she has no idea what to do during the class, which consists in painting cards and posters for special occasions it means all possible holidays – Miner's Day, a first Day of Spring, Epiphany, Marmet's Day etc. She has never told us about some perspective, compositions, diverse painting or drawing techniques not to mention about art history ... All the time cards and posters and she is always able to think up some occasions and force us to do it ... brr. I had to spout it... Do you have similar experience?"

"Fortunately, there is no art class in our high school. In junior high school, a woman was kind of talking something but nobody was listening to her and everybody was doing what he or she wanted, all marks we had for those works, which were sent for some competitions... but some technical stuff was mentioned but without any involvement".

"I wouldn't liquidate this subject because the class is quite relaxing but I would definitely withdraw it from obligatory subjects that have marks... It is harming for people who are not talented and because of it my marks are worse and because of art classes I didn't luck into a Golden Book of School at the end of junior high school... it is only art classes or as much as art classes." (Internet source no 3)

A reading of Barbara Szelwach's text and the comments made by students make us leave the illusions about Polish art education. It turns that the only guarantor of good art class can be a passionate teacher who against the whole educational system is able to attempt to show his/her students a world of art and visual culture.

4. Why do we need art education?

The above mentioned views indicate a serious crisis which Polish art education is facing. We believe, however, that it is not only Polish art education that suffers from its marginalization. Therefore, the question that arises here is: "Do we really need art education? There are so many people that do not know much about art and they are perfectly well, aren't they? Maybe they are, but they miss a very significant part of human experience. Because: "We do not need more and better arts education simply to develop more and better artists. There are far more important reasons for schools to provide children with an education in the arts. Quite simply, the arts are the ways we human beings "talk" to

ourselves and to each other knowledge (Hrehová 2008). They are the language of civilization through which we express our fears, our anxieties, our curiosities, our hungers, our discoveries, and our hopes. They are the “universal ways by which we humans still play make-believe, conjuring up worlds that explain the ceremonies of our lives” (Hrehová 2002, p. 3). The arts are not just important; they are a central force in human existence. Every child should have sufficient opportunity to acquire familiarity with these languages that so assist us in our fumbling, stumbling, and all-too-rarely brilliant navigation through this world. Because of this, the arts should be granted major status in every child's schooling” (Charles Fowler, Internet source no 4).

Another significant factor making art education necessary today is our extremely visual world. Contemporary culture is largely based on images. Images have become communicative tools and also the creators of our reality, since each dominant form of communication produces its own world, as thirty years ago stated an outstanding media researcher – Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1975).

The entrance of images into a domain of mass communication thanks to popularization of press, photography, cinema, television or the Internet has affected the formation of new culture forms and filling them culture practices. Consequently, the world of today's images constitutes a difficult to describe amalgam of traditional and new forms of visual representation.

Therefore, it seems to be obvious that a vast contribution of images to contemporary culture should significantly affect education, which is supposed to prepare children to active participation into cultural and social life. Since every child should be able not only to understand the visual environment that surrounds him/her but also to shape it. Consequently, today's visual education should be based on traditional art classes and new activities that include visual culture and new media which, in fact are to a large extent formed by images.

5. Alternatives to art education

If art education is so important but at the same time so difficult to obtain, we should look for some alternatives. The most obvious one is the Internet.

There are many websites devoted to art education. Some of them are created by art institutions, art schools and art colleges and universities but others reflect a passion for art of art students and teachers and ordinary people.

In this context it is worth mentioning the websites addressed to children and teenagers provided by famous art galleries or museums. The majority of world galleries and museums which are involved in traditional art education based on diverse art classes,

lectures or special programs offer interactive space where children can explore art. The list of those institutions is long but the most well-known are: The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and its website for kids entitled “Destination Modern Art”, The National Gallery of Art in Washington D. C. and its “NGA kids”, The Tate Modern in London and its “Tate Kids” and the Louvre Museum in Paris and its “The Visit”. All of those websites acquaint children with a museum’s collection, introduce them to fundamentals of art history, teach them how to look at art, provide some graphics software, and most of all show art as something interesting and fun. Children can play games, explore unknown places, make art with new graphic tools and enjoy their time. It is also possible to create a gallery with own works of art or add them to a gallery displayed on the website.

An interesting example of a museum website aiming at art education for a wide public is “CyberMuse. Your Art Education Research Site” set up by the National Gallery of Canada which “links you to the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection through the Internet offering a complementary experience, a new dimension in interpreting, understanding and enjoying Canada's visual arts heritage”(Internet source no. 5). You can see there “over 20,000 images of works of the Gallery's permanent collection, video and audio recordings of world renowned artists, showcases of special exhibits” (op. cit.). You can also play some interactive games connected with art, have a virtual tour of the Gallery or find some teaching aids.

In the perspective of art education it is very important that the recipients of “CyberMuse” are not only people interested in visiting the National Gallery of Canada and searching for some information such as visiting hours or admission, but also children and teenagers interested in art who can play educational games or learn how to use graphics software, but also art teachers and researchers. Teachers are encouraged to “Bring the Gallery's collection into their classroom” and “find great in-class activities and many other resources to enhance their curriculum” thanks to “10 innovative ways to introduce CyberMuse into their classroom” (op.cit.). They can also use already prepared lessons plans e.g. “Canadian painting in the thirties” or “Drawing with light”, a lesson related to photography, its origins and technical and stylistic development (op.cit.). Whereas, researchers who are described as “art aficionados, of all kinds and interests” can learn about the history of many works in Gallery’s collection, read “articles, historical and research based, written by external scholars and Gallery staff” and “access to and in depth body of knowledge and materials as they relate to art” (op. cit.).

A visit to “CyberMuse” is extremely interesting and attractive for everybody regardless of their age and you do not have to go to Canada to have a tour of the gallery. What is more, this page makes up a great source of practical and theoretical knowledge of art which may be used during traditional classes.

Another example constitutes a website “Art Education 2.0. Using New Technologies in Art Classrooms”- whose content is entirely devoted to art education. The site is created by “A global community of art educators exploring uses of new technology” (Internet source no 6). In this case the expression of a global community is really appropriate, because the users of this website come from almost all continents. You can check it during the visit to “Art Education 2.0”, clicking the recent visitors map displaying countries where the site is being currently used. There are many sections on this website, the main are devoted to different art projects and to an online discussion forum connected with art education.

The projects are supposed to evoke a response from other teachers and students e.g. “Memory Project: Have your art students create portraits for children and teens around the world who have been orphaned, abandoned, neglected, or otherwise disadvantaged; Connected Classrooms. What IF every teacher on this site was partnered with another teacher in another city, state, or even better another country?; If your classes are looking for a way to help the people in Haiti who were affected by the terrible earthquake, you might want to make Haiti Houses to sell.; Trade portraits with other teachers, participate in a portrait swap with another school, or host a Portrait Party in your classroom”. What makes all of those projects unique is the fact that they do contribute to creating a global community of art educators. It seems that a common effort of people in many different countries may result in raising awareness of the importance of art education all over the world.

The discussions appearing on forum are more practical and concern issues relating to conducting art classes e.g. “Anyone heard of the Sketchbook Project? I'm thinking about something like this with schools from around the globe. However, I don't wish to mail out sketchbooks. Perhaps we could choose a theme to pass down; Does anyone have any lessons that worked really well they would like to share?; Our district recently opened up teacher access to YouTube and so I was wondering if you guys had any good videos you would share with kids. Our theme for this year is the Power of One and we have a great problem.; Does anyone know a place I could order art materials (I'd prefer construction paper but paint if not available) that is black light activated?” (op. cit.). Nevertheless, teaching is not limited to giving classes, therefore “Art Education 2.0” provides theoretical knowledge in texts such as “ Does technology help students' social skills, or hurt them?; or Back to School: Rules and Routines in the Classroom” (op.cit.).

The users of the website have their own art blogs, they can also download some educational videos as well as review and describe other websites related to art and art education.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that we live in a purely visual culture, visual and art education is often marginalized. It seems that traditional attitude toward art education is not going to be changed soon. Therefore, in order to raise people's awareness and to introduce them to the fascinating world of art and visuals, art teachers and educators should use new tools such as websites devoted to art. The employment of the Internet can also help to create a global community putting pressure on institutions responsible for art education in schools.

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Kľúčové slová: vizuálne umenie, vizuálna kultúra, edukácia