

7. AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS IN ROMANIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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Abstract: *The change in structures of Romanian primary school produced by the inclusion of preparatory grade within this educational level, determined curricular changes especially for the cycle of fundamental acquisitions. The new curricular products form the reference materials for the present analysis on the place and the role of aesthetics in Romanian primary education. Although international programmatic documents describe a personality profile for which the aesthetic dimension is relevant in the context of integrated education of the autonomous and creative citizen, national curricular structures do not cover appropriately this aim. It is also the case of Romanian curriculum for primary education (cycle of fundamental acquisitions) which isolates the aesthetic dimensions in two curricular structures: music and movement, respectively, visual arts and practical abilities. Although other curricular areas/disciplines avoid the aesthetic dimension, the two integrated structures previously mentioned indicate a more visible concern among decision-makers and practitioners for innovative reevaluation of contemporary tendencies to include aesthetic education in all curricular structures (including mathematics and sciences).*

Key words: *aesthetics, art education, elementary education, Romanian curriculum*

1. Aesthetics in elementary education: a briefing of international trends

In a report on aesthetic education in school curricula around the world, Amadio, Truong & Tschurenev (2006) provide a short history of aesthetic education movements from the middle of the nineteenth century in Western countries to the beginning of the twenty-first century and conclude with several reflections on its widespread across school national systems, especially in elementary education. In their view, aesthetic education found its place within school curriculum, but it is certainly better represented in early education than in higher grades and embraces more comprehensive aims than in the past. More exactly, aesthetic literacy or „*learning in, about or through the arts*” Amadio, Truong & Tschurenev (2006, p. 3) became the major aim for aesthetic education in the school. This rather general and generous aim is translated into definite choices in educational policy and practices, as reflected in several analyses conducted in the place and the role of aesthetic education within national school curricula (e.g., Taggart, Whitby & Sharp, 2004). In their report, Amadio, Truong & Tschurenev (2006) also review several studies which emphasize the role of arts education in general and music education in particular on improving overall academic achievement, enhancing individual learning capacity, and improving emotional and social functioning.

Although a large majority of international studies which announce an emphasis on aesthetic education reduce their investigations in arts education due to different reasons, recent research-based work tend to value more what should be in our view the role of aesthetic education and experience in children's life,

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and focus on aesthetic elements as reflected in curricular areas rarely connected with arts and aesthetics. Thus, Jakobson & Wilkman (2008) analyzed records of children's talks and children-teachers interactions during sciences lessons in elementary school and showed that aesthetic judgments closely follow moments of anticipation or fulfillment; based on these results they suggest more nuanced connections between aesthetics and learning than discussed in the literature and, moreover, promote aesthetics as part of learning experiences beyond arts. Using a different perspective, Girod Twyman & Wojcikiewicz (2010) developed an experimental intervention based on teaching and learning from transformative, aesthetic experience as defined by Dewey and their results suggest that this type of approach would determine students to perceive differently the world. Going even further, Yang (2013) proposes didactic approaches to promote learning from the aesthetics of nature, which is as much as valuable as aesthetic dimensions of arts. Moon et al. (2013) address the usage of aesthetic experience favored by arts education in developing students' awareness of democratic values such as diversity, freedom or responsibility.

Aesthetic education is infused into school curricula in quite different manners: as disciplines or school-subjects (*i.e.*, arts education, visual cultural studies, music education etc.) or integrated into larger curricular approaches in order to promote interdisciplinary connections. In an international study covering arts education in nineteen countries, Taggart, Whitby & Sharp (2004) concluded that only a half of the analyzed national curricula include integrated curricular structures addressing this educational dimensions, while the rest favored distinct subject-matters with music education occupying large parts of instructional time and efforts devoted to aesthetic and arts education. This manner of ensuring aesthetic education is often criticized, as the scope and in-depth meaning of aesthetic education goes beyond the boundaries of arts education, regardless the number of school subjects dedicated to the field. As suggested before in the present contribution, aesthetic experiences are significant parts of children's life, as they have the tendency to express high motivation and attachment in artistic forms. On the other hand, sciences and nature, as well as social life are valued more and more for their aesthetic contents and power, and this should be more deeply reflected in school curricula.

2. An overview of developments in aesthetic and arts education within Romanian National Curriculum

Developments in aesthetic education in Romanian National Curriculum over time reflect the same preoccupations and tendencies as international trends in policies, practices and research summarized in the previous paragraph. In a diachronic analysis of aesthetic education in Romanian early education, Baciú & Bocoş (2012) reviewed several curricular document issued over a period of fifty years (the oldest document was issued in 1963, while the latest curricular national structured covered in the cited work is promoted in kindergartens since 2008) and concluded that this dimension of education evolved from a static

perspective to fostering creativity and integration of all aspects of children's learning, development and life experiences.

The emphasis on interdisciplinary and integrated approach of aesthetic element into early curriculum is further refined in a contribution of Pașca (2010) who suggests integrating music education alongside different curricular structures in Romanian kindergarten and elementary school, given the role of this process in stimulating a coherent view of the world and life among young children.

As reported in a study coordinated by Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) & Eurydice and published in 2009, the Romanian National Curriculum includes only two compulsory arts subjects (visual arts and music) and no other arts subjects are included as optional studies, except those proposed at school and local level. The study mentions among cross-curricular themes targeting arts and arts education Romanian language and literature, and musical education (integrating literary texts in musical pieces); practical abilities and fine arts education (decoration of schools and school yards); local art monuments and historical places; photography between science and art (p. 32). It is important to notice that these cross-curricular optional subject-matters are common especially in early education (preschool and primary school). The instructional time dedicated to arts education remains stable over grades, by contrast with other educational systems where the total amount of taught time in arts education decreases in higher grades of compulsory schooling. As in other European school curricula, ICT is explicitly associated with arts curriculum, but this trend is more visible in vocational high-schools with artistic orientation.

Formal arts education is seconded in Romania with extracurricular educational activities organized by the schools in close cooperation with museums and other cultural establishments. Recent developments in extracurricular activities within Romanian schools show a more clear orientation towards using community resources in promoting students' personal growth, with an emphasis on artistic activities. Education and culture governmental institutions, as well as several NGOs organize creativity workshops and artistic events promoting arts and artistic expression of children and youth.

Although several steps have been taken in order to better reflect the care for aesthetic education, Romanian educational policy and practices still lack consistence and tend to concentrate on arts education which cannot completely fulfill the aims of this important educational dimensions. The following brief analysis of the new curriculum for primary school, especially for the curricular level of fundamental acquisitions (preparatory, first and second grade) illustrates these trends, and highlights areas to be further developed if aesthetic education is to be considered more than arts education.

3. Aesthetic dimensions in current Romanian curriculum for elementary education

The new Romanian Law of Education 1/2011 reflected the need of including one of the preschool years within compulsory schooling, as a first step

in ensuring coherence and continuity in between kindergartens and primary school. More exactly, the last year of preschool education became the so-called preparatory grade and became compulsory for all children of 6 to 7 years of age, starting with the school year 2012-2013. The implementation of this apparently administrative measure was used for rethinking the curricular structures corresponding to primary school. The present analysis focuses on the current situation of aesthetic education within primary school curriculum, with an emphasis on curricular structures and corresponding instructional time, competences and educational aims, contents and suggested learning activities.

3.1. Curricular structures and prescribed instructional time

The overall curricular framework for elementary education is detailed in the Educational Ministry Order no. 3371 issued on 12th of March 2013, and came into force at the beginning of the school year 2013-2014. The new curricular structures for primary education tend to be integrative, as they propose new approaches under new names, at least for aesthetic education. Thus, curricular areas as physical education, sports and health, arts and technologies are to some point explicitly connected, as they are presented altogether and some of the corresponding subject-matters (namely, “Play and movement”, “Music and movement”, and “Visual arts and practical abilities”) are organized beyond discipline boundaries. However, at the heart of this approach lies the same traditional and somehow narrow view of covering aesthetic education only through arts education. In addition the instructional time dedicate to the two arts disciplines included in the core curriculum for primary education decreases: for “Music and movement” there are allocated 2 hours per week in preparatory, first and second grades, but only 1 hour per week in third and fourth grades; similarly, for “Visual arts and practical abilities” instructional time goes from 2 hours per week throughout preparatory to third grades of primary education to 1 hour per week in the fourth grade. It is relevant to note that the upper limit of weekly school time for primary school students varies between 20 and 21 hours per week. In other words, at the beginning of their elementary education, around ten percent of students’ school time is devoted to mainly two branches of arts education, and instructional time prescribed by the National Curriculum has the tendency to decrease to nearly a half towards the end of this school stage. Several other subject-matters are favored in terms of instructional time, among which we mention mathematics and sciences, and even foreign languages (the latest doubles its instructional time in third and fourth grade).

Curricular structures and instructional time prescribed for educational programs organized and taught in languages of national minorities keep similar time allocation for the two interdisciplinary subject-matters devoted to arts education. There are also noticeable exceptions from this perspective, in curricular prescriptions for integrated primary school programs in arts: thus, for elementary education integrated with intensive music preparation, primary school students are expected to follow four hours of musical education weekly, which includes playing a musical instrument, and music theory, solfeggio and

dictation; for elementary education integrated with intensive primary school in choreography, fourth graders are expected to get eight additional hours per week in dance and rhythm. The core subject-matters preserve their time allocations in all special educational programs in arts and sports.

3.2. Competences and educational aims

The Romanian Law of Education 1/2011 establishes eight domains of competency which has to be addressed through curricular structures and learning activities in primary and lower secondary school (Articles 68, paragraph 1): communication competences in Romanian language and mother language for national minorities; communication competences in foreign languages; basic competencies in mathematics, sciences and technologies; digital competencies reflected in using technology for learning purposes; social and civic competences; entrepreneurship competences; *competences in cultural sensitivity and expression*; and finally, learning to learn. As highlighted, one of the key competencies reflects the care of decision-makers for aesthetics, and suggests a larger approach than the one based on teaching and learning arts. These key competences are described for the elementary school level in the Ministry Order no. 3371, and the aesthetic domain is covered by the subsequent competence defined as manifestations of creativity and innovative spirit through participation in projects developed in the familiar environment, realization of various products by using new working techniques and using knowledge acquired in various contexts for solving new tasks.

Competences and educational aims for the two interdisciplinary curricular structures directly related to arts educational – “Music and movement” and “Visual arts and practical abilities” are further developed in Educational Ministry Order no. 3418 issued on 19th of March 2013 (Annex 2, applied from the beginning of the school year 2013-2014). The new curricular products cover only the cycle of fundamental acquisitions, which includes preparatory, first and second grade. General competences for “Music and movement” aim at perception of children's songs and simple elements of musical language; interpretation of songs for children, with age-specific means; and expression of ideas, feelings and experiences through music and movement, either individual or in group.

For the integrated subject of “Visual arts and practical abilities”, general competencies target exploring artistic messages expressed through visual language in diverse familiar contexts and creating functional and/or aesthetic objects using diverse materials and techniques. According with the structure of Romanian National Curriculum, for each general competence several specific competences and examples of learning activities are provided, but they will be discussed in the following section of the paper.

The key competence corresponding to the very end of elementary education, as well as general competences proposed for music, visual arts and practical abilities offer a mixed picture of decision-makers’ intentions: on one hand, we should note a considerable advancement towards curricular integration if present structures are compared with the previous prescriptions included in the

National Curriculum; on the other hand, integrative connections are suggested only among the subject-matters traditionally associated with arts, with few tentative openings to physical education and new technologies, which somehow partially respond to society's trends and expectations, but also to changes in children's learning needs.

3.3. Contents and suggested learning activities

Specific contents for „Music and movement” include vocal interpretation, individually and in groups, diction and timing; playing musical instruments, especially corporal percussion (e.g., clapping) and the use of improvised musical instruments; singing with accompaniment provided by teachers; elements of musical language: natural and instrumental sounds, rhythm, nuances in interpretation (joyful and said, loud and gently etc.); the melody (musical genres as children folklore and carols); movement on music (free movement, movement suggested by lyrics and rhythm, dancing, marching etc.).

“Visual arts and practical abilities” integrate drawing, modeling, working with paper and textiles, constructions, and photo and video production. Specific contents and suggested learning activities cover all fields, and the rationale beyond this choice reflects acknowledging the role of visual arts and practical abilities in the overall development of children, and in preparing them for the creative use and expression with a variety of techniques and materials. This view which was made visible in the curricular structures is in line with recent developments in international arts education and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetics in day by day life. In addition to traditional elements of visual language, the new suggested contents also provide clear connection with verbal and social expression of feelings (see for example, drama play and costume creation, illustrating short stories with images or shadows, decorating the classroom for special celebrations, role-playing with toys and objects created by children, organizing exhibitions open to the community etc.). This new subject-matter seems even more open to integrative approaches beyond its own boundaries, as it may be implicitly linked with language and literature, history and civic education, sciences and so on. However, all these potential links which may cover the gap in between school-subjects and may influence deeper infusion of aesthetics in elementary education are barely suggested and come to life if classrooms teachers perceive their formative importance and are open to new visions and didactic approaches. One of the most common complaints of classroom teachers in primary schools refers to overcrowded contents in “central” school-subjects (i.e., language, mathematics and sciences) prescribed in the National Curriculum and the derived limited attention and preoccupation for “marginal” matters, as arts. Moreover, if curricular structures for upper educational levels will follow a different organization path, all efforts in bringing to light aesthetical dimensions in all curricular areas as resources in liberating child expression and understanding life experiences beyond their factual aspects are in vain.

4. Final reflections

The present work aimed to suggest a different frame for looking at new curricular structures focusing on arts education, especially for elementary educational level. New Romanian National Curriculum for preparatory, first and second grades provided a good opportunity for illustrating partial integration of contemporary tendencies in promoting arts education in formal schooling structures and beyond. The curricular structures briefly presented and commented respond only in part to the voices asking for more careful and deeper infusion of aesthetics in education (Jakobson & Wickman, 2008; Girod, Twyman & Wojcikiewicz, 2010; Moon et al., 2013), and for avoidance of arts education as a closed construction with pale connections to real life experiences. However, it is to be noted that the new curricular structures for Romanian elementary education reflect certain openness to trends in international debates focusing on artistic and aesthetic education.

International studies emphasize the fact that arts educational remain the major approach for ensuring aesthetic education of students worldwide, but also reflect the care for limited effects of this route on children's understanding of beauty outside artistic expression. Aesthetic education aims the acknowledgement, the appreciation and the creation of beauty in all its facets and manifestations, and this view is still to be reflected in school curricula, although important steps have been taken in order to integrate arts education with other relevant experiences in children's life.

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