

8. THE FORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC CONTENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – AN ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM

Liliana Stan²⁸¹

Nicoleta Laura Popa²⁸²

Abstract: *Human beings prove constant receptivity for aesthetic dimensions of world's components, regardless of their age. The interest of young children for beauty (in its various facets) allows educators to activate it for its instrumental value in developing personalities (the emotional, volitional, moral, cognitive etc. dimensions), and for the benefits of reaffirming aesthetics itself. More than at other educational levels, in preschool education children's interest for aesthetics is acknowledged, and their aesthetic sensitivity grounds the achievement of all educational aims, by the coherent and proper integration of aesthetic contents into preschool education. The curricular offer for young children includes aesthetic experiences in distinct spaces, related with priority themes appropriate to children's developmental level (getting acquainted with the natural world, with human/social groups, and with humans as unique individuals). The present study integrates conclusions derived from the analysis of the current Romanian curriculum recommended for preschool education in 2008; main ideas refer to the identity of aesthetic contents and to associated formative meanings, as illustrated in the curriculum, but also beyond it.*

Key words: *education, aesthetics, aesthetic contents, preschool curriculum, young child.*

1. The contents of education during the first years of life

Shaping the personality of young children, just like in the case of any person, inevitably engages a sum of educational contents. The variety, diversity, and novelty that they share are characteristic features that beg no demonstration, since they are self-evident. Thinking along Comenius' philosophy, we argue that the offer of messages for young children integrates all significant fields of human knowledge and action, starting with metaphysics, physics, dialectics and grammar, and continuing with optics, astronomy, geography, chronology, history, arithmetic, geometry, statics, mechanics, rhetoric etc. (Comenius, 1970, pp. 135-136). We also agree to the variant proposed, in a quite inspired manner, by two American scholars who have become quite famous through their poem *Children Learn What They Live* (Nolte & Harris, 2007, p. 15). Without indicating the locus of origin for aspects of existence that are suggested to children, in order to be assimilated during their first years of existence, the authors highlight the essential values that need to be cultivated for the construction of psychic human normality (irrespective of the circumstances in which it is appropriate for them to be activated): tolerance, patience, on-going encouragement, appreciation, acceptance, approval/ recognition, generosity, honesty, respect, fairness, justice, friendship and so on. As one can see, the aesthetic is not listed among the invoked sources, but this does not mean that its existence is neglected or mitigated. On the contrary, what is offered to young children is unveiled by adults under the most advantageous hypostases,

²⁸¹ Associate Professor, PhD, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași from Romania, lstan@psih.uaic.ro

²⁸² Associate Professor, PhD, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași from Romania, npopa@psih.uaic.ro

including the aesthetic perspective. In fact, the contact with the beautiful, as well as with the ugly is intrinsic to the life of a child (Florian, 1992), but the educational act, which is intended, controlled and proposed institutionally (by adults) stimulates the reception of the beautiful by children, and their awareness of its presence in the human living environment (nature, man-made objects, speech), their engagement in achieving beauty by drawing, painting, modelling, singing etc. (Momanu, 2002, pp. 92-103). Capitalising on the formative valences of the aesthetic in nature, society, human manifestations or art as such is stipulated in fundamental documents of the management of the educational system²⁸³, in regulatory documents²⁸⁴ or documents that ground paideic intervention on young children, in theoretical analyses or in educational practices of human development during preschool and school education (Amadio, Truong & Tschurennev, 2006; Baciú & Bocoş, 2012; EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2009; Crain, 2003; Wallon, Cambier & Engelhart, 2008, Paşca, 2010; Schulman Kolumbus, 1998).

2. Preschool curriculum in Romania – an object of multiple investigations

The education of preschool children in Romania has been grounded and oriented strategically since the year 2008 by the regulating document known as the *Curriculum for the early education of children aged 3 to 6 / 7 years old* (henceforth, *Curriculum 2008*). The interest for the thorough study of the above mentioned regulatory document is justified by at least two reasons, detailed in the following. Firstly, *Curriculum 2008* is an ideatic-normative construct, consistent with similar educational frameworks from other countries in the world (England, France, Italy, Germany and so on), with a new, original structure that is extremely complex in comparison with previous similar documents targeting preschool education in Romania. It suggests a radical change of optics on the contents offered to preschool children by explicitly assuming a certain curricular perspective in education. Thinking along D'Hainaut's idea, the authors of the quoted material highlight the fact that *the core point of the curriculum must be the pupil, not the subject matter ... and that when one talks about the contents of the curriculum, one must understand that it is not a matter of statements of subject matters to study, but of goals expressed in terms of a pupil's competences, ways of acting or of knowing, in general* (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 9). Seen in this context, the issue of the contents offered to young children becomes a more difficult matter, which is more nuanced and requires increased and comprehensive vigilance²⁸⁵. Secondly, another source of

²⁸³ For instance, the National Education Law in Romania stipulates, under article 67, the sense of the orientation of the national curriculum for early education, showing that children's development in the kindergarten implies the emotional component of their personality as well (apart from the physical, cognitive and social components), which presupposes the resort to aesthetic contents.

²⁸⁴ The most representative example of regulatory documents are the programmes that guide educational activity in kindergartens. Beginning with the year 2008, in Romania, the type of document that we invoke in this paper has been known as *Curriculum for the early education of children aged 3 to 6 / 7 years old*.

²⁸⁵ Such a vision obliges one to perform an analytic change of direction; *the world* in which a child manifests himself or herself must be received as a background (fascinating, important, interesting in itself, as well as for the small child) for the world of the child himself or herself, for the universe that the child as such embodies at a

interest for the research of the official document that regulates formal preschool educational activity in Romania comes from the fact that its enforcement has been accompanied by a rather insufficient preparation of teacher trainers and educators, which, nevertheless, was explicitly assumed (a quite important aspect); at present, as well as when the new curricular orientation came into force, it is valued as unsatisfactory for the theoretical grounding offered to practitioners who use the document in their daily professional activity²⁸⁶.

Structurally, *Curriculum 2008* integrates nine segments of variable length²⁸⁷ (which, for the sake of facilitating the transmission of data in our study, we shall count, in what follows, from C1 to C9), each with a separate cognitive meaning:

C1- introductory component (called in the analysed document *The context which has favoured the introduction of the concept of early education in Romania and, implicitly, curriculum revision*) presents the framework for the introduction in Romanian educational practice of the concept of early education, and the circumstances that have imposed the revising of the preschool curriculum in the 2008 variant;

C2 - psycho-pedagogical grounding component (*Development and education of children aged 3 - 6/ 7 years*) refers to certain characteristic features of the development and education of children aged 3- 6/7 years, and mainly summarizes relevant results of scientific research in this matter;

C3 - self-identification component (*Structure and contents*) features the structure of the document proposed to educators under its new hypostasis;

C4 - particularisation/ particularity component (*New accents present in the revised curriculum*) indicates the new elements advanced by the regulatory structure proposed to be enforced;

C5 - managerial-organisational component (*curriculum*), for the age intervals of preschool children (3,1 – 5 years and 5,1 – 7 years, respectively level I and level II) indicates the curriculum as such with indications on categories of learning activities and the time intervals set apart for them daily/ weekly;

C6 - methodological component (*Methodology to apply the curriculum for children aged 3 to 6/ 7 years old*) indicates the major orientations of instruments approached in the formative relation with preschool children;

C7 - strategic contents component (*Stipulations concerning the organization of the yearly study programme according to topics*) indicates six topics of

given moment and which is subject to an ineffable becoming, that is unpredictable in a close or distant perspective. Therefore, to indicate the elements of contents offered for training purposes to children in their first years of existence is metamorphosised in identifying at least two aspects: first, we have to highlight the goals intended to be met in the (formal) context of the kindergarten and in the (nonformal/ informal) context of the family, and then it is necessary to indicate the thematic/ ideatic offer for young children.

²⁸⁶ The introductory remarks to the *Curriculum 2008* point out that “a genuine trainer knows that the true work of a kindergarten teacher lies behind this curricular document, that there are countless fine details that she is to conceive and evaluate alone and that nothing can be more challenging from a professional point of view than to “compete against” the curriculum used with the group of children and thus find new meanings, approaches, strategies for its application etc.” (Curriculum, 2008, p. 9).

²⁸⁷ The nine segments outlined are of variable scope, from one page up to 80 pages, in a document totaling 142 pages.

generous names that will be found in the entire programme of the kindergarten as subjects that are constantly followed, and tailored according to the children's age; the topics are: *Who am I/are we? How is it/was it and will it be here on earth? When/how and why something happens? Who and how plans/organises an activity? What and how do I want to be? By means of what and how do we express what we feel?*

C8 – objective component (*Framework objectives and reference objectives*) indicates the system of framework and reference objectives for the six major topics;

C9 - contents component details, for each major topic, the thematic approach for the two age levels of children in preschool education: 3,1 – 5 years and 5,1 – 7 years, by correlating a set of components for each topic: fields of experience, reference objectives, behaviours aimed in agreement with intentions assumed as objectives / reference objectives and possible / suggested contents. The fields of integrated experience are: *aesthetic and creative* (ECF), *man and society* (MSF), *language and communication* (LCF), *sciences* (SF), and *psychomotor* (PMF).

3. The aesthetic dimension reflected in *Curriculum 2008*

The current study synthesises a few observations resulting from the analysis of the ideological contents of *Curriculum for the early education of children aged 3 to 6/ 7 years*; we look at aspects connected to the aesthetic component within each element in the structure of the document. Our major interest is to identify if there are references, considerations and/or explicit ideas referring to the aesthetic component in the education of preschool children; to signal aesthetic contents indicated to be integrated in formal interventions proposed to children, and to indicate the pedagogical value of messages with an aesthetic dimension in the set of paideic interventions on children.

The aesthetic dimension is easily found in the document that we are analysing; none of the C1 – C9 components indicated above avoids the aesthetic aspect. If in the contents of certain components (such as C1, C2, C3²⁸⁸, C4, C5), references are at the level of statements, in the other components, namely C6, C7, C8 and C9, they are ample, explicit, consistent and direct. Among the latter category of components of *Curriculum 2008*, according to their relevance in our study, we can identify aspects concerning the complex of goals in which the aesthetic content proposed to preschool children is engaged, we indicate the elements of aesthetic content for levels I and II of preschool education, and finally, we draw some concluding remarks.

3.1. The goals of aesthetic education in *Curriculum 2008*

The aesthetic and creative field (ACF) in activities with young children aims for six framework objectives, respectively twenty-three reference

²⁸⁸ C3 mentions the Aesthetic and creative field of Experience – ACF, together with the Man and society field (MSF), the Language and communication field (LCF), the Science field (SF), and the Psycho-motric field (PMF).

objectives (*Curriculum, 2008*, pp. 33-34). Although the intentionalities indicated in the curricular document under analysis are associated mainly to the mentioned field of experience, they are constantly pursued in the other fields as well (MSF, LCF, SF, PMF), in all activities or situations lived by children in the kindergarten environment and outside it.

The general objectives inventoried for the orientation of activities with preschool children aim to: train work skills for drawing, painting, modelling; draw correspondences between the various elements of plastic language and forms, objects from the surrounding environment (nature, art and social life); stimulate creativity and expressiveness via drawing, painting, modelling; train the capacity to receive sounds and music; train capacities to express oneself by music; know the great values of national and world musical creation.

Deriving from the preceding general intentionalities, the *reference objectives* indicate: creating visual themes that are specific to drawing; obtaining visual effects, spontaneous and elaborate forms via techniques which are specific to painting; practising the technical skills that are proper to modelling in reproducing visual themes; recognising the elements of visual language and differentiating the forms and colours in the surrounding environment; knowing and differentiating materials and work instruments, respectively knowing and applying rules how to use them; using an appropriate language with respect to various actual visual activities; the original, personal visual composition using various materials and techniques chosen by children; the free and creative interpretation of visual works that express aesthetic feelings; recognising the artistic creations that are appropriate to the age-specific features of preschool children and to their preoccupations (portraits of children, family scenes, landscapes, humans' or children's daily activities and games); discovering the surrounding world via hearing; the auditory differentiation of the tone of sounds from the close environment and of musical sounds; the auditory differentiation of the intensity, length and pitch of sounds from the close environment and of musical sounds, in particular; singing songs for children; singing/ singing with a musical instrument; the rhythmic accompaniment of songs; singing/ singing in elementary harmonic-polyphonic arrangements; association of movements suggested by the text of a song with its rhythm; expressing the psychological state created by the music listened to via movement; expressing musical impressions in games; doing spontaneous improvisations, free from syncretic motifs (onomatopoeic text and melody, onomatopoeic text and movement, onomatopoeic text, melody and movement); recognising fragments from national and world musical creations that are appropriate for the specific age of preschool children and for their preoccupations.

3.2. Recommended contents in the aesthetic education of preschool children

Young children's enthusiastic perceptive receptiveness to the aesthetic (Crain, 2003, p. 81), especially via visual and auditory perceptions, as well as the natural way in which children engage in them (Schulman Kolumbus, 1998, p. 49), generate, at institutional level, the constant enabling of a child's contact with certain aesthetic contents. Young children's gradual familiarisation with the

aesthetic is carried out, on the one hand, via drawing, painting, modelling and, on the other hand, via music.

Seen through the perspective of the contents of drawing, painting and modelling, *Curriculum 2008* retains as messages that can be integrated in activities with preschool children the following thematic components:

- stimulating the production of graphic gestures, "even mere doodles" (*Curriculum 2008*. p. 42, 52);
- activating elements of visual language in thematic or non-thematic products: the point (static or dynamic), the line (straight or curved, closed, open, in various positions, continuous/ discontinuous), ornamental elements, the plastic surface (plane), spontaneous forms;
- the use of colours, individually or in combination, by engaging in various techniques (fusion, pressing, overlapping, bleaching, watering, folding the paper, the use of a tuft of wool, of a thread etc.), the use of various modelling techniques (pressing, deepening, circular movement, flattening, and so on) or of techniques which are complementary to modelling;
- the use of work materials that are different for drawing, painting, modelling (pencil, brush, chalk, marker, ceracoat pens, sponge, palm, finger, crumpled paper, special/ rare canvases, brush, stamp, clay, plasticine, dough) that must be known and used appropriately, according to specific regulations, that are subordinate to the goals of aesthetic education;
- the use of various support materials (paper, carton, glass, wood, canvas, various objects) for drawing, painting, modelling;
- creating drawings in black and white or in colours (along the entire chromatic register), on given or free surfaces, in given or semi-marked/ gapped contours (surfaces that must be completed), individually or collectively (collage), creating visual compositions, modelling on various topics (ball, man etc.);
- participation in the creation of the aesthetic environmental framework in the preschool education institution, in displays of products obtained via artistic, plastic or modelling activities (exhibitions, decorations, competitions, draws etc.);
- causing multiple reactions to the product drawn, painted or modelled by a child himself, by other children, by any person, by the great consecrated creators (justified appreciation/ rejection, admiration, desire to reproduce, improve, make comments, recognize national or universal art works etc.);
- the use of words and expressions specific to artistic and visual activities in the description of actions generated by the application of various work techniques (aspects valid for level II of preschool education).

In terms of musical contents, *Curriculum 2008* indicates the following elements of the formative offer:

- listening to sounds from nature and from the surrounding environment, listening to musical compositions / songs (pieces that are popular in the area, fragments from the national or international educated musical creation) through auditions, participations in concerts for children, festivities that involve music;
- recognising spoken/ uttered sounds, sung sounds, certain songs;

- reproducing sounds, songs/ singing or singing as an individual activity, in pairs (duet) or in a group (vocal group / choir), as a simultaneous or alternative/ chain activity, integrating various sound characteristics (intensity, rhythm, pitch, tonality, length, harmony), with and without accompaniment;
- accompanying songs with sonorous objects, musical toys or proper instruments (usually used by adults);
- reproducing the musical rhythm received by children in various ways (free or imposed movements, gestures, bodily actions);
- experiencing psychological states in tune with the musical genre/ style that children have listened to or sung/ interpreted.

It is worthy to mention that contents of aesthetic education activities (AEA) in kindergarten can be enriched with specific messages integrated in elective subjects.

4. Concluding remarks

In preschool education, AEA, via their ultimate goals and corresponding contents, possess certain pedagogical valences to shape the personality of children during the first years of their life. It is not only that one can rightfully talk about a pedagogy and didactics/ teaching methodology of drawing, music, modelling, but it is also necessary to become aware of the existence of a special pedagogy via drawing, music, modelling, and art in general (Wallon, Cambier & Engelhart, 2008, pp. 170-172). In the spirit of *Curriculum 2008*, the pedagogical valences of AEA are set against the following aspects.

AEA – answer for children’s needs. Among children's essential needs (C1, *Curriculum 2008*, pp. 5, 6, 9), the need for communication received an unusual answer via the creation of opportunities for expression through music, drawing, painting, modelling (separate, independent or via their correlation in complexes of syncretic communication). Within the ECF, activities offer children the possibility to “respond emotionally and intellectually to perceptive experiences”, which implies activating children’s sensibility to various levels of manifestation of quality, the appreciation of the beautiful and the appropriateness to purpose or use” (*Curriculum 2008*, p. 10). The imperative of the harmonious development (physical, psychological, spiritual, social, affective, cognitive, cultural) of children, considered a priority aspect in the national and global educational policies (*Curriculum 2008*, p. 6), imposes the integration of aesthetic values in the offer for preschool children during the entire institutional programme and, as much as possible, outside it, in the familial environment of a child’s life. The formative potential of aesthetic contents and of AEA is directly correlated with the training/ stimulation/ development of children’s creativity in connection with all thematic openings proposed to them (Baciu & Bocoş, 2012).

AEA – occasions for multiple experimentation for preschool children, to know the world. The world (natural, human, social) can be discovered by preschool children by the intended, guided activation of their perceptive resources, especially the auditory and visual ones. Musical education, artistic

and plastic activities, as well as practical activities approached (at the level of a day) mono-disciplinarily or inter-disciplinarily/ in an integrated manner can be correlated with all categories of contents proposed to children. At the level of intentions, *Curriculum 2008* specifies that AEA can contribute to the discovery of the surrounding world with the help of hearing (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 83) and through sight, both senses being engaged in the carrying out of individual explorations/ discoveries, observations and experiments. Through drawing, in particular, children “learn how to see” (Wallon, Cambier & Engelhart, 2008, p. 172).

AEA – source of delimitation and spatial structuring/ ordering. The resources (objects) activated for ECF and AEA naturally structure the educational environment in an unusual centre (or sector, zone, corner), maybe one of the most attractive ones, which is fascinating for preschool children if we consider the slight likelihood of having a correspondent in the family environment that children come from (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 19). The minuscule set of objects on which AEA is based constitutes the material support without which the category of activities that we refer to could not unfold as such, but at the same time, it constitutes an important source of contents that can be capitalised on in training children in the informational perspective as such, in their orientation in the world of things that are useful to humans, in receiving and understanding the idea of becoming, determination, causality, control over things, control over one’s own person/ self-control etc. The concrete resources on which AEA is based offers an essential support to ensure the intuitive character of teaching small age children, not only for AEA, but also for any type of content proposed to children (sciences, mathematics, language etc.).

AEA – resource to discipline children. Activities or actions for children to produce aesthetic contents are activated in the kindergarten in a repetitive, recurrent manner. Seen in this perspective, they gain the value of *routines*, namely “landmark activities according to which the entire activity of a day unfolds” (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 19), as well as of elements of passage from one category of learning activities to another, i.e. the value of *transitions*. Activities based on rhythmic walking, on music, on a text uttered in jolts, games with a text and singing (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 20) are suggested as opportune ways to carry out routines and transitions. For the entire daily programme in the kindergarten, *Curriculum 2008* specifies the obligation to conceive a moment or a sequence of movements that will be based on games of movement with text and singing (*Curriculum, 2008*, p. 21). Moreover, from the perspective of the time allotted for AEA, the invocation of aesthetic contents in independent activities intended for them (and specified in the educational plan under component C5 from *Curriculum 2008*), and for the performance of transitions and routines, shows that there is no assumed or recommended administrative limit for them, yet there is total opening for the appeal to musical contents, to drawing and modelling whenever such an appeal is required by pedagogic reasons connected to disciplining, drawing attention, motivating, deepening or integrating contents in coherent structures that are accessible to children.

References

1. Amadio, M., Truong, N., Tschurennev, J., (2006), *Instructional time and the Place of Aesthetic Education in School curricula at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century*, UNESCO International Bureau of Education, Geneva, Accessed on-line in January 2014: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001462/146280e.pdf>
2. Baci, O. R., Bocoș, M., (2012), Aesthetic education in Romanian kindergartens diachronic approaches, *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 2247-2252
3. Comenius, (1970), *Didactica Magna*, Editura Didactică and Pedagogică, București
4. Crain, W., (2003), *Dreptul la copilărie*, Editura Lucman, București
5. EACEA P9 Eurydice, (2009), *Arts and Cultural Education at School in Europe*, Accessed on-line in January 2014: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice%20/documents/thematic_reports/113EN.pdf
6. Florian, M., (1992), *Metafizică și artă*, Editura Echinoc, Cluj.
7. Momanu, M., (2002), *Introducere în teoria educației*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 92-103
8. Nolte, D., L., Harris, R., (2007), *Copiii învață ceea ce trăiesc*, Editura Humanitas, București
9. Pașca, E. M., (2010), Interdisciplinary Didactical Strategies of the Musical Education from Integrated Education Perspective, in *Early Ages, Recent Advances in Acoustics & Music*. Proceedings of the 11th WSEAS international conference on Acoustics & music: theory & applications, 149-154
10. Schulman Kolumbus, E., (1998), *Didactică preșcolară*, Editura V&Integral, București
11. Wallon, P., Cambier, A., Engelhart, D., (2008), *Psihologia desenei la copil*, Editura Trei, București
12. *** Legea Educației Naționale, (2011), Monitorul Oficial al României nr. 18 din 10 ianuarie 2011
13. *** Curriculum pentru educația timpurie a copiilor de la 3 la 6/ 7 ani, (2008), Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Tineretului. Unitatea de Management al Proiectelor pentru Învățământul Preuniversitar