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The necessity of teaching visual arts in primary school

1. Introduction

It is a known fact that the role of primary school is to develop and build upon the skills and knowledge on visual arts that children have obtained in kindergarten; through visual arts feelings, ideas, and the visual perception of the world in general are given form. Proper guidance by the teacher is necessary in order for children to illustrate imaginary forms and spaces, ideas and feelings. However, the teachers who are appointed with the task of teaching visual arts in all classes in primary school usually lack both knowledge and skills, as they have received scarce training during their basic studies (either at Pedagogical Academies in the past, or at University, before pedagogical departments were staffed with specialized teaching personnel).

The teaching of visual arts was introduced in Greek primary school about thirty years ago, and it was left to the personal initiative of conscientious individual teachers ever since. In school it is owing to the teacher alone that children might be brought into contact with visual arts and art in general. The proper teaching of visual arts is a very important aspect in engaging children to become interested and to appreciate art; to make art a way of life. But we strongly believe that the foundations in visual arts must be laid in kindergarten. We will agree with Ardouin (2000) that the objective of a school offering general knowledge is not to create artists, but art-loving and thinking citizens, because visual arts as a plastic language is related to certain real conventions, real stereotypes, and a conventional outlook that is based not only on the senses, but on cognition (Ardouin, 2000: 106).

For most teachers and other people working in education, visual arts education is the same as instructing pupils, or is considered as a special form of general teaching that coincides with so called active teaching methods. But visual arts education neither coincides with giving lessons in visual arts, nor is it just a special form of general teaching (Arapaki, 2002). Moreover, new findings in cognitive sciences confirm that learning is dependent on the special contents of the objects of learning (Karmiloff-Smith, 1998, Papamichail, 1994). Therefore, it is our opinion that artists should be teaching this specific subject at all levels of education.

Finally, we would like to state that a contemporary view of the teaching in visual arts at any level requires a theoretical background of visual arts education that combines the aesthetic perception of visual arts with a pedagogical outlook of the educational environment, and a psychological view of the nature and character of the population it addresses. Of course such a theoretical framework isn't simply the sum of the principles set by those three fields, but an entirely new and autonomous approach (Aparaki, 2002). Research on visual arts education is informed not only by the complex social process of education, but also by individual skills that need to be analyzed from an artistic and a psychological point of view. Such a theoretical framework could be constructed from a synthesis of three different approaches on children's drawing: (a) the *aesthetic approach*, which examines the views of known and valid visual artists who consider children's drawing as important, sometimes even equivalent to adult artistic operation; (b) the *psychological approach*, which examines psychological and pedagogical views on the cognitive and conceptual characteristics of visual artistic products by preschoolers; and (c) the *approach of teaching children's drawing*, which addresses the various teaching frameworks and their relation to the aesthetic and psychological outcome in each case.

II. Visual arts education

Visual arts education is an autonomous research field that combines aesthetic perceptions of visual arts, pedagogical views on the educational environment for the teaching on visual arts, and psychological views on the nature and character of the population addressed when teaching visual arts. Visual arts education is concerned with three kinds of issues: (a) the problem of didactic transposition, (b) the students' apprehension of their own knowledge on visual arts and their development throughout the course, and (c) The way visual arts are introduced into a school, and the learning process. In particular:

Didactic transposition refers to the adapting of knowledge on visual arts to school contents (Arapaki, 2002). Usually it is an implied process, and the addressing of visual arts education aims at raising teachers' awareness. According to Koliopoulos (2004), didactic transposition refers to the adapting of a certain concept (in the case of visual arts color, form etc) in order to apply to the purpose of teaching; in other words to comply with the ideas stated or implied in the official curriculum, and reproduced in textbooks and teachers' books. By now it is generally accepted that the selection of certain teaching contents is adjusted to each specific school level and the according cognitive development. To adapt contents to teaching does not mean just simplifying them to eliminate the more difficult or abstract features, but usually to radically reform them. The following extensive abstract

quoted from Ardouin (2000: 134) describes one aspect of didactic transposition of the knowledge on visual arts: "If we take the example of art, we could assume that the knowledge we must teach in school refers to the rules for drawing, which are supposed to give children the ability to perceive beauty. But if we do so we have already predefined art; we have given students a fixed image of what art is. This definition is given in the name of specific values that are supposed to allow children their inscription in a global continuity, the heritage of their ancestors etc. But such a definition ignores other forms of knowledge or social practice that may exist simultaneously, which call into question the given rules for drawing. In 1925 for example, the contents taught in drawing class at school were aligned with a specific academic orientation; whereas in the world of art, in social practice, artists like Picasso had already moved towards the deconstruction of space, the questioning of drawing as an academic canon etc. As for Marcel Duchamp, he had already exhibited his infamous *Fountain*. If such artists are excluded from the compulsory syllabus, then drawing class preserves a strictly academic outlook; it is more like a certain reading of art, than art per se. Indeed, art in school is not the same like Picasso. In this case, to develop a course plan first of all means to make a choice; to select what one happens to consider as being the definition of art. Every lesson, then, is a reading of the complete framework of the course". Then what are the defining factors of didactic transposition at various levels in school? What does the teaching of concepts such as "form" or "color" mean at each level? What aesthetic perception is hidden behind the curriculum in visual arts at every specific educational level? Those are some of the questions on the problem of didactic transposition, which visual arts education attempts to address.

The issue of the students' apprehension of their own knowledge on visual arts and their development throughout the course. Here the focus of interest shifts from the relation between teacher and knowledge, to the relation between student and knowledge. In this case, according to Gaillot (2002), we are prompted to think about the ways in which the student will gain knowledge on visual arts. The "constructive" approach to learning gives us a framework of how this can be achieved. Again Ardouin (2000) writes: "In order to say that we give students the potential to construct knowledge we must first lead them to the 'edge of deficiency', that is to put them in a situation where what they already know is insufficient to solve a given problem; also we must give them the incentive to realize that there is another solution. Those following Piaget will be intrigued in this process of knowledge formation. In other words, they will be interested in the obstacles and problems students encounter throughout learning, and they will assist their students to overcome those hindrances through specified teaching; through the interaction with the object of knowledge, children will understand the importance of what they are doing, as well as their individual part in the process (Arapaki, 2002).

The way visual arts are introduced into a school, and the learning process. In this case the issue at hand is the teacher-student relationship. The creation of a positive learning environment, the construction of a didactic contract where both parties are aware of their mutual expectations, and the selection of a teaching strategy are basic issues for visual arts education. When choosing to adopt a “guided” approach, which necessitates the active involvement and intervention of the teacher in order for the child to develop the aspired knowledge, skill and attitude (Arapaki 2000, Salla-Dokoumetzidi, 1996), instead of a “free” approach, it is important to take the children’s cognitive structure, as well as the teacher’s role in the classroom into account. Visual arts education as a research field can be combined with pedagogical practice in many ways. One way is through the collaboration of researchers and teachers, both in classical or action research (Bagakis, 2002). Another way is working together during training courses. Nevertheless, in this case one must be careful not to draw easy conclusions, because the simple transference of research findings into education hasn’t proved efficacious.

III. The teaching of visual arts

The aim of visual arts education is to provide teachers with understanding and methods that will facilitate the application of the basic principles of the curriculum; furthermore, to transcribe this curriculum into separate sequential teaching units, whilst comprehending not only the applied method but the reasoning behind it. Instead of passively obeying instructions, the teacher becomes an active agent who can adapt the curriculum to the students’ interests and needs. A contemporary outlook on visual arts education as a tool for analysis, design, and evaluation of the teaching in visual arts acknowledges the need to embed research findings into the practice of teaching. Furthermore it acknowledges the role of the curriculum. A telling example of how visual arts education is perceived as a tool for analysis, design and evaluation of the teaching in visual arts is the book *Approaches to art in education* by Laura Chapman (1993). Although it relies on research trends from the seventies, it does bring the conceptual and cultural dimension of the teaching in visual arts to the fore; also it underscores the necessity to take research findings on children’s artistic development into account. On a practical level the book offers instructions and ideas for scheduling and creating teaching units. Gaillot (2002) and Ardouin (2000) also propose similar tools that are based on more contemporary ideas and recent research. Both propose a conceptual approach to the teaching in visual arts; the concepts suggested are related to (a) the form and nature of the artistic process, (b) the creative process per se, and (c) the importance of the

piece of art. Subsequently, those contexts are transformed into teaching contexts to be used by teachers in class.

The main teaching contexts are: (a) the formulation of *functional teaching targets* that refer to the development of student's theoretical (concepts), creative (practice), and cultural (cultural traits) skills. Gaillot believes that "functional targets predetermine what a student is capable of doing (e.g. to creatively express the feeling of imbalance and focus when asked to illustrate a theme such as fish in an aquarium on the onset to catch the bait [...], or to distinguish images illustrating works of art where such an imbalance is determinative). In the example stated above, we intend that children comprehend the concept of "imbalance"; such understanding leads to the correlation between empty and full with the rules of synthesis (rhythm, balance, focus, intensity of color, contrast in tone etc.)...". (b) The choice of a teaching strategy depends on various factors: the institutional framework where the teaching is conducted (conventional lesson, working in groups, at the museum etc.); the functional targets that have been set; the type of problem students are assigned with; and the cognitive obstacles they will have to overcome in order to construct and employ new sets of knowledge in visual arts (Arapaki, 2002). Following Gaillot (2002) again, the teaching in visual arts can be organized according to the following strategies: 1. Talk and chalk, which in spite of being the old fashioned way to teach visual arts, can still save us plenty of time occasionally (e.g. by directly introducing a theme); 2. Conversational teaching, which can take various forms depending on the problem assigned and the proposed working strategy. In this instance the theme and the topic - problem assigned to the students is decisive. "We must bring to the fore the subject that will make students think", writes Gaillot. "We must 'embellish' the theme, in order to make it attractive by taking students interests into account (e.g. to relate works of art to pages of magazines students read); to cover it up with a substitute target; and to construct the situation to be perceived in such a way, that the question will transpire automatically during the process". The solution for any given theme or topic could be closed (there is only a single solution to the problem), or open (where students have to seek either a limited number, or as many solutions as possible).

A tool for analyzing, designing, and evaluating the teaching in visual arts such as visual arts education in the specific form we described in this section, offers many advantages for the teacher. Some can draw on it to comprehend the features and limits of the framework they work in; others to come up with ideas for the lesson; and others yet to use it as a reference for the practices they employ, reach a better understanding of the curriculum, and develop a critical stance towards it. Thus, it is manifest that this framework provides an ideal conjuncture between theory and practice, research and experience.

IV. Teaching approaches

Gardner (1982) classifies approaches to teaching children's drawing into two large categories: a) the "unfolding" or "natural" approach that aims at protecting children from unwanted influences, in order for them to naturally develop their own artistic potentiality, and b) the "guided" approach, according to which, left on their own, children will never be able to develop their full potential.

It should be stated that the purpose of the "unfolding" or "natural" approach to the teaching in visual arts is limited to the emotional and psychomotor field. The development of creative acting and the familiarization with the content and the possibilities offered by the various materials used in the teaching of visual arts are the main objective of the "unfolding" or "natural" approach. On the other hand, as the intention is children's self-development, obviously there is an absence of a cognitive aspect in this method. Of course some cognitive aims are declared, but without any substantial content, as they are not clearly related to a specific teaching practice. In this framework, any typically developed child is considered as a potential creative and imaginative artist. Therefore, the visual arts teacher takes on the role of a pedagogue in the tradition of Rousseau; s/he is entrusted with the responsibility to protect the innocent and fragile young child from harmful social forces, so that its innate talent may flourish. It is important, though, that the teacher is also familiar with the "guided" approach in order for a course to succeed (Arapaki, 2001).

From the perspective of the "guided" approach, Gardner (1982) believes that if a child is left to its own devices it will never develop its full potential. For that reason he strongly claims that the teacher's guidance and intervention is necessary in order for the child to develop a certain knowledge, skill and ideas. Although many researchers accept the significance of didactic intervention exactly because they see the importance of external influences on the development of children's drawing (Wallon et al., 1990), they do not propose any clear and detailed suggestions on the subject, nor do they formulate any completed teaching plans or models, which emphasize on cognitive goals. "We usually limit ourselves to slowly teaching children a new technique, which, however, does not respond to any need they might have", Widlocher states; and further on he asks himself: "'Drawing education can play a role in the spontaneous development of children's drawing, from the phase of smearing to adulthood, but what is its precise effect?" (Wallon et al., 1990: 152). Chapman (1993) motivates teachers to directly and systematically guide their students so as: (a) to encourage children to speak about their work, because the awareness of the connection between visual forms and experience is amplified through speech acts; (b) to read stories to the children without showing them the corresponding pictures, until they have found a way to visually express their ideas

and feelings on the story themselves; also to direct children to combine their impressions from a certain event or experience; (c) to encourage them to create a series of designs, pictures or sculptures on the same or similar subjects, in order to elaborate and amplify the children's means of expression; and (d) to help them link the natural use of those means with the visual virtues of their works through specific activities, because it is known that children of this age aren't particularly interested in controlling their tools in order to achieve visual precision. She also asserts (Chapman, 1993) that this can occur if the educator guides the children towards understanding the relation between the meanings they wish to express and the visual images that are able to convey them. In our opinion this process must go even further, towards the improvement of the old and the construction of new relations between meanings and their visual representation. But this can only happen through a teaching that poses specific conceptual goals; which will intensify the recognition, improvement, and construction of such relations. It goes without saying, of course, that emotional and psychomotor didactic goals should not be neglected. On the contrary, they should underscore the cognitive aims. Finally, we believe that the "guided" approach, while not constituting a dominant trend nowadays (at least in primary school and in kindergarten), is the most effective method for arriving at teachers' didactic goals.

V. Afterword

Our intention is to contribute to the definition of the framework of visual arts education; we wish to underscore the practical value the approaches we presented have for teachers, and to state that through those approaches the teaching in visual arts will become more rational and less empirical. The most common problem with the teaching in visual arts is that teachers make arbitrary decisions on various subjects such as the design of thematic units, lesson planning, or the designation of particular evaluation criteria for the students' artistic products; in other words, there is a lack of specific teaching standards. To confront such shortcoming it is important to develop the teachers'



critical perception on the teaching in visual arts. Therefore it is essential to initiate teachers to the “guided” approach in particular, so as to achieve good teaching results. This is a difficult task because it presupposes a radical shift in pedagogical perception and teaching orientation from teachers who generally employ the “unfolding” or “natural” approach to the teaching in visual arts, especially given their commonly insufficient command on the subject. Subsequently, such change must be aspired at the level of undergraduate studies, as well as through systematic training programs, instead of short-term seminars. Finally we propose to prioritize the instruction of teachers in primary school, and in compulsory education in general. It is obvious that to meet the requirements to a contemporary teaching in visual arts, teachers need to draw from theory in visual arts education. They must have excellent command of the subject, in order to be in a position to accomplish holistic didactic transposition; this means that teachers are aware of the process by which theoretical knowledge in visual arts becomes school content.

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