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YOUNG CHILDREN CULTIVATE THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Katerina Kokkinaki

Mystra 16, Keratsini, 18758, Greece University of west Attica

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*Corresponding author: Katerina Kokkinaki

Mystra 16, Keratsini, 18758, Greece University of west Attica

Abstract

It has been observed that in education children are taught art via unilateral practices that don't offer a holistic connection with the everyday world. This research studies, whether children can shape a holistic aesthetic harmonized with the children's culture and development. The Action Research took place in an Experimental School, via natural, playful and experiential practices, and was aiming to harmonize art, with the children's daily life and culture. Through a three-axis program, of space-object-narration and the formation of a design-community, children showed a change of attitude towards their aesthetic role in their lives and environment.

Keywords: Every day aesthetics, holistic education, children's community, participatory design, experience learning

Introduction

This study deals with the issue of aesthetic perception and development, in primary school children. The main point of the research argues that the issues of daily life can form a deeper and more meaningful connection between children and aesthetics than the academic art, that is usually detached from everyday life. The aim is the study of young children's aesthetics in contemporary everyday life through the teaching of visual arts. In a child-centered and interactive school environment, the concepts of experiential, holistic, playful and multimodal learning are cultivated, encouraging children to learn, to discover, to recognize and enjoy aesthetic values.

The research was carried out in an Experimental school of Attica by the school's art teacher and researcher, in a group of 25

participants-children and it was based on the method of Action Research. The analysis of the results showed that when children experience art naturally in their daily life, they develop in a holistic way with a dynamic aesthetic that is simultaneously related to the environment, culture and relationships. Children's aesthetic cultivation can be triggered by material culture, as the formation of their perception at this age comes out from live experiences of the real world. Additionally, it was revealed that through the formation of a community and the use of sustainable and participatory design, children became self-directed and were able to take initiatives for their environment, while interacting with others. At the same time the therapeutic methods of art helped the children to develop their social and emotional intelligence.

The inability for a holistic aesthetic education at the modern school

It is well known that the school is not a fertile environment for living aesthetic experiences, when the arts do not function as fields of holistic activation for the children with their essential involvement in the learning processes (Cho & Vitale, 2019). The main gap that was discovered during the research, was the incomplete aesthetic education and cultivation of children in many aspects of their lives. Although they are taught arts from an early age, they gradually lose their aesthetic interest, except those with extraordinary talent. It was also found that in the education of the visual arts, children mainly practice in manual ways without the global connection of everyday issues, observation, critical reflection, visual literacy and above all, without the connection to the culture of their life. Art, as taught in schools, seems to be distant from children's authentic interests throughout compulsory education. In addition, it is observed that older high school students and adults do not care about aesthetic quality in their lives, as they have only associated it with eminent art, displayed by the academic recognized artists. However, aesthetics is everywhere in life, in actions, objects, environment, fashion, creative collaboration, aesthetic enjoyment, participating in aesthetic decisions, as well as in human relationships.

In particular, what happens in most schools is that art educators often look forward to specific and limited cultural standards. The practices of aesthetic education that are applied during the lesson, function rather as technocratic and planned actions from which pre-recorded results are expected (Sotiropoulou-Zorbala, 2020; Efland, 2004). Also, many educators focus more on improving the produced aesthetic results and less on the processes in which children participate (Oreck, 2000). But these kinds of actions don't leave room for the development of emotional and social experiences for the children (Sotiropoulou-Zorbala, 2020). The study of art however is not legitimate to be done unilaterally, but in a way that fulfills the multiple purposes of artistic education (Glykofrydi-Leonsini, 2006, p. 293-299). Despite UNESCO's ambitious declarations and systematic efforts regarding creativity and art, the value of the education of art in school's daily practice has not been yet realized (Amadio et al., 2006).

What is the purpose of today's aesthetics in primary education?

The aesthetic education and especially the visual education (that this research deals) can lead to the cultivation of the child and the development of its personality. Aesthetic education is the result of many factors and is linked to sensitivity, cultivation, creative expression and sociability (Glykofrydi-Leontsini, 2006, p. 305). At the same time, the purpose of education is the all-round development of the child's personality on a cognitive, social and emotional level. Thus, we are facing now a new scheme of aesthetic education which has to do with the aesthetic development of the individual (Kalouri-Antonopoulou, 1999, p. 27 -28). In the program of the International Organization for Education Through Art (INSEA)¹ it is stated that art and aesthetic education contribute immeasurably to the education of the personality, to the harmonious development of the individual and to his/her mental balance. Art is important not to be treated as a supplementary means of development, but as an aspect of personality (Epstein & Trimi, 2005).

Specifically, in primary school, art is not cultivated for art's sake but for the child's personality, to strengthen its self-confidence and self-image (Kalouri-Antonopoulou, 1999, p. 27-89, describing this way a multimodal and inclusive framework, so that art is not just the business of the few. Creativity should concern all individuals (Xanthakou et al., 2011, pp. 27-64) and education should provide a framework of personalised learning for each student. Therefore children, may not lose their interest in aesthetic engagement as it will refer to their personal expression, within the context of a communicative art. Especially if we assume that children around the age of 12 need to spend more time socializing (Jolley, 2018, p. 351), art should offer a more social and participatory form. Aiming in a future of aesthetic citizens who know that they have the right to participate in the aesthetic culture of their lives.

Method

The survey focuses on primary education, as it provides a fertile ground for research studies aimed at activating perception, change and personality formation. Primary education offers itself to interventionist type work plans, since children from 5 to 10 years old are in the most receptive age range (Kalouri-Adonopoulou, 1999, p. 89). At this stage, children learn mainly experientially and communicate emotionally. They learn about the world through their senses and emotions, they are exploring and discovering everything around them, but also, they "learn how to learn". The purpose of the research is for young children to approach art in a natural, playful and experiential way, through their own childhood culture and mainly because they need themselves to get more involved in aesthetics.

25 children, from seven to twelve years old, were included to the experimental program which took place for six months in an Experimental school with 450 students in total. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of West Attica, as well as by the management of the Experimental School and by all the parents of the participating children.

The main research questions are:

1. How can children's aesthetics be developed and cultivated in everyday life? Is there a possibility that the contemporary material culture forms aesthetic awareness through holistic experiential practices in visual arts?
2. Is the everyday contact of young children with the environment and the material world, more capable of shaping aesthetic experiences than the conventional, detached from real life, art education?
3. Can aesthetic development as a live experience engage children in participatory design by creating social and relational networks? How does participatory design relate to sustainability and aesthetics within the school spaces? Is sustainable education with aesthetic implications suitable to help children understand their role and responsibility in the environment?

Results

Thematic axes and experimental work plans

The work plans (projects) dealt in everyday issues with multiple aesthetic, philosophical, ecological, emotional and social ramifications. Essentially, the research is part of the triptych: space-object-narrative. It explored the expressive and vital possibilities of space in relation to the properties of the object (or garment) and how these relationships can be interpreted or narrated

¹ INSEA, <https://www.insea.org/>

in the child's world. The Action Research was implemented through 17 experimental work plans (projects) which were included in 6 thematic axes (Table 1). The design of the program

was shaped in a spiral learning form, and also in the method of work plans. Each project had a duration of 1 to 3 meetings (1.5 hours each).

TOPIC AXIS	EXPERIMENTAL WORK PROJECT
On-site installations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sculptural installation in the small garden • Matisse's organic flowers in the school library • Intervening with signs on school surfaces • Building a hut in the school forest
Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multisensory mapping of the school • School area narratives • Psychogeographical maps of the city
Designing the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The microscale and the identity of an architectural project • Designing a habitat in nature
Object design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The box of senses • Redesigning the school's chairs • Designing the household equipment • A sensory knob inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa
Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper fashion inspired by Yayoi Kusama • Shoes designers
Narratives of objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The important objects • The stories of the fragments

Table 1: The thematic axes of the work plans

1st Axis

In the first thematic axis "On-site installations in the school area", children created their own "places" via various interventions at the school. These actions helped them to understand their aesthetic connection with the school-area. Additionally, they recognized their role as active participants in the shaping of their environment as well as their involvement in participatory planning. The thematic work projects of the first axis dealt with the site installation and the intervention, in architectural, physical and social space. The children were involved in issues of environmental aesthetics and sustainable design. Through participatory planning they worked towards a common goal and interacted with the rest of the school community (Table 2).

On site installations in the school area



Sculptural installation in the small garden of the school



Matisse's organic flowers in the school library



Intervening with signs on school surfaces



Building a hut in the school forest

Table 2: The projects of the 1st Axis

2nd Axis

In the second thematic axis "Mapping" children explored the surrounding space (urban and school) through their senses and memories and created sensory and psychogeographic maps. The children were actively engaged in learning processes that helped them understand their aesthetic relationship with the public spaces of the city, school and community. The Photovoice method was used, as well as photographic practices, discovering new communicative possibilities in the man-made environment. They explored concepts such as, sensory place, spatial narrative and atmosphere in everyday environments (Table 3).

Mapping



Multisensory mapping of the school



School area narratives



Psychogeographical maps of the city

Table 3: The projects of the 2nd Axis

3rd Axis

In the third thematic axis "Designing the space" the children practiced in design thinking and created spaces with new identities. They studied the concepts of micro-scale, spatial-identity and eco-philosophy. The children played with the recyclable materials, created models and drew maps of the spaces they built. The thematic work plans of the third axis intended to develop the perception of "children's architecture" and their ability to envision an aesthetic and sustainable environment for their future living (Table 4).

Designing the space



The microscale and the identity of an architectural project



Designing a habitat in nature

Table 4: The projects of the 3rd Axis

4th Axis

In the fourth thematic axis "Object design" the children studied, designed and constructed objects for everyday life, through sensory investigation and multimodal expression. One of the topics in this research was the study of the effects of modern material culture in

children's everyday life. The projects dealt with the concepts of reuse, industrial design, playful and narrative design, sensory design and design perception. A variety of materials were used, from recyclables to real life objects, but also the creation of a collection of sensory objects (Table 5).

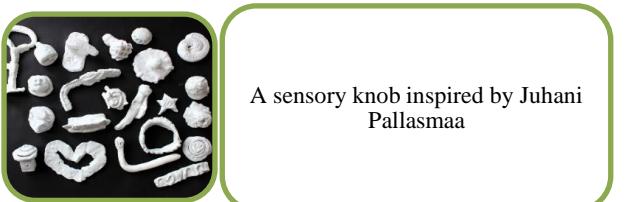
 <p>Object design</p>
 <p>The box of senses</p>
 <p>Redesigning the school chairs</p>
 <p>Designing the household equipment</p>
 <p>A sensory knob inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa</p>

Table 5: The projects of the 4th Axis

5th Axis

In the fifth thematic axis "Fashion design" the children created virtual clothes and shoes, using the techniques of printing, paper design, recycling and also worked in an improvised fashion photography studio. Children were introduced to the concepts of textile design and sustainable fashion, and they also had the opportunity to play and create clothing based on their body measurements. The aim was for the children to connect art with fashion in the scope of everyday clothing and footwear, overcoming various stereotypes (Table 6).

 <p>Fashion design</p>
 <p>Paper fashion inspired by Yayoi Kusama</p>
 <p>Shoes designers</p>

Table 6: The projects of the 5th Axis

6th Axis

In the sixth thematic axis "Narratives of objects" and through the Photostories method, children told personal stories about important and favorite objects. The multimodal expression helped them to connect the narrative with the image through photography but also to intervene therapeutically in their own "fragments" through painting. In a few words, children created activities with therapeutic and autobiographical storytelling. The aim was the meaning of material culture in children's everyday life, as well as the symbolic-emotional dimension that objects may have in their lives (Table 7).

 <p>Narratives of objects</p>
 <p>The important objects</p>
 <p>The stories of the fragments</p>

Table 7: The projects of the 6th Axis

Interpretation of the research data and conclusions

The importance of everyday aesthetics in the education of visual arts

The main purpose of this research was to study how children can naturally experience art in their daily life. The condition is that art and culture are not separated from everyday life, just as aesthetic education is not only acquired through the learning process, but

also through everyday life (Glykofrydi-Leontsini, 2006, p. 331-332). Therefore, in this pedagogical program it is important that the daily life of the children is welcomed as a continuous reconstruction by transformations of experiences. The methodology and content of the research were tested within the different experiences and conditions that were formed, and revealed the ability of the children to perceive aesthetics more deeply and meaningfully, through their personal, ethical and spiritual development, together with others.

The children at the beginning of the program did not understand exactly what they had to do, as they were used to a structured routine at the lessons of visual arts. As time went by, they began to observe everyday events and bring questions about them in the art laboratory. After all, children rarely reported their concerns during the school lessons. Yuriko Saito (2007) argues that aesthetic engagement with the real world, is used to be a neglected area of our lives. Through open discussions, a variety of topics were revealed, that they often concerned the children. As the program progressed, they started to consider more about the everyday issues of their own lives and culture. According to the new theories, the ordinary everyday aesthetic experiences, are more important than the experiences of elitist art, especially in the formation of the individual's identity and view of the world (Duncum, 1999). The children's everyday experiences were included in the art issues that occupied this research, revealing the fact that learning and aesthetics cannot not be separated from life's experience (Mandoki, 2007 · Holt, 1981).

Another issue that arose was that it took a long time for the children to enjoy the process, more than the final result itself. Which is not strange, if one considers the standardized form of aesthetic activity that children have practiced during their previous school years. Despite this, as time went on, children had fun and played with the materials and concepts, in a relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere, where all ideas were accepted. They started to leave behind conventional routines and also started to think out of the box. Saito (2007, p. 236) argues that the activities themselves can be understood as aesthetic experiences. According to the above the production of an art object does not play such a big role, not as much as the knowledge and the feeling formed by the individual in his/her interaction with experiences. John Dewey (1934) mentions that the work which is not marked by experiences, it ends up being separated from life itself.

The aesthetic development as a live and holistic experience

The experiential method was deemed the most suitable to reveal issues that concerned the research. After all, children at this age discover the world sensorially (Danko-McGhee, 2006 · Schirrmacher, 2002) and with intense creative mood (Magouliotis, 2002). The work plans aimed at the active engagement and exploration (Mardell et al., 2016) through playful, learning, aesthetic, social and participatory activities. The results showed that when children work with more freedom as they play and experience learning experiences, they learn more easily, creatively, complexly and also, they form attitudes and life skills.

In this research a holistic aesthetic field of development is advocated, enabling the child to shape its personality into what it wants and what it can be. And this can be realized when the child gets to know itself better, acquire mental resilience and life skills. With experiential learning we enter a global-holistic way of children's development, where biological, social, emotional and

cognitive development, influence and are mutually influenced by each other (Schirrmacher, 1995, p. 42).

During the research a number of data was recorded in relation to experiential and holistic learning:

- Through open and dialogic discussions, critical and reflective thinking, the children learned to observe, interpret and evaluate the phenomena of art. They built their visual and aesthetic literacy, as a resource for their adult life.
- The children released their creative abilities in a multimodal framework of expression, highlighting their personal intelligence in a personalized framework of action and communication.
- Children developed their sensory perception, discovering their senses through play and creativity. They discovered new ways of perceiving the environment through the practice of wandering and mapping.
- The children learned about sustainable design. They discovered their deep ecological nature interacting with the natural spaces of their school.
- Through the interaction with the material world, the narration and the storytelling, children recognized parts of themselves but also their essential connection with everyday material culture.
- Children's metacognitive skills were cultivated through experimentation, repetition, modification and modeling, according to design thinking.
- Children took responsibility for designing their environment and making their own decisions, primarily as partners in a community rather than as learners.
- They created a community of culture and worked with others to achieve a goal, creating at the same time relationships and friendships.

Also, the methods of learning on which visual-experiential learning was built were:

- Sensory perception
- Playful learning
- Multimodal expression
- Narrative expression
- Critical Thinking
- Participatory and sustainable design
- Design Thinking

Engaging children with issues of the material culture

One of the main questions of this research is whether the aesthetic cultivation of children can be triggered by material culture. As, according to the literature, the formation of children's perception comes from real experiences and their direct interaction with the natural environment (Katsavounidou, 2023). More than ever, children are growing up in a world strongly characterized by its materiality and this can be used with a positive sign, when the aesthetics of everyday life are cultivated. Engaging children in the issues of material culture helped them to discover elements of their personality, to remember, to feel, to narrate, to be inspired, to find ideas and solutions, to cultivate perceptions and to break down stereotypes. Material culture was studied in terms of object and space at the level of perception, but also in relation to design and interaction.

First of all, the sensory response of the children was studied, given that children learn the material world sensory. "The construction of

reality in the child occurs through its physical interaction with other objects" (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956, p. 42). Through the morphoplastic constructions and the exploration of materials the children developed their fine skills, highlighting hidden abilities that are missing, as they mostly interact digitally. Georgia Dimou (2011, p. 7) argues that the development of the individual depends on the continuous support of the sensory systems, on their cooperation and coordination. At the same time, children through mental skills such as design thinking, practiced new strategies and solved problems during their favorite activity, the construction. The children had a very natural connection to design thinking and this was demonstrated in relation to their high performance in design issues. Through the three-dimensional constructions it became apparent that children's spatial perception can be cultivated much more than what is believed, as well as their mathematical perception in relation to proportions, scales and technical skills.

After all what was discovered is that children have no prejudice between fine arts, applied or technical activities. All these are of equal importance to them, as long as they provide them with a playful dimension of action. Thus, in the projects that were created, the object became a toy or was constructed by the children as a toy. Children created and played with the meaning of construction, storytelling, identity, installation and interaction. Through the construction of toys, essentially, they created a new relationship with their reality (Pantazis, 1997, p. 30-31).

Children's emotional relationship with the material world was also investigated. The children discovered that objects hide stories as well as biographies, and that their own stories are intertwined with those of the objects. The importance of material things for children was revealed through the Photostories method. Through the method of photographic narratives, it was shown that for children the concept of importance means something which consists of "strong" feelings. So, an important object is a favorite object. Therefore, children have already created emotional bonds with material things and this research comes to illuminate this aspect. The children interpreted difficult means through material reality, such as the concept of loss and the importance of imperfect things. They revealed traumas and hidden feelings through their own objects, while at the same time they showed that they know very well the self-healing mechanisms through art practices. Thus, the children's relation with the objects became more meaningful and emotional, hoping that this new relation with the material world, could affect children to resist the non-thinking commercial materialism of the modern world.

Children rediscovered their reality and realized the concept of "experience" as the meaning was transferred from the object, to each one's personality and life in a deep and meaningful way. They began to understand the relational network between people, environment and material. In this ontological learning approach to material culture, the way to show the permeability of boundaries between people and things was to perceive things as events, in which people, things and places were simultaneously involved (Hicks, 2010). Juhani Pallasmaa (2020, p. 189) states a poetic view of Maurice Merleau-Ponty "We live at the flesh of the world" implying that we are not strangers to our world, nor its spectators, but components the universe itself. The world is constituted through us and we are self-aware in the world. As Ludwig Wittgenstein² says "I am my World".

Participatory planning through the formation of community

Dewey (1907, p. 44) saw the school as an "embryonic community", the microcosmos of society and argued that education should be linked to the real experiences and challenges of the community, providing opportunities for children to engage in problem solving. The school space could be seen as a preparatory stage of real life, looking forward to create a culturally informed and conscious citizen (Chapman, 1993).

During the research and through practical methods of participatory design, children could decide the best solution for the community, representing its benefits (Davidoff, 1965). Participatory design was developed through a combination of thoughts, things and relationships (—, 2019). The children at first, found it difficult to act participatively as something like this is not common in the Greek culture of education. Also, in the first projects, they were not willing to offer their creations to the school community. It took time, patience and a lot of discussion for the children to understand the importance of their role as social planners. Additionally, through the response and admiration of the school community, the children-designers began to change their perspective. After some time, the participants of the design-team could make decisions, act, negotiate their decisions, control their activities and evaluate their achievements. Through social practices the children were introduced to the concept of giving, donating their works to the school community. In this way the development of emotional skills, empathy and the exit from childish egocentrism was perceived. At the same time, the children of the rest of the school community as active audience, interacted in a natural way with the objects and constructions that were made, embracing the efforts of their classmates and making use of the "play-objects" and "places-installations" until that these were destroyed by decay.

Children create their own personal places

The children's aesthetic relationship with the environment was studied via their interventions in the natural open spaces of the school. The aim, through the on-site research, interventions and installations, was to turn the school space into a place of meeting and interaction, invested with live experiences and emotions. Henri Wallon (1984) argues that children's need to create spaces for themselves is related to the internal formation of a personal space, as middle childhood is connected to the concept of the place (Sobel, 1993; Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979). Pallasmaa (2020, p. 180) argues that "The experiential places of the world structure our consciousness, as well as our mental self-awareness. We cannot exist in a non-place". This need of the children was verified in their intense involvement of the activities that took place in the school environment. The children often stated their need to create places of their own, showing this way a strong desire to connect and assimilate with the school space. Thus, through work plans which had a strong style of intervention in the school grounds, "places" defined by children, were created. It is very important for children to realize that they are not mere spectators of the aesthetic issues of the environment, but participants in its formation. After all, the active contribution of children in the shaping of their spaces is essential, as they themselves know best what they need (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Children's awareness through sustainable and ecosomatic aesthetic education

One of the aims of the research is the sustainable, ecological and ecosomatic placement of art within the school environment, as school outdoor environments are valuable topological cases within

² Αναφέρεται στον Pallasmaa, 2020, σ. 189.

the school complex. The children, through experiential activities in the natural environment, were led to an ecosomatic relational approach. At the same time, particular importance was given to the configuration of the relationships between them, as they mutually constituted each other in the development of meaningful places (Ugrinis & Liapi, 2015). The pedagogy which is relational centered, sets as a prerequisite the emotional engagement of the child with its environment (Tsoukala, 2015). Thus, the children through playful activities and participatory design, embodied the intangible and material space, with kinesthetic practices, self-activity, autonomy and rhythm. In this research, the child is approached emotionally and relationally, as everything is seen as relationships. Henri Lefebvre (1977) states that space has a relational meaning that arises through the relationship between people and places. Even movement, i.e. the introduction of the intangible element or elements of nature, played a role in the children's interaction with the environment. Experiential pedagogy takes on a human role, it does not simply lay the groundwork for the child's connection with the real, but allows it to experience real life within the school.

Also, it is important for children to become interested and connect emotionally with the natural environment, creating this way a deeper commitment to it. In addition, eco-pedagogy has the potential to cultivate values but also the process of life in a playful and revealing way. Accordingly, ecophilosophy became the occasion for children to see an alternative view of architecture through the repositioning of human intervention in the natural environment. The involvement of children in the planning of the environment seems to contribute decisively to their development since they discover the dynamics of their intervention in space and thus lay the foundations for a quality and balanced life (Sutton & Kemp, 2002, p. 172).

Conclusions

In this research, everyday life is welcomed as a continuous reconstruction from transformations of experiences, highlighting a multitude of aesthetic issues that preoccupy young children. Culture needs to be understood as a constantly changing system of relationships, values and life practices. The aesthetics of everyday life is not limited to the world of art (Dowling, 2010) as it includes familiar objects and daily routines, as well as infinite ways through which life experiences are reflected (Forcey, 2013, p. 243). Essentially, every aspect of life is constructed of aesthetics (Gracyk, 2008). This study aims to form a pedagogy with more freedom and naturalness in the school environment. School should become a natural place of aesthetic development. Art education should promote experiential learning, within the wider interdisciplinary and holistic field of everyday life, as it is felt and experienced by children. Life itself and childhood experiences are legitimately transformed into an experiential, playful, multimodal, open and interactive field among the community of children.

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