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Aesthetic Teaching: Seeking a Balance between Teaching Arts and Teaching through the Arts

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This article aims to examine the kinds of teaching practices that correspond to the various educational roles ascribed to the arts within school curricula. Three teaching approaches are analyzed: (1) *teaching the arts*, in which the arts are treated as distinct cognitive teaching subjects; (2) *teaching through the arts*, in which the arts are used as teaching tools in the curriculum; and (3) *aesthetic teaching*, in which the arts are treated as alternative ways of approaching and processing other academic subjects. The first two approaches are used regularly in elementary education settings, while the third, which could be considered a combination of the other two, is a potential future development that could constitute the basis of a revitalized arts education policy. This article illustrates the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches with examples of activities used in a pilot program in public elementary schools in Greece.

Keywords: aesthetic teaching, teaching the arts, teaching through the arts

Why should the arts constitute an important and necessary part of schooling? The aim of this article is to shed light on this question by examining the teaching practices that correspond to the various educational roles ascribed to the arts as part of elementary school curricula. This study reveals benefits of incorporating the arts into curricula that are not evident in existing educational practices. In particular, this article provides guidance for the development of arts education policy and insight into the use of arts education for both the generalist and the arts educator.

In contemporary Greek elementary schools, according to existing cross-thematic curricula (Hellenic Pedagogical Institute–Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs 2003), the role of the arts is at times that of a *taught subject* and at other times that of a *teaching medium.* Given this situation, I carried out a study based on the belief that a third role the arts could play, that of a *teaching approach*, is rarely used. I hypothesized that art can offer an aesthetic approach to any taught subject and foster particularly beneficial teaching practices, which in turn could constitute the basis of a revitalized arts education policy. To this end, I designed a series of activities that examined, both individually and comparatively, the three roles of art outlined previously. These activities were used in a pilot program in public elementary school classrooms in Athens and Crete. Some of the activities were implemented by generalist teachers and others by art teachers to children aged five to eight years.

In the following section, the theoretical underpinnings of the three educational roles of the arts under examination are illustrated with examples of music and visual arts activities that were used in the study.

TEACHING THE ARTS

In formal education, various arts are included in the curriculum as special classes. Children in school engage in musical, visual arts, dance, theatrical, and other arts activities in the context of these classes (Benavot 2004; Efland 1990; Poyet and Bacconnier 2006). This is a “teaching the arts” or “in the arts” approach (Bamford 2006), the main objective of which is building cultural capital and identity (Amadio, Truong, and Tschurenev 2006; Richmond 2009). This approach leads to outcomes that, according to Eisner, are “arts-based” and “directly related to the subject matter that an arts education curriculum was designed to teach” (1999, 146). The position assumed by the arts in these cases is that of a specific curricular subject (Geer 1997). In the Greek elementary school curriculum, these subjects are the visual arts, theater, physical education, and music (European Commission, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2009).

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An illustration of the characteristics of a "teaching the arts" approach can be found in the following activity, tested on seven- and eight-year-old children as part of a music education class. The specific subjects were rhythm and tempo (speed of execution) in Western "tonal" music. The educator played a piece of music and invited the children to move around the room and produce loud sounds (by clapping their hands, stomping their feet, or snapping their fingers) in time with the beat of the piece. At nonregular times, the educator muted the volume of the music, which continued playing, although no one could hear it. While the sound was muted, the children were asked to continue their actions, trying all the while to maintain the same tempo. When the educator raised the volume once more, the children could check to see if they had kept a steady beat—that is, if their actions continued to be in time with the music. This activity presupposes but also exercises the aural skills of keeping a tempo in mind, listening internally, and coordinating movement with a given rhythm.

It is clear that the participants in this activity were being taught an art—specifically, music. The children were able to assimilate musical knowledge about the rhythm and the tempo by exercising the relevant skills and listening actively to a musical piece. In this kind of activity, art is viewed as the end of learning, and the teacher—who is most likely an arts (music) teacher rather than a generalist—focuses mainly on the artistic benefits that a child may gain.

TEACHING THROUGH THE ARTS

In the twentieth century, arts education was enriched by the concept of "teaching through the arts" (Dewey 1934; Read 1943). Researchers found that engagement with the arts could promote not only aesthetic development, but also holistic growth and personality balance. On this basis, since 1954, a "teaching through the arts" approach has been supported by the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA; http://www.insea.org), under the leadership of UNESCO (Steers 2001).

Teaching and learning through the arts strategies have been studied within the framework of the recent trend for "arts integration" (Burnaford et al. 2007), which Deasy defines as "the effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the other skills and subjects of the curriculum" (2003, 3). Kress (2003) maintains that the integration of the arts with other cognitive fields has been positively influenced by the theory of multimodality, which calls on the pedagogical community to acknowledge that within a school, language is not more important than any other sign system. Thus, when learners are taught through the arts, they are given opportunities to undergo transmediational experiences—in other words, to translate what they learn into a variety of sign systems and connect one representation system (mode) to another (Leigh and Heid 2008; Reilly, Gangi, and Cohen 2010; Siegel 1995; Siegel 2006). A survey of contemporary literature (Bamford 2006; Catterall 2002b; Deasy 2002; Dickinson 2002; Kelner and Flynn 2006; Rooney 2004; Walker, Tabone, and Weltsek 2011; Winner and Hetland 2007) indicates that within the context of "teaching through the arts," scholars are seeking to find either broader benefits (e.g., physical, social, emotional, intellectual) or positive influences on other school subjects. Specifically, theatrical activity has been found to improve verbal skills (Catterall 2002a; Podlozny 2000; Walker et al. 2011; Winner and Hetland 2000), and music has been found to contribute to a fuller understanding of certain mathematical concepts and improved spatial-temporal perception (Bilhartz, Bruhn, and Olson 2000; Jausovec, Jausovec, and Gerlic 2006; Rauscher et al. 1997; Scripp 2002). According to Eisner (1999), this approach to arts education produces what he describes as "ancillary outcomes." In this situation, the arts assume the role of a teaching medium within the curriculum. In Greece, with its cross-curricular approach to teaching and learning, teachers are encouraged to use this type of arts activity (Hellenic Pedagogical Institute–Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs 2003).

The following activity, which was tested on seven- and eight-year-old children in an Athens school, illustrates this approach to teaching through the arts. The children stood in a circle, with the teacher holding a tambourine. Upon the teacher's instructions, one child held an imaginary ball and pretended to throw it to another, at the same time calling out a word related to the language lesson of the day, which was adverbs (e.g., " speedily," "clearly"). The child who caught the "ball" did the same, throwing the "ball" to another child and calling out another adverb, and so on. Both the ball throwing and the words followed a fixed tempo that was kept by the teacher on the tambourine. When the teacher saw that the children could perform the activity with ease, he increased the frequency of his beats.

This activity could be viewed as both music and movement education: the children practiced the skill of synchronizing themselves to a given rhythm and deepened their understanding of such musical terms as tempo and accelerando. However, the rhythm and the movement also created a favorable environment for language teaching. This activity is designed to train players to quickly find words from a specified grammatical category. It is important to note that the activity does not require special artistic skills on the part of the teacher, who in fact uses the arts as a tool to achieve broader educational objectives.

AESTHETIC TEACHING

Some researchers (Benavot 2004; Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles 1999; Eisner 1972; Mouriki 1998; Winner and Hetland 2000) claim that teaching the arts (the first approach) "could stress the intrinsic value of the aesthetic experience and show what immeasurable long-term outcomes the arts may have on individual development and also the well-being of society" (Amadio, Truong, and Tschurenev 2006, 4) whereas teaching through the arts (the second approach) has "positive benefits on learning and academic achievement" and by extension may influence policymakers in favor of arts education (Amadio, Truong, and Tschurenev). Given the educational significance of these two strategies, I propose a third approach that achieves a balance between them in terms of teaching practice.

During the 1970s, Broudy maintained that the educational value of the arts in school emerges when they are integrated into learning processes (Bresler 2001; Broudy 1972). Eisner and Gardner took this idea further. According to Eisner, the various aesthetic forms of representation correspond to ways of expressing one's experiences (Eisner 1976). Gardner, for his part, articulated his theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993; Gardner 2003) and demonstrated how the arts are associated with ways of thinking (musical, spatial, kinesthetic, etc.) that differ from those cultivated in schools (Fowler 1990; Gardner 1999). These foundations served as the starting point for further research on the correlations between the arts and the intellectual functions, particularly learning (Dorn 1999; Efland 2002; Eisner 2002; Gardner 1990). On the one hand, art was seen as a field in which students could develop advanced intellectual abilities, and on the other hand, cognitive development was linked to parameters such as imagination, creativity, intuition, and emotion (Efland 2004; Parker 2005). It has become clear that when the arts are present in the learning process, teachers and students can look at meanings and messages in multiple forms and through diverse content (Albers and Harste 2007; Cowan and Albers 2006).

If this theoretical basis is carried into school practice, the arts can acquire a new role, that of a "spotlight" that illuminates alternative aspects of knowledge. A new kind of teaching can be inaugurated in which children are called upon to participate in situations pertaining to the aesthetic traits of each taught subject. In other words, each taught subject can be treated as a possible framework within which a child may have aesthetic experiences. This approach could be defined as "aesthetic teaching" (Granger 2006; Macintyre Latta 2004; Pike 2004; Sotiropoulou-Zormpala 2012). The pedagogy of aesthetic teaching is based on the premise that human beings can perceive the world in more than one way (Gardner 2003) and invest it with more than one content (Eisner 2002). Thus, aesthetic teaching may offer students opportunities to process what they are taught not only logically and verbally, but also kinesthetically, musically, spatially, interpersonally, and intrapersonally, as well as to imbue traditional nonarts subjects with musical, theatrical, kinesthetic, or artistic content.

As part of the pilot implementation of an aesthetic teaching approach, the following activity was integrated into the curriculum of a language class in which the teacher wanted to evaluate the knowledge of seven- and eight-year-old children regarding the tenses and grammatical numbers of verbs. First, the teacher selected a piece of music and noted some verbs that he believed matched the mood of the music. In this particular example, the music was Pachelbel's Canon. He then asked the children to walk in pace to the music in the classroom. At nonregular intervals, the teacher called out the verbs he had noted: *I feel calm, we are flying, you touched, they will sway, it blossomed, you are sleeping, you will think,* and so on. Based on these verbs, the children devised and acted out a simple choreography according to the following rules: First, when the verb the teacher called out was singular, they had to move singly, and when it was plural, they had to move in pairs. Second, depending on whether the verb was in a past, present, or future tense, the children had to step backwards, march in place, or walk forward, respectively. The children were then asked to sit at their desks and, as the piece was played one more time, write down their own ideas for verbs that the music evoked, using what they believed to be the appropriate tenses and grammatical numbers.

This activity can be seen as music teaching, since the teacher used words to interpret a piece of music; the children listened to it actively in order to respond to it rhythmically; and, finally, they too used words to interpret the meaning it had for them. Alternatively, this activity could be seen as teaching language through music, since the children acted upon the grammatical rules they had been taught and supplied evidence to evaluate these decisions. Both the teacher and the children were able to approach and perceive a part of the language curriculum in an aesthetic way. Grammar lent itself to activating children musically, and at the same time the music enriched the teaching of language with a new aesthetic approach.

Ultimately, the children were taught far more than a part of the curriculum. Children in school generally learn the logical construction of past, present, and future, but the previously described aesthetic teaching activity also generated a kinesthetic and spatial dimension of this knowledge.

One necessary prerequisite for implementing this activity is the willingness of both teacher and students to adopt a creative approach to the taught subject. In this example, the teacher can be seen to have invented a context that aided the children in discovering the aesthetic characteristics—that is, an alternative dimension—of the taught subject.

Thus, in an aesthetic teaching environment, children focus on a clearly aesthetic process (as in a "teaching arts" approach) but are concurrently grounded in and consolidate their knowledge in other nonarts areas of the curriculum (as in a "teaching through the arts" approach). This fusion of the two roles of art in education creates opportunities for children to gain aesthetic experiences in different curricular subjects. A partnership between the two implementers of aesthetic education—the art teacher and the classroom generalist—would be the ideal way to carry out a program of aesthetic teaching.

COMPARISONS

A direct comparison of the three roles of the arts outlined previously can further elucidate their boundaries. To this end, three activities representing each of the different roles were introduced in a class teaching the subject of the water cycle. The activities were targeted to six- and seven-year-old children. Traditionally, the water cycle is taught on a logical-mathematical level (e.g., the relevant natural phenomena, their sequence, their causes, their consequences for nature and human life) and on a verbal level (e.g., through definitions, terminology, spoken or written explanations). However, the arts can be used to teach this subject in three different ways. First, using a teaching music approach, the children were asked to listen to several songs of Manos Hadjidakis whose lyrics contained references to water. The class then discussed how water affected the composer. Second, using a teaching through the arts approach, the children listened to sounds related to the subject (e.g., the sea, rain, thunder, a river, a stream). They were then called upon to suggest ways of grouping the sounds based on the order in which these natural phenomena may occur. Finally, using an aesthetic teaching approach, the children were asked to work individually or in groups to improvise scenarios about "the adventures of a water droplet," brainstorm their own set of sounds or combine pieces of music with their story, and present the final result to the class.

In the third approach, the aim was for students to discover and process the aesthetic elements of the natural phenomenon they were studying. To do this, the activity had to be child-centered and the process had to be emergent. Thus, the instructions the children were given concerned the modes of their actions (improvised text and sound, choice of music), and it was up to them to decide how the activity would evolve. Furthermore, besides including traditional school activities, the process used in this activity was reminiscent of that used in an arts studio. Children wrote scenarios, improvised sounds, and combined pieces of music that reflected their personal experiences, either real or imagined, related to the taught subject. They generated understanding that went beyond correct and objective information about the water cycle to encompass their own interpretation of these phenomena. Finally, while the children were aesthetically processing this knowledge, they had opportunities to enhance their expressive skills, perceive aesthetic qualities (properties, objects, and attitudes), reflect upon the conditions for creating and appreciating works of art, and ultimately gain aesthetic experiences.

Comparing the three roles of art discussed here, although it is easy to differentiate the process of teaching arts from the other two processes, the line between teaching through the arts and aesthetic teaching may seem more blurred. A final example will clear up any remaining ambiguity. A generalist teacher used the following activity with kindergarten children (aged five and six years). The subject being taught was the correspondence of phonemes with graphemes within the broader framework of phonological awareness. In this case, the lesson focused on the correspondence between the phonemes /o/, /i/, and /a/ and their lowercase letters. Integrating visual art into the lesson, the educator introduced two activities in succession. In the first, she handed out modeling clay and asked the children to form one of the three letters being taught. To do this, she showed the children the graphemes for /o/ and /i/ and how to combine them to form the /a/. Each child chose which of the graphemes he or she wanted to make. The teacher then put a scarf around a child's eyes and placed before him a grapheme made by one of his classmates. With his eyes covered, the child felt the clay form and identified the grapheme while his classmates looked on. Taking the scarf off, he looked to see if he had correctly identified the grapheme. The same process was followed with all the other children. They were then given a fifteen-minute recess in the garden.

The second activity began directly after the recess. On an A4 piece of paper, the children drew one of the three graphemes in whatever position and size they wanted. They were then asked to fill in and modify their original drawing in any way they wanted. Some children filled the area around the grapheme with pictures (e.g., landscapes, books); others altered the grapheme to form a figure (e.g., an additional curved line was added to the /a/ on the left to create a girl's face, or the line in the /a/ was extended to form the trunk of an elephant); still others transformed the grapheme into something else entirely (e.g., one child who said he was hungry transformed his /o/ into a plate filled with food). As a group, the children then identified the letters in particular drawings and talked about how each child felt about that. The drawings revealed the children's thoughts and associations regarding the letters they had chosen. In the end, the children wanted to count how many had drawn each grapheme to discover "which letter the group liked most."

In analyzing these two activities, it is interesting to compare their goals, procedures, and results. In terms of goals, in the first activity it is clear that the visual arts mainly served the nonarts objective of learning graphemes and phonemes. The goal of the second activity, however, was for the children to express how they connected their knowledge about each letter with their personal experiences through their drawings. In terms of procedure, the first activity called upon the children to make one of three models assigned by their teacher, mainly activating their intellectual faculties, whereas the second activity—working with the grapheme in three dimensions, the focus on visual perception—enriched the learning experience, offering students the opportunity to process what they were learning in multiple ways. In the second activity, the children worked holistically (not only intellectually, but also physically, emotionally, and socially) to interpret the subject being taught, seeing it through both their real and their imaginary experiences. This process was less directed than the first activity and depended more on the children's choices. Finally, the results produced by the children in the first activity could be characterized as programmed, relatively homogenous, and interwoven with the curriculum. In the second activity, the results could be considered emergent, unpredictable, and variable both among themselves and with regard to the significance ascribed by each child to the taught subject. Therefore, these results are more reflective of a knowledge that the children themselves produced based on a part of the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Aesthetic teaching is a teaching approach that invites students to focus on the "aestheticity" of each subject they are being taught. In this context, the extent to which "instrumental applications are dependent on art's inherent qualities and achievements" (Richmond 2009, 93) and vice versa is clear. In aesthetic teaching, both teacher and students can process knowledge in multiple ways (e.g., verbally, logically, spatially, musically, kinesthetically), handle it through multiple modes (e.g., bodily expression, music, theater, art, sculpture, poetry), and be influenced by it on multiple levels (e.g., intellectual, physical, emotional, social) (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala 2012). In aesthetic teaching, art is not separated from life: every taught subject is either interpreted as an aesthetic object or acts as a springboard for aesthetic work.

Differentiating between aesthetic teaching activities and other types of arts activities is a first step toward systematic study of this approach. According to my experiences in the pilot program, aesthetic teaching activities can improve and encourage more comprehensive implementation of arts education in a school by allowing teachers to adopt concurrently the virtues of both "teaching arts" and "teaching through the arts" approaches and can help teachers and students generate new knowledge—in other words, redefine themselves and their world.

One question that arises from the categorization presented here is whether the arts are more effective in fostering student learning when one of the three roles is ascribed to them, or whether a more positive effect is produced by interchanging the three roles. Although I would tend to advocate the latter view, this question could be the basis for future study.

An awareness of the three roles of the arts in education, and particularly of the neglected aesthetic teaching approach, could bring about changes in how arts activities in the schools are categorized and organized. In practical terms, an initial change within the framework of school curricula could help foster favorable conditions for the development of aesthetic teaching, which could promote closer and more substantive collaboration between arts educators and generalist teachers. In addition, the increased role of the generalist teacher in arts education could encourage improvements in the arts education provided to preservice teachers in their higher education. Although such changes would operate on the practical level, they would have an impact on the philosophy of formal aesthetic education. The fact that contemporary schools frequently situate the arts as a teaching subject or a teaching medium, rather than as a teaching approach, is probably not an accident. This decision might be explained by the fact that in these roles, an arts teacher follows a predetermined program that defines the desired goals and outcomes of arts activation. In contrast, an aesthetic teaching approach requires that a curriculum leave "space," which the teacher and students fill with their aesthetic responses, expressing new knowledge that is original to the group that produced it. It is therefore possible that the neglect of aesthetic teaching indicates a lack of trust in the teacher and a lack of daring on the part of the educational system in managing knowledge that emerges outside a program. Briefly, the issue can be stated thus: if the field of the arts is subject to guidance and programming in all of its manifestations in the schools, it will be in danger of suffocating.

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