

## The Authors

**Antti Juvonen Ph.D. Docent**  
Senior Lecturer of Music Education  
University of Joensuu  
Faculty of Education  
Department of Applied Education  
Toonika-house  
P.O. Box 111 (Tulliportinkatu 1)  
Fi-80101 University of Joensuu  
Finland  
Phone +358 40 5830544

email: [antti.juvonen@joensuu.fi](mailto:antti.juvonen@joensuu.fi)

**Heikki Ruismäki Ph.D. Docent**  
Professor in Art Education  
University of Helsinki  
Faculty of Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Applied Sciences of Education  
Art Research Centre  
P.O.Box 8 (Siltavuorenpenger 10)  
FI-00014 University of Helsinki  
Finland  
Phone: +358 40 5408958  
fax +358 9 191 29701  
email: [heikki.ruismaki@helsinki.fi](mailto:heikki.ruismaki@helsinki.fi)

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# Kindergarten teacher student's conceptions about children's Art education in Finland.

## Abstract

This article focuses in conceptions of a group of kindergarten teachers and preschool teachers (n=38) working with children who are about to begin their school, which means that the children they teach are 6-7 years of age. The article is based on empiric research which was made in Helsinki University's teaching project in Finnish city Lahti in autumn 2005. The target group consisted of 38 persons, all of them being female. The data was collected by email after a teaching period "*Aesthetic orientation in preschool and school beginning*".

The questions were given during the lectures to participants and they sent their answers to researchers in email. Then the data (N=33) was analyzed, categorized and reported. In this article only one question is handled, and it was: "What are the most important factors in small children's art education from your own point of view?" The results show that the educators see art education as an important mean to build up children's self-conception and emotional growth. The results also show a way to be able to lead a good life with the enjoyment; therapy and joy which understanding art can give us all.

*Keywords: Art education, good life, kindergarten teacher, Aesthetics and Art, Early childhood education.*

## Introduction

### What is good life?

A good life is something everyone should be able to live. The future always includes both good and bad accidents, but what is important is the inner strength of each individual. How happy and fortunate a person is, is dependent of many different factors. There are personal factors and social factors connected to happiness of an individual.

The post modern society is rapidly changing. There are lots of new ideas pressuring the social, cultural and economical structures in our times. The institutions of government are in economical trouble as the need of population keep growing and the sources of money are getting smaller. It is important that in a situation like this we could live in belief of possibilities and positive challenges while living through this turning point. It is often said that today people have drifted into a crisis of the values. We speak about the disappearing values and at the same time about too many values, which lead to difficulties in deciding which of them we should choose to guide us through the life. It is often thought that old values collapse and new grow up to take their place. Still many researches show that the basic values change very slowly, if at all (Väkevä 2004). The changing process concentrates more in the importance of the values, beliefs and preferences. Principles, needs, hopes and expectations form the basis of decision making.

The ongoing change in the society reflects especially in the needs of people (see Niikko 2004). We are floating away from a society fulfilling only the basic needs to a society focusing more in social appreciation and self-fulfilment. The general view of reality becomes all the time more and more fragmented in the middle of the tide of information. That is why the world view of young people easily becomes splintered and fragmented (compare with Stipek 2004; Landerholm &

Gehrie & Yi 2004; Efland 2004). The life is more and more concentrating in short period thinking: narcissistic hedonism easily takes the place of tranquil long period planning and decision making.

Having a positive picture of one's own today life as well as future is one of the basics for a good and meaningful life. If you have something to enjoy of and to look forward to, it is easier to win usual difficulties of everyday life. If you understand life and society generally, it is easier to live in it.

In this article we figure how art could help to form solid and harmonious self-picture and world view which would form a good basis for leading a good life. The way the children understand art is connected to their experiences in early childhood.

### **What connects everyday life to good life?**

Wittgenstein wrote that ethics is a research which tries to solve what is "good". Ethics is also research of what is really valuable or what is really important. Ethics researches the meaning of life and what makes it worth living. At the same time it is a research about a right way to live. This is what connects everyday life situations to good life. These questions are like looking at a sculpture from many different points of view. Terms indicating values (good, right, important, valuable) are used in two different meanings. The first meaning is comparative value (relative value) and the other is absolute value (ethic value). (Wittgenstein 1986, 24-25). The relative values are used when there exist some kind of a standard and we try to fulfil it. The ethic values cannot be connected to any standards – they rather kind of form a standard. Ethics is often mixed with the concept morals. Ethics is a wider concept and we can say that all moral statements are basically ethic, but all ethic statements are not always moral.

### **Aesthetics and art**

In latest discussion on aesthetics there have been new winds blowing. For example Shusterman (1995; 1997; 2003) has been writing strongly about the gap between theoretic and pragmatic approach in arts education. He has widened the entire definition of art to contain also elements of everyday life and popular culture. Shusterman's point of view is quite important in modern societies ruled more and more by different types of media. These ideas form a basis for this article, too. In field of music education there has been active research going on about the philosophic and practical tasks about how to teach, what to teach and also the aims and needs of teaching music and other arts (e. g., Paige, R. 2005). The basic approach in this conversation has been the difference on basic philosophy in pragmatic music education philosophy and aesthetic music education philosophy. (Elliott 1995; 1996; Regelski 1996; Swanwick 1988; 1996; Anttila & Juvonen 2002, Juvonen & Anttila 2003). The same conversation has also been going on in field of aesthetic approach more widely.

Aesthetics is a part of philosophy which tries to show what beauty really means. Aesthetics is a philosophic approach; it concentrates in problems trying to find out what art basically is and what it means, or what difference is there between aesthetic values and values of observed or empirically verifiable knowledge. It is often stated that an aesthetic experience is close or even includes some kind of "flow-experience", which is a dynamic state, holistically or comprehensively stimulating experience that does not create anxiety about what is happening or what might not happen (Csikszentmihalyi 1990a, 4; 1990b; 1997). In any case, emotions and feelings are usually present in all kinds of severe experiences, and that is why the happenings are often remembered even after many years. Naturally the intensity of emotions and feelings is dependent to personality structure. Also it is often thought that enjoyment (pleasure) is one of the feelings connected to aesthetic experience. Both concepts: experience and enjoyment, cannot be easily specified as they are usually very personal experiences. The intensity of the experience is consequently hard to measure. An experience can be enjoyable, if it has a positive charge. Enjoyment usually lasts only a little while, when experience can even change whole life of a person by bringing new sensations and feelings into his or her emotional selection (Ruismäki 1996). The joy of success in doing something

demanding brings easily experiences which are enjoyable. This is one important connecting point linking arts experiences and aesthetic experiences to education. In arts subjects at school as well as in preschool it is possible to create an atmosphere where a pupil can and will process artistic work which both provide challenge and give joy of success.

Aesthetic elements can easily be found also in many other sectors of life (sports, science, love, food, animals etc) but in this article we will not be touching them. Also the associations between ethic and aesthetics are a very common fountain for argumentation in literature comprehending thoughts of epistemology, the ethics of good and the aesthetic of beauty. The question is often aroused about the domination among the two subjects mentioned. In this article we are not trying to respond to that question, even though it seems evident that aesthetics cannot appear without ethical and moral point of view.

### **The target group and the aim of the research**

The inquiry was targeted to kindergarten teachers and elementary school teachers working in preschool and they came from different cities of the Southern Finland. The participants were in the middle of their updating education at the time of the research. Prof. Heikki Ruismäki was responsible of a course "*Aesthetic orientation in preschool and school beginning*", and that was where the research was completed. The question we are focusing in this article was: "*What are the most important factors in small children's art education from Your own point of view?*".

The age of the target group was between 23 and 40. The presentation of the inquiry which was used in this research was given to students at the end of a lecture held by Professor Ruismäki on the autumn 2005. The total sum of the target group was 38, but (in time to be in this research) the amount of answers was finally 33. There were no male teachers among the answerers.

The aim of the research was to get more knowledge of answerers' conceptions about art education (in common). The information this research offers can be used many ways in planning rapidly changing education on both kindergarten teachers and classroom teachers. The questions asked were stated basing on many sources (Reimer 1989; Dickie 1990; Puurula & Väyrynen 1992; Langer 1976; Koroscik 1992) and also practical themes which came up during the discussions at the lectures series. The students wrote their answers independently and intuitively reflecting their points of view to bring new knowledge to the focused field of problems.

The conceptions of the participants show quite widely the thoughts of the whole targeting group. At least considering Finland we believe that these results show the main lines of thinking although the number of participants was small.

### **Process and methods**

This research belongs to qualitative research tradition, and to be more specific: in phenomenographical field. The aim in qualitative research is to describe the target as well as possible and to increase understanding about the subject. Phenomenographical method was first used by Marton in Sweden. The targets of the research are the conceptions and relations between conceptions of people. It shows the way the world is built and represented inside one's consciousness. The starting point for this approach is consciousness and ability to build conceptions of different phenomenon and to describe these conceptions linguistically. (Nummenmaa & Nummenmaa 1997, 65-66; Ahonen 1994, 113-114, 121-122). Phenomenographical research has some points of contact with Piaget's theories, Gestalt psychology and phenomenology. The main difference is that in phenomenographical research the surroundings and the cultural dimension are included in research.

The conceptions are built inside our head through experiences and thinking and with them a human being is connected to interaction with the surrounding world. Each person has different conceptions about different phenomenon which is because of the different experiences which form the conceptions in the first place. We form through everyday life so called pre-conceptions on

which the understanding of new experiments are built. Through analyzing and interpreting we build different describing categories which include different ways of understanding the world on general level without connecting the categories into the individuals who are being under research. These describing categories form the main results of phenomenographic research.

### Results

The data analyzes was done by classifying the data in many levels and naming the categories, then analyzing the substance of each category. Results showed clearly, that the saturation point was reached in our research material. It is us often said that *“it is not necessary to fish all the fishes in the lake to know what kind of fishes live there”*. The same answers became common after analyzing two thirds of the material collected. The problems in this kind of data are the deep connections between different elements of the phenomenon researched. The research revealed 5 categories of description telling *“What are the most important factors in small children’s art education from Your own point of view?”*.

Most important elements in art education are:

- 1) A possibility to experience art (feelings, joy of success)
- 2) A possibility to act in field of art (invent, create new, imitate, practise)
- 3) A possibility achieve versatile, different type interactivity (experiencing art, creating art)
- 4) A possibility to learn knowledge, skills and attitudes towards arts and making it (knowledge about art)
- 5) Growing to be a human being and growing as a human being

These categories were formed from the answers. The first element: *“Possibility to experience art (feelings, joy of success)”* was seen very clearly in most of the answers. The answerers show deep understanding to the importance of a child’s learning through own activity as well as the meaningfulness of the joy, pleasure and enjoyment the children get in the producing process.

- Person 1      ...The most important element of the early childhood art education is the phenomenal attitude and the versatility...
- Person 3      ...a child gets experiments in his own work and gets lots of pleasure and enjoyment in doing himself...
- Person 7      Because art is a personal experience, we should be careful not to criticize the products children have produced with their own hands...
- Person 23     ...children should be taken to art museums and concerts; you should listen good and many sided music with them and read the poems and fairy-tales. Versatility in art education is much better than concentrating in one or two fields of art.

The second category *“Possibility to act in field of art (invent, create new, imitate, practise)”* shows the importance of the child’s own activity, which also is connected in positive feedback. A child as an artist is very often mentioned in the answers.

Many of the answerers also notice that not all art is only beautiful. There are often also negative elements involved in art. These elements should be discussed with a child to make him/her understand the polarity of the world.

- Person 4      ...a child needs a possibility to be an artist himself, to be able to create with his own hands...
- Person 10     A child enjoys doing something meaningful to him/herself... What is important for a child is the process of doing something, creating self, that’s where children need space and help from adults...
- Person 21     ...It also depends on a child’s age. When we are working with children 0-3 years old, the most important element is to give them possibilities to get experiments together with a safe adult. It should leave the child with a good emotional feeling, a feeling of being taken care of and being loved...
- Person 22     ...I feel that the most important element in art education is that every child gets a possibility to take part in artistic work in many different ways, they should have a possibility to react their personal ways and share different experiences...

- Person 25 The joy of doing something self. The result is not as valuable as the process of making something.
- Person 15 A child enjoys art through a possibility to take part in art making and in interaction with others to be able to imitate others and use these processes in finding their own way of expression...
- Person 6 Experiential and phenomenal experiments, an ability to enjoy and create beauty at its all forms are important factors in the growing process...Anything that comes out from a child must be let to come, no matter if it is positive or negative...
- Person 12 Art makes you free from everyday life and gives you a feeling that even impossible will be possible in world of art.

Third element mentioned was “*Possibility to achieve versatile, different type interactivity (experiencing art, creating art)*”. Many of the answers show clearly the importance of versatility in teaching arts. The possibility of experiencing different art forms and broadmindedness in general are the leading principals when we try to be good art educators for small children. The abilities of the educator may not be limiting factors in early childhood art education: what is necessary is the right attitude towards the arts, which means readiness to offer the children situations where art is involved without a fear of prejudice or humiliation. It is often said that the art experience kind of brightens up your vision and let’s you notice such elements of the art object which you normally wouldn’t notice. These effects are often connected to aesthetic experience. Perceptive skills are mentioned in many of the answers. This shows that it is an important element of art education. Some answers show how the target group has developed their own perceptive skills to quite high level: they see and feel beauty even in every day surroundings.

- Person 16 It is good to teach a child to notice how different types of art there are. That helps them to notice exchanges; differences and that way develop their perceptive skills.
- Person 24 Developing a child’s senses with artistic actions in a safe atmosphere is very important, because that way a child gets to know the enjoyment in a way which is not learned through cognitive processes, they are learned through emotions. Carpe diem!
- Person 9 Most important in small children’s art education is the liberality and broadmindedness together with the freedom from prejudice. The educator’s own limitations or constraints of making many sided art may not be narrowing children’s possibilities...
- Person 26 Respecting dissimilarity and everything different is one of the most important things in art education of small children...we have to respect the products of other children and also our own output...
- Person 7 Hearing a child’s own opinion is most important. A child has a right to be understood by an adult. All the time we should give them a feeling of being loved.
- Person 9 Talking about art and one’s own experiences raises interest to the subject and helps in understanding many levels of art.

“*Possibility to learn knowledge, skills and attitudes towards arts and making it (knowledge about art)*” These were the fourth elements found from the data. The child’s ability to invent and create new is seen as a great opportunity for art education. Many of the answerers seem to think that after the school age the children lose that ability somehow. The child originated artistic work is seen very important through the answers. The answerers also note the importance of encouraging children’s differences and dissimilarities as they see it important that the children grow up as individuals.

- Person 3 ..A child wants to try many different materials to get experiences about working with them...
- Person 14 I believe that children enjoy art if they have a possibility to take part in making it, getting possibilities in identifying themselves and admiring good art. They also must have a chance to imitate pictures and shapes and that way they may find their own way of expression...
- Person 10 Artistic work is a valuable part of emotional, social and cognitive development. Art supports individuality and dissimilarity. Art education aims to develop a child’s creativity, imagination, self expression. It also helps to develop senses and perception, spatial conceptualization and appreciating other person’s work...Children’s own art exhibitions are interesting and children love and enjoy watching the works...
- Person 2 A small child is an active learner, and he learns best by doing things self. Learning through trying and finding personal paths in doing things will develop problem solving abilities...

Fifth elements concentrate in “*Growing to be human being and growing as a human being*”. (compare White 1990) They deal with meanings which may not open to adults. When a child creates something own, it may contain such elements which do not show outside, but still it may give a lot of enjoyment to the child. Also the safe and encouraging adult is needed to guide a child into dealing with art. To grow to be a human being is involved with emotional growing and broad understanding of differences. A child may handle difficult emotions through artistic work without even noticing it. That is one reason for the therapeutic elements in art. Many of the answerers point out that a child should never be forced to do something or made fun of. The emotional surroundings in art subjects should be made as safe and encouraging as possible. Art may also raise such feelings in a child which he/she cannot handle without an adult sharing the experience. Through discussion a child gets a possibility to take to pieces the experiences rising from art. This helps to understand one’s own emotions and feelings better. Estimating and evaluating children’s art work should always be done in positive and encouraging manner, but still with a realistic touch. Too much appraisal will not lead into good results because children are actually quite skilful in evaluating their own work. Delicacy is one of the elements which should be present every time we discuss or evaluate artistic work. Then the children will be able to learn from experience and example how to handle evaluation and critic.

- Person 6      ...Art may raise uncontrollable feelings in a child, and that is why an adult is needed to help dealing with the emotional side. An adult should be very tense to such feelings, and be ready to guide the handling of them in safe atmosphere. Art education develops emotions and feelings as a part of personality.
- Person 12     Through art a child goes through different emotional experiences. He gains insights and feelings of succeeding when he understands something about what he sees...
- Person 19     Children should be taught to stop, wonder and listen to surrounding world, we should give them a possibility to relax and feel the silence of nature. That is how they have a change to see beauty around them, to go near satisfying and beautiful places and objects. With showing a good example we can learn children to enjoy art and later even make them artists...After art experience it is necessary to discuss the happening. Were you afraid of something in theatre play? What do you remember about the concert? What was the most exciting thing in art exhibition? These are the types of questions to be asked a child after intense art experience...
- Person 1      The feedback from the art making should always be positive and encouraging to keep the will to try making art again alive. Then after trying many times also the quality of the work will be better...With positive feedback I don’t mean over raising appraisal, because small children often get embarrassed; they can very often evaluate their own work quite well...
- Person 4      ...Most important is the positive and appraising feedback.
- Person 5      A child needs a possibility to be an artist him/herself, to get a change to make art. He/she must also get appraisal about the work.
- Person 8      Because art is a very personal experience, no one has a right to start criticizing the results or the artist. The art gives a good possibility to grow a child into consideration and delicacy.
- Person 16     Even if someone would be better in drawing, it doesn’t matter, because everyone is good in some part of artistic expression and one must not underestimate one’s own skills. Art as well as beauty is in the eyes of the spectator. We must teach children to respect other person’s work.
- Person 10     ...Art supports a child’s individuality and dissimilarity from other children.

Developing self confidence is one of the big challenges in all education. Art education may be one good way of developing self-confidence, self-consciousness and self picture of a child. This happens through the creativity and the feelings of succeeding in doing something self. A growing child needs to get feedback about his self made products, but this feedback should be wisely given. In many cases it has been proved that unwise music testing, rough criticising or negative attitude towards a child’s product may cause lifelong changes in attitudes of a growing child. A good example is the singing test, which still are in use at many schools: a new research among the elementary school classroom teacher students show that the most negative experiences in music lessons have raised from these tests which often have been carried out in the classroom in front of

all other pupils (Juvonen 2005). Another important element in developing self confidence is that a child should not be forced to do anything. This only causes negative attitude against the subject.

- Person 2 A child naturally gets joy and enjoyment when doing something concrete with his/her hands and feet. A child is naturally active, and wants to try everything new. These experiences are connected to child's self picture. Positive guidance is needed to strengthen this slowly forming part of personality.
- Person 3 When a child is a participant in artistic actions he, at the same time, observes everything that's happening. All the time he tries to find where his own skills are situated in comparison with the others. When getting positive experiences this helps to build a positive self-conception...
- Person 10 A child enjoys all active concrete doings and to him/her it is most important to be appreciated and encouraged. This feeds his/her belief in own abilities and skills.
- Person 14 Sharing experiences in artistic work, singing, drawing acting etc. without criticizing the children is very exhilarating and satisfying to children. In this area we are dealing with the most tender and sensitive parts of mind and emotions. Not everyone must be a new Mozart or genius in some field of arts. Let's help children find the therapeutic use of arts!

### Conclusions

On road to good life there are some turning points which are more important than others. One of the most important elements leading to good life is the self-picture of a person. It has many smaller parts like self-confidence or self-conception (see Eccles & Wigfield 2002). These can also be divided into smaller parts like the musical self. Self-picture forms an important part of personality and it has close connections also to the worldview of a person. The worldview can, also, be divided into smaller parts like the musical worldview or some other parts of the art world view of a person. All these important parts of a man's mind are forming and being built during childhood. The most important experiences in this artistic field of life are taking place in early childhood during the first years of life. That makes the difference: the under school aged children are beginning to form their conceptions about art, sports and every other part of normal life at that age. That is why it is the most necessary to realize the importance of all art subjects. They offer the early childhood educator good equipment leading the child on a path leading to good life (see Mori, K. 1997; Juvonen & Ruismäki 2005). The good life consists of a healthy self-picture, an ability to enjoy arts, an ability to take part in making different art subjects and an ability to enjoy and understand artistic work.

In the early childhood art making it is not only matter of building the self-picture positive. At the same time a child learns new motoric, social, emotional and conceptualization skills. Maybe the most important of these are the emotional connections. They give the sense to all arts. Feeling something in the artistic happening or situation makes it possible to feel the same emotions later in similar types of situations.

The road leading to good life is also connected to the ethic questions, which rise from doing things right and just (see Wittgenstein 1986). These questions were closely present in the writings of the target group of this research. As a whole this research shows the great diversity of possibilities to enclose the art education in early childhood. What is most important is that all the participants of the research seemed to have a philosophy concerning art education of their own. They used it as a basic theory in their thinking of art education. This means, that they have logic in their thinking and they have good abilities to their work concerning art education. The worst situation would be that our children would be in early childhood in hands of kindergarten teachers without a clear vision about art education's meaningfulness and importance for small children.

All the elements mentioned in the results showed to be important, all of them were mentioned in answers many times. The elements form the stairs which may lead into good life; we must give our children possibilities and abilities to climb those stairs, step by step.

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