

The Different Aspects of Artistic Expression in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In Finland each day care centre has produced their unit-specific curriculums based on the national curriculum (2005). This article describes the situation from the art education point of view. The staff from 243 day care centres (84 %) in the city of Helsinki answered to four open questions concerning art education. The artistic aspects were about harmonic, chaotic, goal oriented and possibilities oriented aspects of art education. In this article art education is interpreted as starting as a contact with a cultural product, evolving into art production relying on children's inner resources, and further on into a tool for personal and cultural production. The artistic education deepens and broadens as the children develop. Artistic tools can be mastered. Art becomes a platform for different interpretations and children's art is what children do. When art becomes an instrumental tool, there is always room for enhancement. Play, exploration and curiosity produce an atmosphere for a new culture development. Children can take the media in their own hands and enhance the needed tools and content further. The four different aspects of art are described in the light of the educators' descriptions.

Keywords: early childhood education, art education, curriculum

The different aspects of artistic expression in early childhood education

This paper describes the different aspects of art education in producing local municipal and unit-specific Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curriculums in Helsinki. The unit-specific ECEC curriculums for each day care centre are based on the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2005).

In the Finnish national curriculum guidelines on ECEC (2005, p. 22) children's artistic experiences and expression are defined as follows:

"Children gain their basic artistic experiences in a developmental environment that fosters a wide range of artistic activities, such as music, drawing, dance, drama, handicrafts and children's literature. The intensity and enchantment of artistic experiences activates children and grips their attention. Artistic activities and experiences introduce the child to an aesthetic world: the joy of learning, artistic drama, forms, sounds, colours, scents, sentiments and combination of experience based on the different senses. Art gives the child an opportunity to experience an imaginary world where everything is possible and true in a make-believe way ... Children enjoy artistic activity, skills and self-expression both when working alone and when working together with other children in various productions. Through artistic experiences and activities, children develop as individuals and group members."

Art can be conceived in many ways and the educational procedures depend on those presuppositions. In this paper, tools created by Piaget and Vygotsky are used to clarify the different functions and relations of artistic expression.

Piaget divides children's constructive thinking into **accommodation** and **assimilation**. In accommodation the views of the children change, in order to better correspond to environment (Gruber & Vonèche, 1995, p. 216; Piaget, 1977, pp. 18-19). In art this would mean that the child is accommodating his/her views to better grasp the artistic content. The child is opening up to the artistic content. In assimilation the experiences fit in with the existing mental structure of the child (Reunamo, 2007, p. 21), the schemas are incorporated into an already existing inner structures of children (Piaget, 1977, pp. 18-19). In art this means that children do not change their views along the process, rather, art can be seen as distinct ready-made content that can be used as tools for the mind and artistic expression. The children can use art to express themselves.

In accommodation art is a larger wholeness in which children need to open themselves into. In assimilation the art does not change child fundamentally but art can add up to children's repertoire of tools to grasp and do things. Accommodating to art is opening up to the cultural and artistic content to get a better contact and get a more deep understanding of art. Assimilating art means to use and acquire separate artistic ideas and tools to apply them.

The second continuum considered here is **adaptation** and **agency**. Adaptation serves as a balance between assimilation and accommodation (Kitchener, 1986, pp. 54-61). Adaptation refers to already existing content. In agency children change the environment, too (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 4-5; Solberg, 1997, pp. 126-127; and Reunamo, 2005). As Galperin observes (cf. Arieviditch & Haenen, 2005), the ability to look ahead (orientation) is a precondition for and even a prime aspect of learning. The more accustomed the children are to participating in the processes of their surroundings, the more prepared they will be for participating also as adults (Reunamo, 2004). In this article, Piaget is considered as emphasizing the adaptive (dependant) nature of children's views while Vygotsky considers both adaptation and agency. Bodrova and Leong (2006) discuss the impact of Vygotsky's ideas on pedagogy. They point out that to develop self-regulation, children need to engage in regulating others too. By discussing and planning, children engage in high levels of both "self-" and "other-regulation" (Bodrova & Leong 2006, pp. 206-220).

When children are having agency on art they are seen as the originators of new cultural artefacts and ways to produce new cultural developments. These two continuums produce a fourfold table describing four possible ways to consider children's relation to art and art education. On this continuum the direction of change is central. Is art having an effect on minds or do children's views contain elements that change art? The fourfold table can be seen in Figure 1.

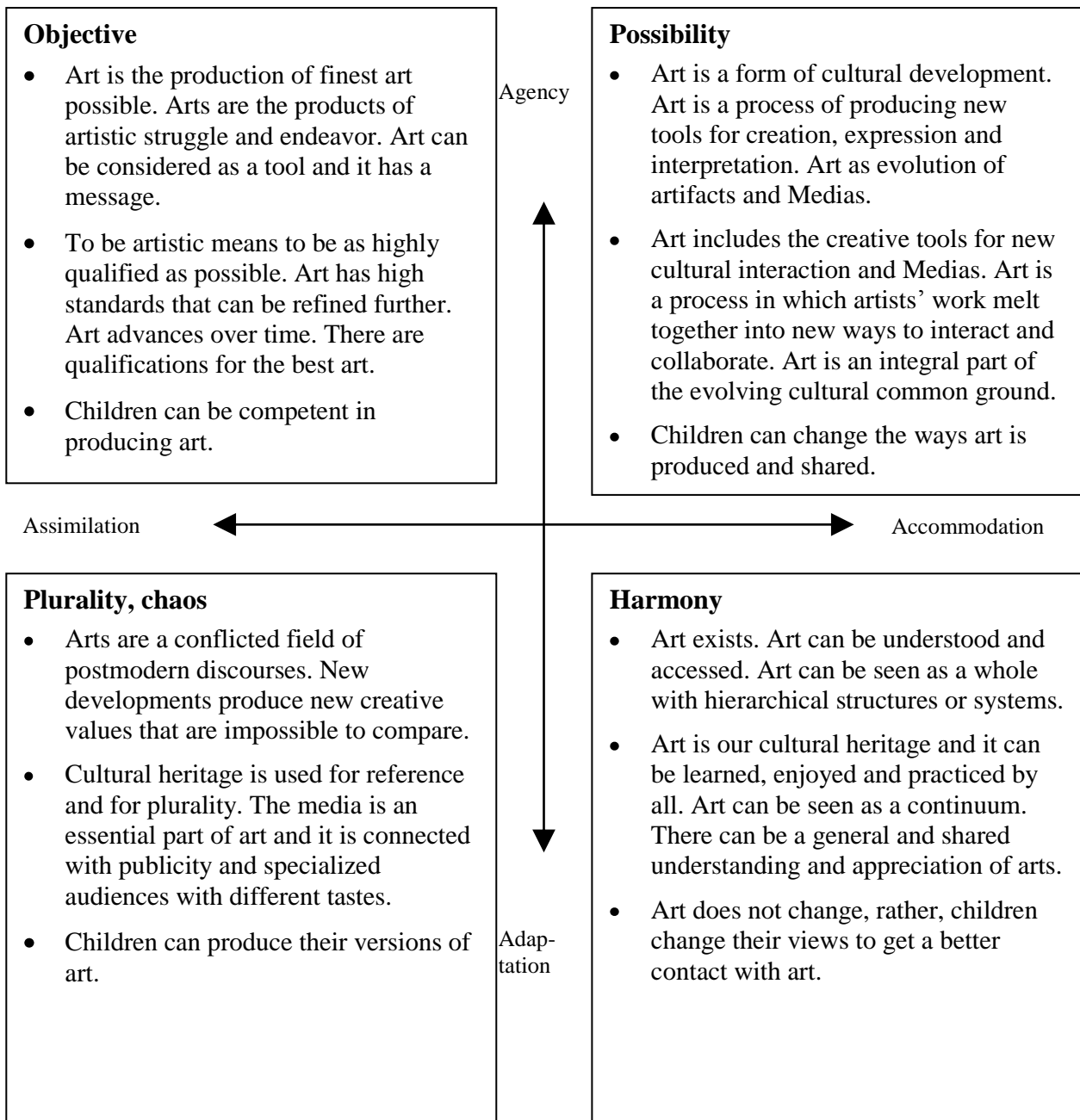


Figure 1. The four different ways to consider artistic change

The four different views on art have consequences on relating art. When art is seen as existing (the art or artistic content does not change), the only way to interact with it is to change oneself: to interact with it is to adapt to it and accommodate one's conceptions to fully incorporate the artistic content (harmony). When the different aspects of art are applied as such there is no unifying whole and the differing developments produce conflicting fields of interest that compete with each other (plurality, chaos). When the art is seen as personal assimilation of artistic development with new changes in artistic products, the art can be considered as new personal developments and products the art can be considered as personal impacts and better art (objectives).

When the artist both accommodates to the existing forms of arts and is the motor (agent) in contributing new tools for artistic production the artistic endeavour becomes a shared cultural development (reaching for new possibilities).

The four aspects of early childhood education also reveal four different artistic relations for pedagogy. These aspects are described in the light of Vygotsky (1978, 2004) in Figure 2.

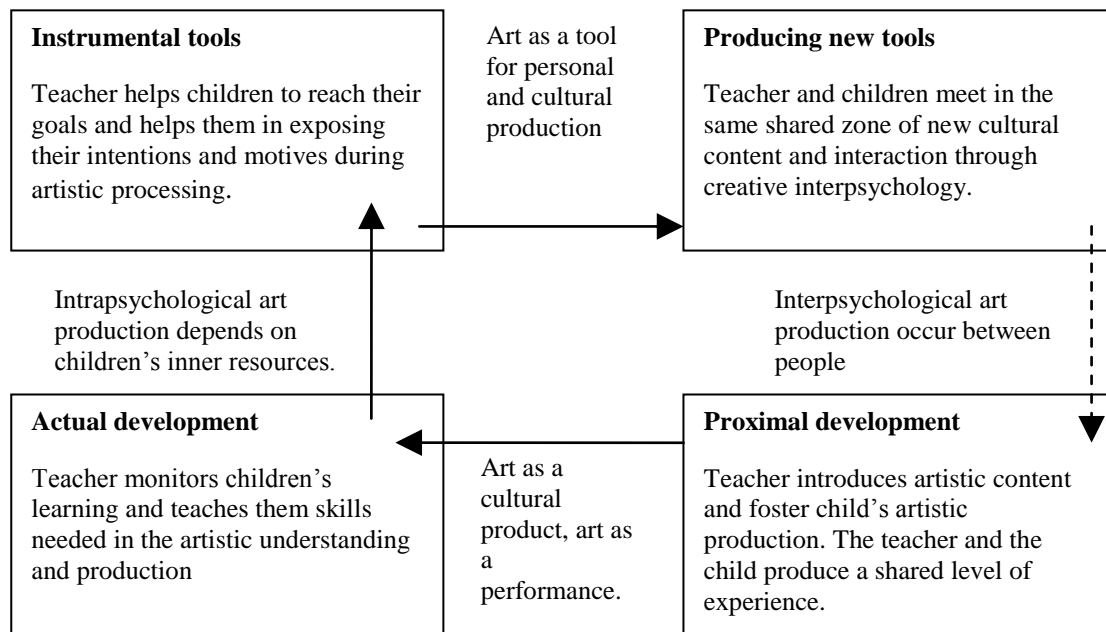


Figure 2. The four facets of art education in ECEC

Harmony. In the zone of proximal development art can be enjoyed, learned and practiced by children. Art is a constant source of content the children can accommodate to and integrate into. The artistic education deepens and broadens as the children develop. Artistic tools can be mastered. Art is a vibrant whole the children can get involved in, that can be experienced and perceived.

Plurality (chaos). When children's art describes their actual development, the actions describe children's ideas and needs and all kinds of children's work are important. Children's artwork describes the plurality of children's voices. Art becomes a platform for different interpretations and children's art is what children do.

Objectives. When art becomes an instrumental tool; there is always room for enhancement. With practice children can gradually become better in their creation of artistic artefacts. The best art requires talent, work and the best specialized art education possible.

Possibilities. When art is considered as a shared content produced together, art for children is a social process they get involved in. Adults foster new projects with shared planning, interacting

and evaluation of the processed products. Play, exploration and curiosity produce an atmosphere for a new culture development. Children can take the media in their own hands and enhance the needed tools and content further. The four different aspects of art describe are reflected in children's relation to art and art education.

Research questions and method

The research questions for the paper have been:

1. What are the central themes in artistic expression in ECEC in Finland?
2. What can the four aspects of describing artistic expression reveal of educational orientations of art education?

Eighty questions, four of them dealing with artistic expression, were sent to 328 day care centres in Helsinki at the end of February 2005. Next are the concise instructions for the day care staffs for the first phase of the process in spring 2005.

In the file Vasu-kartoitus.doc there are four sets of questions. In each of the sets the ECEC guidelines are considered from different viewpoints which are: 1) good practices (harmony) 2) conflicts (chaos) 3) objectives and 4) possibilities. In the kindergarten one member of the staff is liable for one set of questions. Altogether there are four people in the kindergarten to address one set of questions each.

Although one staff member is responsible for answering her/his set of questions, it is important to process and discuss the topics with colleagues (e.g. at coffee breaks, in teams and at meetings). If one has different opinions than one's colleagues, write down both opinions. One does not have to discuss with everybody in the kindergarten, but it is important that the opinions of different teams are written down.

The time to complete the processing of the questions is from 01.03–15.04.2005. The first week is for considering the questions in general. These instructions are delivered to all the staff. The second week the taking of one's own and colleagues' notes begins. On the third week the answers are written up.

Not later than week 15 one of the ECEC plan leaders writes up all four sets of answers into a form at the address <http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/vasu.htm>. The viewpoints are left for all to read and comment (in the staff room, info board, copy to everybody etc.). The viewpoints are used as a starting point in the conducting of the ECEC plan.

The opinions were written in an open form without predefined alternatives. By the end of the deadline, 243 kindergartens had sent in their answers. The percent of curriculum processed Finnish-speaking kindergartens was 84,4 %, which is satisfactory. Of all the day care centres a random sample of one hundred day care centres were selected for the analysis.

The first phase of the interpretation was conducted in line with grounded theory (cf. Smet, Keer, Wever & Valcke, 2010). In grounded theory are no before-hand categories. The categories are indicated by the data under study. The emerging theory and the codes describing different categories are based on the content being researched and grounded on the material. After interpretation several codes were merged together and in the end seven different categories remained.

After the initial analysis based on the emerging (grounded) categories (codes), the whole data was analyzed again by content analysis. A coding scheme was developed for each category to ensure consistency in scoring the descriptions (cf. Mulenga, Al-Harhi, & Carr-Chellman, 2006).

Results

The numbers in the results describe the amount of mentions of that particular aspect of artistic expression. As there were a sample of a hundred day care centres the figure is also the percentage of day care centres who described their aspects of artistic expression accordingly.

Harmonic tendencies. To find out about the harmonic (cf. Figure 1) aspects of artistic activities in Helsinki the staff was asked a question: *What kind of artistic and expressive items work best in your own work and the day care centre as a whole?* The twelve most often described items are listed next. After the description the number describes how many times the aspect was mentioned in the staff's descriptions. Because the qualitative sample of all the day care centres was 100 day care centres the number is at the same time a percent of all answers. The percentage is well over 100 percent, because most of the answers described several aspect.:

- Singing and music (sessions); 60
- Drama, performances; 51
- Visual arts, different techniques, stories with pictures; 44
- Fairytales, nursery rhymes, storytelling, story crafting, books, language; 31
- Craftsmanship, hobby activity, pottering, woodwork 28
- Children's expression, imagination, children's own mental images and products; 26
- Celebrations, trips, projects, themes: 20
- Versatility of tools and materials and their availability, recycling etc.; 15
- Educator's personal involvement and adult performances; 9
- Workshops and clubs; 9
- Encouraging atmosphere; 8
- Children's own projects and performances, spontaneous expression; 7

These aspects describe art as something that can be valued by children and colleague educators alike. These aspects of artistic activities are described already working well and the educators are already satisfied with them. Thus these activities do not need to be forced or hurried.

When art becomes a shared practice for all, children have an open and involved contact with the social sphere, an advanced contact to artistic content helps the child to produce more advanced art. A child can learn the uses and content of art to better correspond to the socially shared art. Thus a harmonic relation to art is good in early childhood education, giving children contact to the existing artistic content in the zone of proximal development described by Vygotsky (1978). Nevertheless, this harmonic view of art can also become excessive, when obsessive habits hinder the necessary change.

Plural, chaotic tendencies. To find out the chaotic aspects of art education another question was asked of the early childhood educators: *What limits children's creative projects from flourishing in your group most? What about the whole day care centre?*

- The daily schedule, the planned program and the daily routines take time; 38
- Constricted space, e.g. workshop is a junk pile; 35
- The adults do the limitations, task orientation, strict planning, adult does not catch up; 28
- Projects need to be cleared for resting, eating or for other groups; 28
- Resources (big groups etc.); 25
- The differences in children's readiness and age; 14
- The lack of adult co-operation and shared vision; 12
- No permanent places for workshops or long projects; 11
- A ready-made or insufficient pre-school material, the material not available; 9
- Nothing, empty answer; 8
- Children's ideas are not considered, children's projects are not supported, children do not invent; 7

Here art is not considered as a harmonic whole, rather, it is a controversial field of life among other important facets of life. Art needs to fight for the limited resources and time against other aspects of human interests. The daily schedule has not room for artistic endeavours. Artistic processes get lost in the forthcoming mountain of necessary things that need attention. There is not time and place for long creative processes. Even if there were enough time for an artistic process, the process can collapse when educators or children are absent. Long fulfilling artistic processes cannot be completed with too many changes in participants, spaces and frequent interruptions. It is difficult for the educator to welcome children's creative processes when the educator is in the middle of chaos trying to make some sense of the discontinuities. Another creative strand is not welcomed. However, chaos can be seen also as a creative aspect, as the constant unwinding and restructuring includes also the seeds for new structures to evolve. In artistic chaos there are new elements learned and invented, too. Maybe not all of the limitations are not real limitations, they can be excuses also.

Objectives. To find out about artistic objectives the educators were asked a third question: *What kind of artistic and expressive objectives have been important in your group/day care centre lately?*

- Children's expression, language development; 43
- Singing and music; 39
- Drama and role play; 38
- Craftsmanship, handiwork; 37
- Visual arts and techniques; 32
- Fairy tales, nursery rhymes and books; 31
- Culture (tradition, art, theatre etc.); 21
- Themes and projects concerning parties, trips and seasons; 20
- Introducing materials, versatile use and recycling; 15
- Morning get-togethers, art and other clubs; 11
- The encouragement and cheering of children, joy; 10
- The development of children's creativity and imagination; 8
- The atmosphere of putting one's soul into the expression; 7

The objectives should describe things that do not exist; it describes something that is not possessed yet. Children's expressive and language skills are on the top of the list of objectives and drama, role play, tales and rhymes seem to be the tools to enhance them. They also serve as connections to cultural art forms. Children's own activity in art and expression is manifested in handiwork, introducing material, encouragement to enhance children's creativity and imagination. To get highly involved in the expression ensures all important aspects of children's development to be incorporated into the expression. On a more general level this would mean that to produce high quality artistic results the educators would need to direct children's needs, motivation, affects and alertness to ensure high quality results. Creativity and fixed goals do not go hand in hand all the time. The *harmonic* and *objective* aspects of art education have several same aspects, which I think means that for harmony it is not sufficient that things work out well, they need to have relevance, too.

Possibilities. To find out aspects of art education and expression that the staff seemed interested to open up and try as new developments in their work the fourth question was asked: *What kind of artistic and expressive openings seem to be interesting at this moment?*

- Music in different situations, singing get-togethers, voice; 38
- Role plays, drama; 36
- Visual arts (painting, different techniques, body, nature etc.); 24
- Themes, projects (colours, art weeks, rhythm, exhibitions, garden etc.); 24
- Puppet theatre, desktop theatre, shadow theatre; 18

- Handicraft (felting, baking, pottering, making books etc.); 17
- Story crafting; 16
- Children's expressions (children's interviews, performances, descriptions of their works); 15
- Culture (theatre, art, circus, opera, museums etc.); 15
- Fairy tales, reading, language; 12
- Nature, trips (inspiration and ambience); 10

Testing new developments is about finding and producing new culture. Music can be incorporated in many situations. Possibilities for new projects and process are not obligatory, they can be used and spent if found interesting or valuable enough. Possibilities can be ideated in abundance, but they do not need to be treated as necessary. New possibilities seem to be often situated in cooperative projects in which children can participate in. It seems interesting that dancing was not mentioned as an interesting new opening. Maybe dancing is considered more like physical education. Creative projects need time and the resources are limited. Maybe the best option for creative projects is to help children themselves take hold of their projects, their planning, development and evaluation. Then children themselves can become resources for development and they learn the needed metacognitive skills and strategies to steer shared processes.

Discussion

The sample can be regarded as a random sample of the day care centres in Helsinki. The results can not be generalized to all of Finland or Europe. Nevertheless, as the questions were open questions prepared and tested to catch the different aspects of education, they give us a glimpse of important aspects of art education in early childhood education. The questions and answers were not described in "good" or "bad" dichotomy, which hopefully helped the educators to express their understanding freely. The next phase for research could be the quantitative analysis of the four dimensions described in the article. Then we can estimate the importance and statistical dependencies among different aspects.

Art is equilibrium between accommodation and assimilation. Children (and adults alike) need to accommodate their perception and understanding to get in contact with the artistic content produced and to share it with others. Children assimilate their artistic conceptions in their artistic endeavours. Piagetian way of looking at adaptation has still some valuable insight into this process.

Art is an existing and solid product of culture with valuable artefacts. Children can use the artistic cultural heritage in their own artistic works. Art develops another meaning when children start to create new cultural artefacts in their processes and with other people. When we talk about artistic change we have to ask who is changing: the "art" or children's artistic understanding and skills. Vygotskian way looking at cultural mediation has inspirational examples of these processes.

In the end, children need to find their artistic processes in all the four sectors: to get in contact with the existing artistic culture, to practice their artistic skills, to learn to create their own artefacts and to rejoin their forces in shared cultural development.

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