Constanze Kirchner

Art Education in Primary School

Abstract

Based on children's need for pictorial expression and the multi-layered power of symbolism in the fine arts, Constanze Kirchner provides a sketch of the tasks and objectives of art class. This includes experiencing nature and compensation, experiencing the environment as well as playing, perception and creativity, experiencing art and media skills. This overview is rounded off by a look at the function of grading from an art didactical standpoint.*

Tasks and Objectives of Art Class

Art class is supposed to convey a multisided approach towards the world. This means that children discover, appraise and expand their aesthetic skills. Getting to know works of art in their function as cultural pillars, grasping the complexity and the power of symbolism of the fine arts is one of the starting points in art class. The other pole is the anthropologically anchored, genuine need for communication and expression of children. Here, art classes follow the age-appropriate forms of representation that are successively facilitated by thematic assignments, by offering material, as well as by teaching the use of specific techniques and workflows.

Aesthetic Interest and Aesthetic Experience

Children draw and paint, form, build and craft. They express themselves through movement and dance, they collect most different things, they craft odd objects and fantasy figures from materials they find, they photograph, put together collages on the computer and create many other things. Some children prefer graphic expression, others prefer painting, some students only want to build and construct, others dress up or dance, etc. The spectrum of creative-aesthetic interests is diverse, differs on an individual basis and changes with age. Furthermore, aesthetic interests and needs (Kleinmann, 2002, pp. 79–80; Duncker, 1999; Boehm, 1996, p. 149) change with changing

---

* First published in German in 2008, translated and revised in 2015.

social conditions, with an environment dominated by images, lacking links to nature, the technologies etc. This is complemented by the complex differentiation of the contemporary artistic strategy in correlation with technical possibilities for creation – both factors add to the fact that subject-related content of art class and its focus have to be thought through and updated to account for changes on a constant basis.

To trigger and support a sustained aesthetic interest and thereby discover and realize talents at the same time, it has to be the objective of art education to provide the students with as many areas of creative production and reception as possible. Especially when – most often towards the end of primary school – there is a great discrepancy between the intent to express specific imaginations or creative concepts and the skills of expression. At this stage, creative interest often stagnates. But it is certainly possible to preserve aesthetic interest after this so-called "end of children's drawing". For this to be achieved, children have to learn a broad repertoire of creative expression at an early stage, which includes forms of activity such as building and constructing, collecting and ordering, crafting and forming, interacting in and with nature, digital creation, movement and dance, unconventional use of everyday objects as creative tools, the use of ready-mades (industrially produced objects) and objets trouvés (found objects) and working with a video camera.

Experiencing Nature and Compensation

Movement exercises and haptic handling of different materials are supposed to equalize deficits in development. Particular emphasis is placed on the effect of the different materials, which offer resistances and have a specific inert appeal, to have a positive effect on identity development. Ego strength, competence to act and communication skills are to be developed through mutual activity, to prevent failed development and identity disorders. The experiences in nature are also ascribed compensatory power. Creative interaction in and with nature stimulates reflections on the relationship of mankind and nature on different levels and can also, through the use of natural materials as creative tools, start an engagement with natural phenomena (fig. 1).
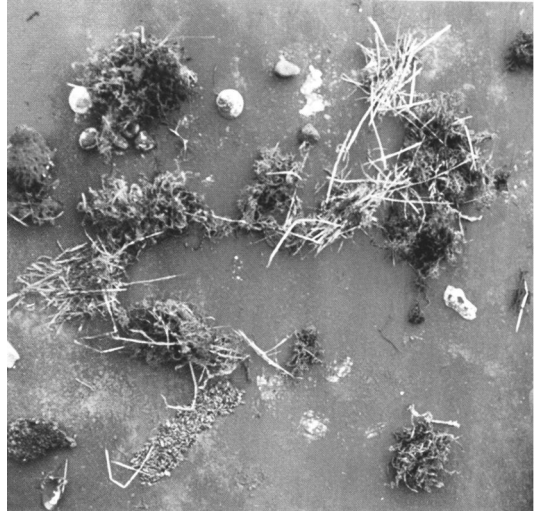
Fig. 1
Student work, 2nd
grade – Creating with
materials from nature,
inspired by reflections on
the works of Yves Klein

Visual Design

Through the training of visual and artistic tools and technical workflows, students learn to expand their arsenal of expressions, the reason being that it is also an objective of teaching art to offer solutions to visual and artistic problems and convey the use of different techniques. Here, it is attempted to fill visual and artistic problems with content that relates to the interests of children and youth. Presentation skills are to be fostered, so that the desired content can be expressed in a manner appropriate for the children and youth (fig. 2).

Experiencing Environment and Play

Further content-specific objectives are the reflection of reality and the adoption of the immediate living environment. Not only the everyday environment of children serves as a basis for the creative occupation with their own living environment, but also the current artistic strategies, in which everyday objects serve as autonomous means of creation, performances and installations suggest interacting with the environment in art education.

Acting (theatre play) and stage design, dancing and moving oneself, but also the crafting of toys are among the topics of a pluralistic art education. Partially linked with the area of crafting, art classes are used to make play

Fig. 2
Student work, 2nd grade
– Colour play, inspired by
reflections on the works
of Ernst Wilhelm Nay

figures, walkable model houses, shadow plays are developed, etc. With behavior such as collecting and ordering, searching for objects and securing them, children and youth develop modes of behavior that serve, among other things, as means helping them to adopt to their immediate environment (fig. 3).

As additional creative acts, collecting objects allows the activation of memories and reconstruction of experiences through pieces of personal importance. Based on the child's characteristic curiosity, thirst for knowledge and eagerness to explore their environment, everyday material, objects with special sensuous appeal or objects that are connected to memories can become part of the creative activity. These processes of aesthetic practice are not only based on genuinely childlike behavior but are also used by numerous artists as creative forms for their work.

Fig. 3   Student work, 3rd grade – Creating with everyday objects, inspired by
reflections on the works of Daniel Spoerri

Perception and Creativity

The aesthetic behavior of children and youth is extraordinarily varied and
multifaceted. Inventiveness, practical fantasy and creativity are brought to
life in creative activity. The mental image of particular ways of going about
a certain task or the possibilities for combination are often not laid out as
strictly in children and youth as they are in adults. They find odd approaches
and develop wonderful constructs of fantasy. Experiences in playing and
experimenting influence their creative work. The playful, experimental and
unconventional use of creative tools, e. g. the unusual use of a scanner, lead
to new ways of graphical expression.

Media Literacy

In recent years, computers have increasingly entered the daily lives of chil-
dren and youth. The growing importance of computer technology and digi-
tal photography as creative tools is also reflected in art education. Therefore,

Fig. 4
Student work, 1st grade
– Naked feet on a
scanner, painted over

conveying media literacy is a natural concern of educational work in the
arts. Meanwhile, media reception heavily influences a child's perception, as
well as the topics that interest children. Growing up with computers and the
use of drawing and painting software, the Internet, authoring software, etc.,
leads to changes in both the productive and the receptive work of children
and youth (fig. 5).

Experiencing Art

Getting to know historical and contemporary works of art is part of the
basic curriculum of the subject. It not only inspires the creative process
with respect to the motif, the technique, or the material, thereby expanding
the toolbox available for expression. It also leads to the development of the
ability to understand works of art and a repertoire for their interpretation.
Many recent models for using works of art prefer focusing on contemporary
art – reasoning that contemporary art deals with the problems of our time.
Connecting it with what is happening in one's own life is often easier than
with historical art (Kirchner, 1999; Uhlig, 2003). The dialog with and about
art means that impressions are formed in language, statements about effects
are justified, intentions deducted and singular elements such as materials,

Fig. 5
Student work, 4th grade
– Digitally created image

subjects, items, creative means etc. are connected within a greater context. Furthermore, creative structures are to be noticed, motifs to be assigned to themes, categorization must happen, and the social context in which the work is embedded is to be discovered. These are exactly the skills the last PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) required under the key word "reading literacy". In the future, "visual literacy" is to be additionally tested – the skill to decipher pictures, which is taught when working with works of art. This means that working with art offers educational chances on many levels, far beyond merely getting to know of works of art.

Performance Evaluation

Performance assessment proves to be a special problem in the art classroom. Particularly during primary school age, drawing skills of students differ significantly. Additionally, there are different aesthetic interests – in building and construction, in scenic play, in collecting and ordering, in the use of color, etc., a multitude of talents, ideas and solutions is revealed.

Not all tasks can be graded, nor must they be graded. Tasks, the creative criteria of which can be made transparent and that contain gradable approaches, are often more suitable for evaluation than strongly subjective themes relating to personal expression. Any evaluation of creative achievements must incorporate several factors: The own aesthetic "prejudice", the personal "taste", must be reflected upon. The individual performance improvement of the child is to be considered with priority, as the level of expressivity may differ considerably from child to child. The ability of real-

istic reproduction of reality should by no means be the benchmark for an evaluation. Instead, criteria such as the development of an idea, composition, expression, use of creative media, participation, social behavior, etc., should be taken into account when evaluating and grading. Furthermore, an overall grade is to be determined based on all areas of aesthetic practice (drawing, painting, sculpturing, building and constructing, treatment of media, dramatic play and so forth).

Works Cited/References

Boehm, G. (1980/1996). Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane. J. Stöhr (Ed.), *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*. Köln: DuMont.

Duncker, L. (1999). Begriff und Struktur ästhetischer Erfahrung. Zum Verständnis unterschiedlicher Formen ästhetischer Praxis. N. Neuß (Ed.), *Ästhetik der Kinder. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur ästhetischen Erfahrung von Kindern*. Frankfurt am Main: GEP.

Kirchner, C. (1999). *Kinder und Kunst der Gegenwart. Zur Erfahrung mit zeitgenössischer Kunst in der Grundschule*. Seelze: Kallmeyer.

Kirchner, C. (2000) Digitale Kinderzeichnung. Annotationen zum derzeitigen Forschungsstand. *Kunst+Unterricht*. 246/247, pp. 32–45.

Kirchner, C. & Peez, G. (Eds.) (2001). *Werkstatt: Kunst. Anregungen zu ästhetischen Erfahrungs- und Lernprozessen im Werkstattunterricht*. Hannover: BDK.

Kirchner, C. (Ed.) (2007). *Kunstunterricht in der Grundschule*. Berlin: Cornelsen.

Kirchner, C. (2006). Ästhetische Bildung im Fach Kunst. J. Kahlert, G. Lieber & S. Binder (Eds.), *Ästhetisch bilden. Begegnungsintensives Lernen in der Grundschule*. Braunschweig: Westermann.

Kleimann, B. (2002). *Das ästhetische Weltverhältnis. Eine Untersuchung zu den grundlegenden Dimensionen des Ästhetischen*. München: Fink.

Uhlig, B. (2005). *Kunstrezeption in der Grundschule. Zu einer grundschulspezifischen Rezeptionsmethodik*. München: kopaed.