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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS
IN RUSSIA AND ITALY

The research presented herein stems from a project realized within the framework of joint Masters degree program between MSUPE and La Sapienza in 2010-2012. As part of that project we looked at aesthetic preferences and other features of aesthetic perception in elementary school children coming from different educational environments, namely general education school, gymnasium with extended program on natural sciences and languages, the infamous in Russia school №91 where developmental education program of Elkonin-Davydov is realized (this program includes aesthetic development as its part and aesthetic ability is claimed as one of key competences developed by the program along with theoretical thinking). Additionally we included a group from Tretyakov Gallery arts education studio.

Essentially we had two groups of children not getting any special aesthetic education and two groups who were getting aesthetic education in different ways. In that data we noticed a significant difference in children from School 91 and Tretyakov Gallery in the way they were making sense and describing meaning of images of pictorial art. What is it in the didactics of different aesthetic education systems that creates these different educational outcomes? This was the intrigue that called to study it and challenge for further research. Since the PhD project is done in Rome, a cross-cultural component was included to compare systems of aesthetic education in Russia and Italy.

Below I introduce the methodological basis of this research project. As aesthetic education is being discussed, two points will be made – on how artistic activity is understood and on how education is understood.

In understanding aesthetics we rely on the work of Lev Vygotsky outlined in his «Psychology of art»; however the same ideas were expressed and structured by philosopher of Russian Silver Age, Pavel Florensky in his works on analysis of

pictorial art, and we will be using his terminology. Following Florensky, we see artistic activity both from the side of creator and from the side of spectator through integrity of two components: composition and construction. Composition is all the compositional characteristics of the artistic image, including imagery, form, color, perspective, etc., so this component may be described as external and form-related. Construction is meanings and senses found in the artistic image, so it may be described as content-related and meaning-related.

Artistic activity of the spectator is creative synthesis: taking elements of composition and trying to look *behind* them at the meaning being transferred through them. Some of these meanings will be in line with cultural norm of understanding art (explained below), but some will be ambiguous, when the artist intended to transfer some meaning but another one can be attributed as well; these are lacunas of sense which the spectator can fill with his/her own sense and meaning. An opinion shared by most specialists in arts is that artwork has aesthetic value only when such lacunas are there to be found and filled by the spectator, because it makes inner work of mind possible and provides an opportunity for development.

As for understanding education, in the basis for any didactical system we find a certain idea or concept regarding laws and logic of development which determines the pedagogical strategy, the goals and values of teaching and learning, and the general principles of putting those goals into educational practice. Our understanding of development is purely Vygotskian, which implies that we see development as a process of assimilation and mastering of cultural (developed in and by culture) ways of operating with tools, motives of activity and norms of relations. This process requires consequently the presence of an Adult - carrier of culture and – in our case – cultural norm of understanding art. The activity starts with adult and child acting together and gradually, within the Zone of Proximal Development, as the child masters this activity, the adult steps back until finally the child can act on his/her own.

To explain, cultural norm of understanding art is an ability to see in the form of an artwork the artistic intention of the artist and to relate to this artistic intention as a representation of some essential characteristic of life. It is opposed to naïve formalism when artwork is understood according to formal characteristics, not image content and expressivity of form (for example: “this picture is wrong, because it is not drawn in single point perspective”). So in aesthetic education there is a task of overcoming naïve formalism and learning to grasp construction (sense) and its relation to

composition (form) of artwork, or in the words of Ilienkov, “see the whole before it’s parts”.

For us it is most important that the notion of cultural norm of understanding art presupposes sense-making as part of art perception and appreciation, a competence of seeing the ideal dimension (intentions, thoughts, feelings, etc.) behind compositional elements, and this is what aesthetic education should do for the children.

Due to my own background as psychologist and researcher I can’t help but see features of developmental education as described by Davydov and Elkonin in aesthetic education as described in these terms, and try to analyze art education programs from this point of view. Since aesthetic didactics in Italy has its own rich tradition rooted in the works of M. Montessori and J. Dewey, it does not seem fair to impose my view of how education should be on every practice. Therefore it is essential for comparative analysis to introduce units of analysis that are unbiased towards each educational environment, and this is the main challenge on the current stage of this research.

The way we explore aesthetic education systems is based on contributions of MSUPE Educational Psychology Faculty to Federal Standards for various stages of education and methods of expert assessment of educational programs.

Aesthetic education programs are analyzed upon three elements or parameters:

- 1) *Educational idea* – proclaimed goals of learning with the system of methods and means of achieving it, pedagogical tasks;
- 2) *Educational result* – measurement of aesthetic development level, as per methods of experimental aesthetics;
- 3) *Educational practice* – results of observation over educator's activity and ways he/she organizes educational processes.

The first category of data is information we can easily take from official program documentation, descriptions, teaching plans, etc. The second category of data is collected using a set of diagnostic procedures designed by E. Torshilova and her colleagues in Institute of Arts Education of Russian Academy of Education. This tradition of experimental aesthetics is rooted in the works of Fechner, Dürer, Lotman, Child and others, and counts over 20 years of collecting data on aesthetic development of children of different ages. Parameters measured in this set of diagnostic procedures include **sense of form, sense of composition, sense of style, ability to grasp and interpret the artistic intention, understanding emotions in**

facial expressions and **aesthetic preference**; therefore it provides data on level of reflective understanding of both compositional organization and sense-related content of pictorial art.

As mentioned above, the main challenge for this stage of research is in the *Educational practice* analysis, taking into account the aforementioned problem of choosing the unbiased units of analysis.

As a research problem I am posing for this Summer School for PhD students, I would like to initiate a discussion and brainstorming on such analysis units. I propose the following as units of analysis of aesthetic education practice:

- Is Educational Idea implemented into practice? How exactly?
- Teacher's position (role)

she/he directs? she/he facilitates individual and/or joint activity? what kind of questions she/he asks? Etc.

- How art appreciation is combined with children's own creative activity?

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