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Abstract:

This study deals with an exploratory research about understanding of art in students of different age, grades and kind of schools attended. In particular, we analysed how beliefs and reflections about art and aesthetical experiences expressed during a cross-age interview, changed in elementary school children involved for two years in a UE Project (Socrates - Comenius, Action 1) titled "Philosophy and European Contemporary Art". The activities are based on guided philosophical discussions, transforming the classroom in a "community of inquiry", according to the methodology of "Philosophy for Children" program (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). The elementary school group was tested pre and post the program activities. A qualitative analysis of the students' answers was carried out, considering the data with respect to the five stages of art understanding defined by Micheal Parsons (1990) which correspond to different beliefs about art in the subjects.

Key-words: Philosophy for children; qualitative analysis; art education

Como estudantes entendem a arte: uma mudança nas crianças através da filosofia.

Resumo:

Este estudo lida com uma pesquisa exploratória sobre a compreensão a respeito da arte por estudantes de diferentes idades, séries e tipos de escola frequentados. Particularmente, analisamos como crenças e reflexões a respeito da arte e da experiência estética expressas por crianças de diferentes idades nas entrevistas feitas mudaram naquelas do ensino fundamental envolvidas por dois anos na UE Project (Sócrates - Comenius, Ação 1), intitulado "Filosofia e arte européia contemporânea". As atividades são baseadas em discussões filosóficas conduzidas, transformando a sala de aula em uma "comunidade de investigação", de acordo com a metodologia do programa de "Filosofia para Crianças" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980). O grupo do ensino primário fundamental foi testado antes e depois das atividades do programa. Uma análise qualitativa das respostas dos estudantes foi efetuada, considerando os dados em relação aos cinco estágios da compreensão da arte, definidos por Micheal Parsons (1990), que correspondem a diferentes crenças sobre a arte nas disciplinas.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia para crianças; análise cualitativa; educação artística

Cómo los estudiantes entienden el arte: un cambio en los niños a través de la filosofía

Resumen:

Este estudio trata de una investigación exploratoria acerca de la comprensión del arte en estudiantes de diferentes edades, años escolares y tipos de escuelas. En particular, analizamos cómo creencias y reflexiones sobre el arte y las experiencias estéticas expresadas en entrevistas realizadas en diferentes edades cambiaron en niños de educación fundamental en los dos años de un proyecto de la Unión Europea (Sócrates - Comenius, Acción 1), intitulado "La Filosofía y el Arte Europeo Contemporáneo". Las actividades estuvieron basadas en discusiones filosóficas guiadas, transformando la clase en una "comunidad de investigación", de acuerdo con la metodología del Programa de "Filosofía para Niños" (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980). El grupo de educación fundamental fue testado antes y después de las actividades del programa. Fue desarrollado un análisis cualitativo de las respuestas de los estudiantes, considerando los datos en relación con los cinco estadios de comprensión del arte definidos por Micheal Parsons (1990), que corresponden a diferentes creencias acerca del arte en las materias.

Palabras clave: Filosofía para niños; análisis cualitativo; educación artística

HOW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ART: A CHANGE IN CHILDREN THROUGH PHILOSOPHY.

Marina Santi

This study, conducted by the author with some students of Rovigo Liceo Socio-psico-pedagogico "C. Roccati" (Italy), is part of a larger two-year monitoring programme on the educational activities carried out in an Italian Elementary School involved in the European Project Socrates - Comenius/ Action 1, named "PECA - Philosophy and European Contemporary Art". The Project aims are to foster classroom reflection about aesthetic topics, and further children awareness of the different intellectual, social, cultural dimensions implied in art experience. The Project title connects philosophy and art, following the hypothesis that philosophical reflection stimulated during guided discussions, could promote aesthetic awareness producing a cognitive and cultural advancement in this domain. The methodology utilised during discussions was "community of inquiry", as proposed by M. Lipman in the "Philosophy for Children" Curriculum (Lipman, 1985, 1988; Santi, 1990, 1993, 1995). In fact, Philosophy for Children is the educational core of the Project, shared by all the European partners (Spain, Scotland, Belgium, Italy) involved.

The need of a monitoring programme of the Project has suggested some original and meaningful research paths, we developed both through quantitative and qualitative methods. Here we analyse only a part of the evaluation programme done in Italy, that is the cross-age research about students understanding of art. This research investigates the different typologies of approach to art in different ages and kind of schools attended, and the aesthetic beliefs that lead the students' comprehension in this domain. In particular, the results of an explorative research regarding the elementary school children involved in the Comenius Project are presented, suggesting the possibility of a positive relation between the increasing of art comprehension and the practice of aesthetics discussion in the classroom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In our culture, the reflection about the nature of art was been a prerogative of philosophers. Kant, for example, theorized a fundamental difference among three basic kinds of cognition: the empirical, the moral, and the aesthetic. A contemporary version of

this view is that of Habermas, according to whom the three kinds of cognition are different because they deal with three different worlds: external –of objects- social –of norms- and inner –of self. These different worlds provide us with different kinds of data and sustain different kinds of meanings. For this reason it is plausible to suppose that there should be also three corresponding streams of cognitive development. Piaget is well known for his account of the development of our understanding of the outer world of objects; Kohlberg for his account of the development of our understanding of the social world of norms; Parsons (1987) provides a parallel account of development in the art domain. Other psychologists studied the individuals' responses to art. Baldwin (1906) was a precursor in this sense, trying a systematic analysis of aesthetic experience. Machotka (1966), instead, analysed the nature of aesthetic judgements referring to the piagetian stages of development. More recently Gardner (1973) conducted an analysis of the psychological development in the various arts, but not from a strictly cognitive point of view. The Parsons' proposal, contained in his book *"How we understand art"* (1987) refers both to the piagetian stages of cognitive development and to the Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The author elaborates a progressive sequence of stages for art domain, in which different ways of understanding works of art follow one another.

These ways of understanding paintings are arranged in a developmental sequence. I argue – says Parsons – that people adopt them in a certain order. Young children start with much the same basic understanding of what paintings are about, and they restructure that understanding in much the same ways as they grow older. (...) Each step is an advance on the previous one because it makes possible a more adequate understanding of art. Where individual people wind up in this sequence depends on what kinds of art their encounter and how far they are encouraged to think about them (Parsons, 1987, pp.4-5).

What is important to note is that people are not stages, nor are stages labels for people. Rather, people use stages, one or more of them, to understand works of art. People acquire the ability to use these stages in sequence. However, we cannot associate stages closely with ages. "To be twenty-year old, or forty, does not guarantee being able to understand in a stage four, or five, way" (cit., p.12). The developmental progression is highly related with the individuals' base of art experience, with the opportunities they had to reflect and discuss about work of art in their daily life. The situated and social character of the stages is the most interesting aspect of the Parsons' theory, from the perspective of

our research. In fact, it is hypothesised that classroom discussions on aesthetic issues, carried out during the two-year project could affect the development of art understanding in children. Moreover, Parsons' theory and the PECA Project share some fundamental assumptions about art. The first is that art is not just a series of pretty objects; it is rather a way we have of articulating our interior life, through various needs, emotions, and thoughts; the second idea is that what art expresses is more than what one person has in mind at one time. Art is a joint product, is a social and historical construction, is a public text which could be interpreted in different ways, and may reveal aspects of its creators of which they themselves were unaware. The third idea is that judgements about art are capable of being "objective": though art articulates our needs and emotions, interpretations of art can be more or less reasonable and judgements more or less defensible. They may not be exactly right or wrong, but certainly they are more or less adequate (Parsons, pp.12-13).

Parsons' theory tries to go over the limits of a traditional concept of cognition that does not require understanding: cognition is taken to be substitutable by some form of behaviour, such as preferring, recognising, categorising, producing, that can be observed. But behaviours are not equivalent to understanding, and do not bear the essential mark of understanding, which is the giving of reasons. "One understand people only when one sees what they says as reason for they opinion, and not just as verbal behaviour" (cit., xii). What is important is to recognise the common beliefs that stay behind a similar approach to art, guiding the development of understanding of art in a determined period of life, and affecting its quality. On the other hand, the influence on learning processes of prior and tacit knowledge - beliefs, conceptions and informal theories - elaborated by individuals during their experience and acculturation, is highlighted in many researches (Hofer e Pintrich, 1997; Mason, 1999; Shommer, 1990). These beliefs organise the following learning and are the base on which to anchor the incoming information. The analysis of the students' assumptions that lie behind their verbalisations during the semi-structured interview we administered for our study, could offer relevant suggestions also from this research perspective.

From a pedagogical point of view, the sequence of stages proposed by Parsons could be a valid and useful instrument, not only in a diagnostic perspective, but also in a

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prognostic one. The author, in fact, underlines the social and dialogical character of the later stages of development:

Because understanding a painting is so obviously a matter of interpretation, requiring conversation with other people and participation in a tradition, one cannot imagine the later stages as the individual framing of judgements, or the monological application of principles privately known (cit., p.xii)

According to the socio-constructivist perspective, we can maintain that the development of art understanding is situated in the context of experience and activity of the individuals and is affected by it. The practice of philosophical discussion in a classroom transformed in a “community of inquiry” could be a meaningful activity to advance the comprehension of art in students. We collected empirical data to evaluate the change in children involved in the PECA Project, based principally on classroom discussion about works of art; The data were analysed referring to the Parsons’ sequence, and according to the literature about the role of social interaction for learning (Vygotskij, 1978; Fish, 1980; Pontecorvo, 1987, 1993b; Santi, 1995; Bruner, 1996), in particular that one related to the use of discussion as method and context for knowledge construction and critics (Wertsch, 1985; Resnick, Leavin, and Teasley, 1991; Pontecorvo, 1993a; Pontecorvo e Girardet, 1993; Santi, 1995).

METHOD

Subjects: 136 students of different ages, attended different schools situated in the city of Rovigo (Italy). The subjects were divided into four groups referring to the grade and kind of school attended:

- GROUP 1: 34 children (age: 9 years old) from Elementary School (PECA Group)
- GROUP 2: 34 students (age: 13 years old) from Middle School
- GROUP 3: 34 students (age: 17 years old) from Teachers College (Istituto Magistrale)
- GROUP 4: 34 students (age: 17 years old) from Art College (Liceo Artistico)

The last two groups were compared in order to control how different kinds of school curricula could affect the understanding of art in students.

Setting: The four groups of students correspond to four classes of three schools in the same city. The setting of the classes was not modified during the period of the interview administration. The schools followed the regular national curriculum.

The setting of the first group, involved in the PECA Project, was modified after the pre-test. The Project started in the two classes with the organization of laboratories of Philosophy for Children and of artistic creation. These are the main lines of the activities proposed during the two-year programme:

- Classroom is transformed in a “community of inquiry”, following the “P4C” method, in which exchange of points of view and argumentation are fostered, and the charge of reasoning is shared;
- Philosophy sessions and Laboratories of art are scheduled two days a week for two school years;
- Children discussions on art and aesthetic experience are stimulated by shared views of different paintings proposed by the European Partners as representative works of art in their countries;
- Teachers trained in P4C and local artists guided the laboratories of aesthetic discussion and of creative production.

Children were stimulated to reflect about art and to elaborate shared ideas based on shared values and judgement criteria, starting from their own experience and interests about art. Each philosophy session started from problematic issues raised by children referring to a work of art, or to a novel about art written specifically for the PECA Project. Works and novel are shared among the European Partners, and the discussion plans were itinerant.

This is an example of discussion “agenda”:

“Does everybody see the same things in a painting?”

“What does each person’s liking depend on?”

“Is a work of art at the Louvre because “of value”, or is “of value” because it is at the Louvre?”

“Is there something “living” in a work of art? Are works of art fundamentally dead things?”

“What is the beauty for a person who can not see?”

“Why must we give meanings to works of art?”

During classroom discussions children have many opportunities to reflect on aesthetic issues and to co-construct shared knowledge about art and its possible meanings.

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The teacher in the context of “community of inquiry” has the role of cognitive monitor, communication facilitator, discussion modulator, and scaffolding for thinking.

Data collection: A semi-structured interview was administered to each subject. The interview was based on ten questions: eight about aspects of painting and two on subjects’ beliefs about art in general. Six works were proposed to the students as stimulus for the interview: six paintings of different artists, different schools, and different periods. For each painting the student was asked to consider six aspects of the works. The questions regarded aspects considered to be familiar to the students and relevant as indicators of art understanding.

These are the paintings proposed:

J. CONSTABLE (1776/1837): *Campo di grano*; VAN GOGH (1853/1890): *Campo di grano con volo di corvi*; U. BOCCIONI (1882/1916): *Studio per una testa di donna*; V. KANDINSKIJ (1866/1944): *Giallo, rosso, azzurro*; P. PICASSO (1881/1973): *Guernica*; S. DALI’ (1904/1989): *La persistenza della memoria*.

These were the questions asked about the paintings:

- 1) “Look at this painting. Do you like it? Why?”
- 2) “What makes an impression on you? Why?”
- 3) “What do you think about the subject, the colours, the forms, the technique used by the painter?”
- 4) “Does the painting communicate something particular to you? If yes, what?”
- 5) “What aspect of the painting is more related to your emotions or ideas? Why?”
- 6) “What do you think these emotions or ideas depend on? On the painting, on the painter, or on you? Why?”
- 7) “What title would you give to this painting? Why?”
- 8) “In your opinion, is this painter a good painter? Why?”

These are the two last questions of the interview:

- 9) “In your opinion, where does painter find ideas to do a work of art?”
- 10) “In your opinion, how does a person become an artist?”

All interviews were audio-recorded in tapes and transcribed.

Data analysis: The answers were categorized in ordinal way, following the stages proposed by Parsons in his sequence. Each answer was categorized in one of the five stages of the Parsons’ sequence. The answers on paintings and the general ones were categorized separately.

Each stage is characterized by a prevailing dimension, which expresses itself in two different planes: psychological and aesthetic.

Stage One: *favoritism*, characterised by an intuitive delight in most paintings, a strong attraction to colour and a freewheeling associative response to the subject matter. The common characteristic is the happy acceptance of whatever comes to mind, not distinguished between what is and is not relevant for the evaluation of the work.

Psychologically, this is the stage where there is little awareness of the point of view of others. All that occurs in experience; there is nothing else, and nothing to compare with it.

Aesthetically, paintings are a stimulus to pleasant experience. It does not matter what they represent or whether they are non-representational. Liking a painting is identical with judging it, and it is hard to imagine a bad one. There are no distinctions of relevance nor questions about objectivity.

Stage Two: *Beauty and realism*, dominated by the subject. This stage is organized around the idea of representation. The basic purpose of painting is to represent something. A painting is better if the subject is attractive and if the representation is realistic. Beauty, realism, and skill are objective grounds for judgement.

Psychologically, there is an advance because it implicitly acknowledges the viewpoint of other people. The notion of representation requires the distinction between what anyone can see and what one is merely reminded.

Aesthetically, there is an advance because it enables the viewer to distinguish some aspects of experience as aesthetically relevant from some that are not. The judgment is about the work and not about the personal feeling about the work.

Stage three: *expressiveness*, as quality of the experience produced by a work of art: The more intense and interesting the experience the better the painting. Intensity and interest guarantee that experience is genuine. The purpose of art is to express someone's experience. The beauty of subject matter becomes secondary to what is expressed. Similarly, realism of style and skill are not ends in themselves but means to express something. Creativity, originality, depth of feeling, are newly appreciated. There is a scepticism about the value of talking about painting, and about the possibility of objective judgements on art, dominated by immediacy and individuality.

Psychologically, there is an advance because this stage rests on a new awareness of the interiority of the experience of others, and a new ability to grasp their particular thoughts and feelings. There is also a corresponding awareness of one's own experience as something inward and unique.

Aesthetically, there is an advance because it enables one to see the irrelevance of the beauty of the subject, the realism of the style, and the skill of the artist. It opens one to a wide range of works and a better grasp of expressive qualities.

Stage four: *style and form*. The new insight here is that the significance of a work is a social rather than an individual achievement. It exists within a tradition, which is composed by a number of people looking over time at a number of works and talking about them. The work exists in a public space; aspects of its medium, form, and style can be pointed to in an inter-subjective way; in this way interpretations can be corrected and improved. There are relationships between different works – style – and a history to their interpretation. All these aspects of a work are public and may have a bearing on its meaning. Its meaning is constituted by what can be discursively said by the group about it, and is more than what is grasped by an individual at one time

Psychologically, the advance here is the ability to take the perspective of the tradition as a whole. This is cognitively more complex than grasping the state of mind of one individual.

Aesthetically, there is an advance because it finds significance in the medium, form, and style, and distinguishes between the literacy appeal of the subject and sentiment and what is achieved in the work itself. It finds significance in the stylistic and historical relationships of works, and it expands the kind of meanings that can be expressed. It enables one to find art criticism useful as a guide to perception and to see aesthetic judgement as reasonable and capable of objectivity.

Stage five: *autonomy*. The central insight here is that the individual must judge the concepts and values with which the tradition constructs the meanings of works of art. These values change with history, and must be continually readjusted to fit contemporary circumstances. Judgement is felt as both more personal and more fundamentally social. On one hand the responsibility for judgement lies inevitably with the self. On the other hand, while one is individually responsible, the responsibility is toward others. The re-examination of accepted views is an attempt to fashion a more appropriate judgement in

light of the common situation, and it is meant as valid for anyone in that situation. It is important therefore to talk with others about works of art and the common situation. One cannot question one's own experience without dialog, without considering the response of others to the same works. Dialog provides the only leverage one has to question the tendencies of one's own experience and to understand their significance. In sum, while judgement is accepted as an individual responsibility, there is also a clear sense of the need for discussion and inter-subjective understanding, and of responsibility to the community for truth. Art is valued as a way of raising questions rather than as transmitting truths. Judgement is seen as capable of reasonable argument, and at the same time as dependent on personal affirmation.

Psychologically, this is an advance because it requires one to transcend the point of view of the culture. It requires the ability to raise questions about established views and to understand the self as capable of answering them. This implies a perspective on the culture itself.

Aesthetically, it is an advance because it enables one to make subtler responses, and to be aware that traditional expectations may be misleading. One also understand the practice of art, both its creation and appreciation, more adequately as the constant re-examination, and adjustment of self in a common situation, as the exploration of values in changing historical circumstances (Parsons, 1987, pp. 22-26).

As regards the general answers, these are also categorized in analogous five stages, we defined in this way:

Stage one: The work of art is considered as the product of free inspiration of the artist, who paints what he or she wants and likes, using his natural talent.

Stage two: The artist is inspired by reality around him, training himself to represent truly the world, practising his pictorial skills.

Stage three: The work of art arises from the interiority of the artist; the bravery of the artist depends on his skills in communication using the expressive mean.

Stage four: Reality is made by nature and culture, so the artist is inspired by a world of ideas as well as by things. The work of art is situated in an epoch, in a tradition. A person becomes an artist dealing with schools, styles and different expression modalities.

Stage five: The work of art springs up from the comparison with the culture, criticizing and surpassing it, recognizing limits and needs of an epoch. The artist dialogues

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with the symbolic world, he comprehends and transcends it, to develop a personal and autonomous version of the word, he offers to the interpretation of others.

Results: The analysis carried out was mainly qualitative, accompanied by a first statistical analysis of the per cent frequency registered in the answers distribution of students.

The results of cross-age interview confirm the Parsons' theory, according to which the development of the upper stages of understanding of art are not strictly related with the age, but rather with the circumstances. What is wondering in the results is that the "circumstance" hypothesised as relevant in the Group 4 - being students in a School of Art - appears to be unimportant in the students' answers: it seems that taking part in laboratories of art by doing works would be not sufficient to develop a better understanding of art in itself.

The results of the post-test interview administer to the Group 1 of the PECA Project suggest that classroom discussions on aesthetic issues in a "community of inquiry", accompanied by laboratories of art, could represent a positive "circumstance" to promote the development of art understanding in students.

(A) Questions on paintings (1- 8)

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5	TOT. answers
GROUP 1	24,9% - 385	67,6% - 1045	7,4% - 115	0% - 0	0% - 0	1545
GROUP 2	34,5% - 550	38,2% - 610	23,8% - 380	3,4% - 55	0% - 0	1595
GROUP 3	42,1% - 621	41,7% - 615	14,2% - 209	2,0% - 30	0% - 0	1475
GROUP 4	27,0% - 421	38,8% - 605	30,6% - 477	3,4% - 53	0,3% - 5	1561

(B) General questions (9 -10)

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5	TOT. answers
GROUP 1	13,2% - 9	48,5% - 33	38,2% - 26	0% - 0	0% - 0	68
GROUP 2	4,4% - 3	30,9% - 21	44,1% - 30	20,6% - 14	0% - 0	68
GROUP 3	2,9% - 2	17,6% - 12	73,5% - 50	6% - 4	0% - 0	68
GROUP 4	17,6% - 12	27,9% - 19	54,4% - 37	0% - 0	0% - 0	68

POST-TEST GROUP 1

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5	TOT. answers
(A)	11,9% - 185	47,1% - 730	38,5% - 597	2,5% - 38	0% - 0	1550
(B)	14,7% - 10	29,4% - 20	55,9% - 38	0% - 0	0% - 0	68

Discussion:

In this paper the results of pre-test and post-test in GROUP 1 of PECA Project will be considered for discussion, referring to the cross-age results.

The results of the pre-test in Group 1 are consistent with what Parsons maintains in his book: " All studies of young children conclude that two kinds of things dominate their response to art: colour and subject matter" (cit. p.28). And following: "By the time we go to elementary school, we have typically reached a clear understanding that paintings picture things. It allows us to understand paintings meaningfully, and we organize our response largely in terms of it. Basically, we want to understand what the subject is, and if we can't our response is scattered. (...) The main thing is to figure out what the painting is about" (cit., p.39), its beauty and its realism.

What is very interesting is the relevant change in post-test.

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
(A)	-13%	-20,5%	+31,1%	+2,5%
(B)	+1,5%	-19,1%	+17,9%	

The number of answers categorized in upper stages is relevant. Considered the results of the cross-age interview, we think that the change could be reasonably related with the implementation of the PECA Project, and not to the time passed between the pre-test and the post-test.

Finally, the increasing in the development of art understanding should be interpreted also considering the data emerged in the qualitative analysis of children discussion in the classroom. The joint-processes activated in the philosophical dialogues fostered the co-construction of aesthetic knowledge, showing, specially in the final part of the Project implementation, an evolution in kind and complexity of ideas about art. Some examples of the opinions shared in the "community of inquiry" can attest the level of awareness reached together by the children, regarding the social and cultural dimensions of art, the inter-subjective and dialogical nature of aesthetic experience, the critical component which makes such experience personal and unrepeatable:

"It's not important what the artist wanted to say with his work of art, but it's important what he make everyone else say."

"A work of art can help me understand the life, the past, the emotions of the artist who created it, but when I see it, it's an experience which I live. It helps me especially, to better understand my life, my past, and my emotions."

"I don't know if we could know what a painter or a sculptor had in mind while he was doing his work... we would have to ask him to find out... and perhaps not even in this way would we really know, because if he had been able to say it, he would have used words, he would have written a novel or a poem, he wouldn't have made a painting or a sculpture."

"The artist sees art where others don't see anything, they only see normality... The artist takes things away from their function, he doesn't pay attention to what they are for... he uses imagination and depicts/conceive them in a different way, he changes them."

"Art doesn't let you be sure of anything."

"If the artist created works only for himself, why would he show them? He needs other people to understand him."

"(But)... is it more important to be understood by a lot of people who don't know anything about art, or to be understood by a few, even one, really expert people?"

"(But) Can a person be an artist... without anybody saying that he is?"

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