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Art and Play from the Beginning

Cultural Education for Young
and Very Young Children

Positions
and goals



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**It all starts with...
aesthetic education**

Introduction

From the very start children have a right to full participation in a cultural and artistic life.

Artistic processes, events and works can facilitate aesthetic experiences for children which their day-to-day lives do not offer. The encounter with a variety of arts – ranging from music, sound, dance and moving to the artistic traditions of storytelling, the circus or artistry up to literature, theatre, play, photography, film and media – in their surroundings as well as in institutions for the education of children and teenagers or cultural institutions such as libraries, theatres, concert halls, museums hold in store valuable impulses and important educational experiences. The different forms of artistic expression and use of media carry with them specific qualities which can create an impact in their interdisciplinary interaction. The child experiences an integrated space of experience and does not distinguish between the categories as adults tend to.

Art, culture and play in all of their forms should be accessible to children. Children playfully develop their capacities to imagine and express, nurture their perceptive faculties and develop artistic skills by experiencing artistic events and dealing with art hands-on. This strengthens children to orient themselves in their day-to-day lives and deal with themselves and others.

The following position paper put together by the members of the „Bundesvereinigung Kulturelle Kinder- und Jugendbildung“ is meant to demand high-quality possibilities of cultural education from the very start. The institutions associated with cultural education for children and teenagers assembled therein formulate what quality in an educational practice for young children means and which development needs can be identified to implement them.

I A FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORLD

The importance of cultural education in early childhood

Aesthetic Experience as a Foundation for Cultural Education

„Immersed in playing with sand and water, inquiringly handling an earthworm, scraps of paper or sounding everyday appliances children are in a playful mode of sensually being directed towards the world, freed from the need to attribute meaning. This allows them to freely shape and give order to their experiences and put everything into question. Independent of a need for an outcome they can freely give themselves over to a to and fro between impression and expression, between being touched and answering, to give themselves over to the dynamics of what is happening devoid of any interest.“

Dietrich, Cornelia/ Krinninger, dominik/ Schubert, Volker (2012): Einführung in die ästhetische Bildung. Weinheim und Basel

Sensual experience und a playful-creative involvement with the surroundings are the points of departure for the education and development of humans as cultural beings. Children – like adults – collect insights by focussing their attention on sensual experiences. A child perceiving a sound or a scent and consciously following up on it is an example for this. In this moment one's own activity of perception is called to mind and gains importance. Aesthetic experiences are the point of departure for culture education.

Education through aesthetic experiences is not something that can be added to or left out of a child's development. Rather it is the foundation of a child's capacity to interpret the world based on its own experiences.

The child actively teaches itself and uses the means which it finds in its surroundings including those parts that are constructed. Thus, teaching yourself can only take place in the framework of possibilities provided. This starts in family surroundings. Parents or other reference persons design and influence the framework of self-teaching in early childhood. Kindergartens or day-care introduces other players: Educators, pedagogues, baby minders. They carry a significant responsibility for the spaces, situations and processes in which a child makes aesthetic experiences and develops its individual strategy to "read" the world and participate in its design. Artists and art pedagogues, being experts for artistic approaches, works and processes can be valuable partners. They are capable to make use and explore the potential of art and culture for providing a sensual approach to the world and developing one's own forms of expression.

Aesthetic Experiences are Open to Interpretation

An aesthetic experience begins with an experience through the senses, the body and emotions. Once this experience is connected with ideas, images and phantasies the child begins to think symbolically. It distinguishes between perceptions and ideas. For a child this creates an order of the senses in experiencing yourself and the world.

Aesthetic experiences have to be distinguished from everyday experiences, although a child can make them in their everyday-life. They transcend both the purely sensual and the purely rational. Rather, they are marked by a connection between the two which is articulated differently depending on the individual character. The signifiers appearing in aesthetic processes have an open character. This means that different meanings can be assigned to them. An aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to applying a specific meaning to a certain element perceived. Thus, they are also an experience of being at liberty to assign meaning to the world experienced. When a child experiences this liberty through its encounter with art or cultural phenomena a valuable space of experience opens up. It becomes aware that the world is constructed, but also that it can participate in its design. I design my world – I can do it and am allowed to. This conscious experience has an influence on how the child confronts its future life.

Aesthetic Experiences in the Context of Artistic Processes and Works

To make an aesthetic experience is always a process of acquisition. The elementary capacity for compassion is a prerequisite for this. Cultural education begins with the basic experiences of being human as well as the experiences of encountering artistic or cultural works or activities. Cultural education as a whole is fostered in the interplay of the aesthetic-sensual and the artistic-cultural.

An art object or artistic occurrence leaves an impression on the child. This leads to having to position yourself in relation to the work or event. The child is not passive in this process of reception because it has to find meaning in what it has perceived or seen.

When a child actively participates in an artistic process the following happens: First, it focuses its attention on its inner ideas for which it finds an external form. A child symbolically expresses its inner idea. The child experiments, invents and structures in order to find a form. The internal is given an external shape. Thus, what has been created becomes an opposite which it can look at from a distance and begin to deal with – and which can also be dealt with by others. In such a way the artistic medium becomes a source of realization.

Next to everyday aesthetic experiences, experiencing and creating art is another point of departure for cultural education. Both dimensions – experiencing and

dealing with impressions through the senses and the experiences in relation to artistic works and events – act in dialogue.

Play and Artistic Strategies

Aesthetic approaches are an integral part of a child's play as well as of artistic strategies.

Playing is the oldest and most reliable method of learning in human history.

It can even be considered a foundation for what it means to be human, a basis for all cultural activities. Children deal with the world through playing. They learn to make sense of the world and to understand it. They explore materials and objects, combine and transform them through their phantasy. Playing is a means of expression for children which evolves alongside their overall level of development.

Different forms of play come with different aesthetic approaches: A game of functions is experienced sensually, touched, smelled, tasted, a game of exploration is explored and tried out, a game of symbols teaches us to read objects as signs, a phantasy game teaches us to invent, to role-play, to transform, and a construction game to build and create. All of these principles of playing are also artistic methods. Cultural education makes use of this vicinity of approaching the world in playing and in creating art.

II DIMENSIONS AND ATTRIBUTES

What Makes a Practice in Cultural Education for Young and Very Young Children Work?

Many people would say of themselves: “I cannot sing, i cannot paint, i cannot dance.” They might also say: “Art is not for me. I really do not know what to do with it.” A child has little to fall back to when confronted with negative remarks or hostile judgements concerning its creative ways of expression. It internalizes them quickly. It is important in early childhood to support, build and protect the child’s trust in its own creative and artistic skills.

The highest requirements regarding the quality of cultural education for young and very young children must be met on all levels. Aesthetic experiences are a basic part of early childhood education. Cultural education on an elementary level must be supported with a high quality practice and a corresponding framework to meet the importance it carries for early childhood education.

The conditions for a succesful cultural education practice for young and very young children can be described in four qualitative dimensions:

- the setting (spaces, their equipment and design)
- the adult’s attitude (specialists from the areas of early childhood education and care, cultural pedagogy and art, parents and relatives)
- participation (the child has all encompassing possibilities to co-create and can experience itself participating in a process with others)

This can serve as a starting point for the following quality criteria which can help to offer a good structure and practice for cultural education.

Open Educational Possibilities

Aesthetic process are open and multi-dimensional in their educational effects. One cannot determine in advance what will be learned. More importantly, possibilities for aesthetic experiences must be created. This allows children to recognize and experiment with the richness of the world, with different perspectives and ways of expression.

The basis of experiences a child can fall back to becomes richer and more varied with every aesthetic experience it makes. Less interference and restriction makes for a differentiated basis of experiences which will expand the child’s thinking and feeling. A variety of aesthetic and artistic experiences should be available to children in open educational settings. The different types of art can easily be connected and related to each other.

Processes of cultural education can be initiated by different materials or stimulating impulses and can in turn lead to different aesthetic approaches.

It is important to choose them consciously in terms of quality and quantity. Also, children should be given the time they need to get acquainted with the impulses and materials and experiment with them. This process can be different with every child.

It is our pedagogical and artistic responsibility to initiate moments of experiencing and for an intensive subjective acquisition in the context of cultural education.

Comprehensive Participation

It is important to allow children to make their own decisions and create self-determined activities. For this they have to understand processes and the rules of the game. This includes the possibilities they have to actively participate, express and co-create the process. It is the adult's responsibility to create these conditions. It is central to leave open spaces for self-development in these processes of experiencing and creating.

Participating in cultural education should be voluntary – this is one of the foundations which make possible any form of aesthetic experience. It is an art in itself to motivate children to participate in something which they do not yet have an idea of.

For example, this is the case when a lot of creative materials are provided and connected to a game which inspires the child's phantasy. If the outcome has not been pre-decided by an adult, children cannot do something „the wrong way“ or „badly“.

The exact form of the child's participation can vary according to it's age but not in it's degree. One has to create adequate possibilities of participation according to the individual predisposition and skills of the child.

This is the responsibility of the pedagogical experts and artists (or other accompanying adults) who conceptualize and carry out the program. They should carry an attitude of openness towards the child's participation and the process' outcome.

Allowing for a child to develop and introduce its own ideas is an essential foundation for any practice of cultural education. This is also the case for ideas that are utterly different from the adult's. If this works out children experience their means of expression as something that is cherished and they can cherish themselves. They make the experience of co-creating and understand that this has an effect.

Subjective Approaches

A good practice is defined by allowing children to find their own rhythm to familiarize themselves with materials or topics and start experimenting. If adults give in to these individual processes of experiencing and creating, every child can find its own approach. In order for this to happen, adults accompanying the process have to become aware of the different approaches. What counts is the subjective meaning which a child attributes to its experience. This has to be reinforced. It allows the child to discover its own meaning in aesthetic processes and develop its very own, personal forms of expression.

Educational settings can be considered to be of high quality if new impulses are connected to the child's interests. Cultural education on an elementary level should connect with the child's natural way of exploring the world, to its interests, its curiosity and its spirit of exploration. Every child brings with it its individual experiences from a corresponding living environment. This includes natural as well as social and cultural influences. If a project in the field of cultural education connects with the experiences from the living environment the child can make meaningful aesthetic experiences. It experiences something new and interesting through something that is already familiar. Its horizon broadens. The child is taken seriously in its way of approaching, discovering, inventing, its skills, achievements and works and thus experiences appreciation.

Versatile Approaches

Every child – independent of its origin, its artistic, bodily or mental possibilities – should be given the possibility to participate in projects of the highest quality in the field of cultural education. A sensitivity for discourses of diversity and gender is seminal when initiating projects. Differences should be welcomed, respected and cherished as an enrichment.

Accordingly, access has to be designed and participation made possible. Different approaches can guarantee to reach children and their individual needs. It is important to offer versatile aesthetic and cultural approaches including offers for different age-groups in the field of cultural media education.

Playful Approaches

Playing is central in a child's development and its cultural education. This is why aesthetic practices for younger children should always take as their point of departure the child's way of playing.

Children develop their phantasy and creative skills while playing.

Pedagoges and artists have to create circumstances that support a whole variety of games and aesthetic encounters. It is a good idea to take the time for

focused examinations and document them. This allows for the adults to decode the motifs and contents of a game as expressions of a child's involvement. Cultural education projects work out nicely if the adults involved adopt a playful way to approach and deal with things.

Children and Adults Eye to Eye

Young children are especially dependent on mutual exchange with their reference person. It is very important for them to receive a reaction to many of their actions. Children understand their aesthetic experiences as something joyful and motivating when receiving immediate and appreciative resonances to their ideas, actions and experiments. The aesthetic processes experienced together with the adults grow richer when the interaction with the adult is perceived as a game in which both parties give and receive impulses. An ideal case is a reciprocal game of leading and following: The children get impulses in the shape of materials and suggestions and begins to deal with them. They transform them. The pedagogue or artist takes up the situations and the ideas the child has created. Performed in such a way playing together is based on positive experiences of resonance: Action and reaction are being exchanged. This creates both joy and creativity for everyone involved. Through the resonance of the interaction they also experience an internal emotional resonance.

Joint Experimenting, Exploring and Learning as Processes

The quality of cultural education projects is largely based on allowing children to experiment with artistic forms of practices. This often works best when the adults see themselves as explorers who are looking for something as well. Children should not only be considered as the ones who have to learn but as those who know and think as well. It is the pedagogue's or artist's task to discover, stimulate and help unfold the available potentials. Thus, the educational settings should offer enough space to make possible new and unusual perceptions.

Children should experiment and try out other perspectives and actions. This triggers the motivation for new things. Being explorers allows children to find out things that are new to adults as well. In artistic processes children learn together and from each other. Discovering things together is an important element of social education.

Corresponding to the child's level of development cultural education should focus on the aesthetic process and not solely on the product itself. By concentrating on the strategies and ways of involvement of the children they are given time to experiment and try out without the need to produce final results that have to fulfil certain preconceived ideas.

Dive into Artistic Processes

Trying out different artistic techniques and ways of expression is an integral part for artistic practices in cultural education. The following things should be taken into consideration when it comes to designing educational settings which allow children to make aesthetic experiences: Children should be allowed to experience artistic processes in all of their creative openness, including moments of surprise and an insight into their vulnerability.

Accidents, uncertainties and risks are important moments in the creative process. They can be the source of a peculiar energy which children can bodily feel and experience. Both a big seriousness and playful easiness which fascinates children is grounded herein. Thus, everyone involved should approach art with open questions instead of knowing the right answers beforehand.

Cultural Educational Possibilities Designed in Dialogue

Artists and cultural pedagogues working with younger children should have a knowledge of developmental psychology. This allows them to conceptualize the encounter with artistic processes and works according to the level of development and needs of the children.

Cooperations and long-term collaborations between day care centres with cultural partners such as cultural initiatives and institutions as well as artists are fruitful efforts in the context of cultural education. Such collaborations raise the quality of cultural education, especially when conducted with a lively involvement and practiced long term. This has to be based on a mutual understanding of a shared responsibility and according to the skills each partner has. This can also make work easier in the educational situations which makes up for the additional work caused by communication and reflexion.

Involving Parents

Parents (and other family members, such as grandparents) are the most important companions and multipliers for the cultural education of their children. They should be involved in the actions and should be given possibilities to have exciting encounters with play and art. This allows them to value the importance of the educational work based on experiences of their children. Their role is not limited to visit the project at the end and have a look at what has been achieved. Involving parents and family members offers the chance to experience their child as an expert and do their part in the shared process.

Artistic (Co-)Production

It has proven useful to work artistically with children. The joint aesthetic experiences and discoveries can flow back into works for children. This can increase the relevance of a work in development for the young spectators. If these aesthetic experiences are integrated, their individual experience is given a meaning and value.

III ACTION AND DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS

Suggestions for Cultural Education

Expanding the Offers and a Diversity of Approaches

Every institution and initiative involved in creating offers in the field of cultural education should also develop concepts and forms of practice for young children. It is a shared initiative and responsibility of every player to create offers of high quality from the very start. Specific formats and methods based on the contexts and settings have to be developed, disseminated and implemented.

Cultural Education as a Permanent Element in Pedagogical Practice

A practice of cultural education such as the one described here is not yet a „natural“ part in educational institutions for young children.

Every child has a right to participate in art and culture. All children need to have the possibility to make aesthetic and cultural experiences, independent of how and in which context they are taken care of.

This includes being equipped with spaces and objects which make possible cultural education via aesthetic experiences. Multifunctional rooms and furniture can be a strong asset.

Include Cultural Education in Educational Plans

Nurseries and day-care centres are the first educational institutions.

A comprehensive form of cultural education should be part of the educational plan of every federal state and should be regarded as a natural part of a child's development.

It is important that pedagogues know about the importance of aesthetic experiences for children. This means that they are able to estimate the role that these spaces for experience play in the child's experience of itself and the world and to understand that art and culture play a comprehensive and fundamental role in the child's development. Pedagogues, artists and cultural pedagogues working on an elementary level should be given the chance to create possibilities for cultural education. For this they need a variety of methods in order to guide, accompany and reflect the practice. In order to support the multitude of forms a child has to express itself, they should be open to new, unusual experiences in aesthetic and creative processes.

Make Cultural Education Part of Pedagogical Training

Cultural education should be an integral part in the training of pedagogues at institutions of higher education such as universities as well as courses for daycare-mothers/fathers.

Future pedagogues should be given the possibility to experience art's potentials for themselves. That is why a qualification in the field of cultural education must include practical experiences that accompany an introduction to theoretical knowledge.

These should be connected with a reflexion of moments of cultural education in one's own biography. An introduction to the places and institutions which make it possible for children to make experiences of cultural education should be a part of any training. Specific artistic methods can be taught on that basis. The Ministry of Education and other institutions have to demand the inclusion of these elements into these trainings.

Integrate Cultural Education into a Continuing Education

Continuing education has to be supported financially to make up for the lack of qualification in the field of cultural education. Pedagogues and artists should have the opportunity to continually enhance their skills in the field for young and very young children. This includes to make aesthetic experiences for themselves and delve into artistic processes to get to know the multitude of institutions and offers. Organizations responsible for these trainings should try to make a qualification in the field of cultural education mandatory. Implementing sustainable cultural education on an elementary level has to be accompanied and supported – actions such as “training on the job“ and „train the trainer“ can be helpful.

Work Together with Parents

In order for cultural education to have a lasting effect it is very important to include parents and relatives into the process. This carries the possibility to strengthen the collaboration with parents and have them participate in their child's development. Concepts for cultural education should include parents and relatives. Artistic processes should be opened to an extent that allows them to participate. Pedagogues and artists should document the activities of their children in the field of arts for the parents.

Strengthen Collaboration Between Culture and Day Nurseries

Many players in the education of children and teenagers – such as museums and theatres for children, libraries, music- and artschools already have qualified concepts for working with younger children. These have to be developed and disseminated continually.

Many cultural institutions such as museums, places for theatre, dance, literature and establishments of media pedagogy have already opened their activities for children and their parents. Those that are not heading into such a direction yet, should work on this and develop specific formats and forms of collaboration. Professional associations should become active and help in the process, another option is working together with institutions who have been active in the field for decades. This can be an impulse to further develop how these institutions see themselves and increase their importance for an audience with different cultural interests. A sustainable audience development does not only reach new people but also creates ideas for new topics that these audiences might be interested in.

So-called “audiences of tomorrow“ can only be won if taken seriously in their specific interests by the institutions of today.

Grounding their program in a city’s district of a specific social space is helpful as well. Specific programs can help to strengthen collaborations and accompany them professionally. Positive experiences can be had with artist-residencies or the branch of a cultural institution being placed at a daycare-centre.

Support Model Projects and Allow for Exchange

In order to make offers of cultural education a fixed component in cultural institutions as well as institutions in the field of early education we need an initial impulse in the shape of funding for model projects. These can develop model type formats for the corresponding contexts and settings. Special attention should be given to cooperation and collaboration, strategies for implementation should be part of these from the start. A constant exchange of ideas between pedagogues, cultural pedagogues, artists and the administrative personnel involved has to be made possible. What we need is an accompanying research and the development of sustainable transfer structures.

Enable More Research

Not much research exists on the impact of cultural education in early childhood. Educational research in this area should receive more funding. On an elementary level an investigation into certain fields is less important than an exploration of cultural education practices with innovative interdisciplinary approaches adjusted to the topic itself. How do these processes happen? Under which circumstances do they work? Which forms of teaching are appropriate? Practice-based research gains insights by looking at the practice itself which – ideally – flow back into the process. It is imperative to include aesthetic and cultural research. In the future, cultural education in the field of early childhood should be a subject of the German educational report.

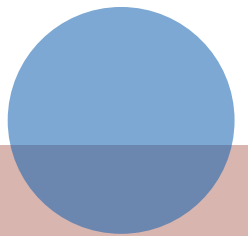
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