

The right to aesthetic education and the good life

Thomas Steinforth, Munich

Abstract: Aesthetic experiences – enabled by aesthetic education – are important, because they are a necessary condition for unlimited self- and world-relations, for freedom and because of that for a good life. Aesthetic education is important for all children, for childhood itself and for their adult life, too. Nevertheless there are considerable deficits – even in countries with a well-developed educational system like Germany. The reduced access to aesthetic education is a matter of social justice and there are unequally spread possibilities and capabilities, which are connected with disadvantage, economic poverty and social exclusion.

1. Is there a basic right to aesthetic education?

International human rights law guarantees the right to education. The *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, adopted in 1948, proclaims in its article 26: "Everyone has the right to education". Since then, the right to education has been widely recognized and further developed by a number of international normative instruments elaborated by the United Nations, including the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education*.

In the following I would like to focus on aesthetic education and look into the question whether the human right to education includes a human or basic right to aesthetic education?

There are indications that the right to aesthetic education is not just a "second-rate" right:

- According to article 29 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* "the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential". This definition of education-goals implies in my view a right to *aesthetic* education too.
- According to article 31 there is a right to participate "in cultural and artistic life", which requires an appropriate education, although aesthetic education in my view is more than teaching artistic competence and knowledge – important as that is.
- Moreover, many national constitutions and laws suggest that people and especially young people have a right to something like aesthetic education.

Quite often though, people would agree in principle that aesthetic education is important and that a right to aesthetic education does exist. But claiming a *basic*-right to aesthetic education

is controversial and not self-evident. Sometimes even professionals in child and youth services working with disadvantaged children would deny such a basic right. According to them, education first and foremost is about enabling children and young people to manage their life, to participate in the economy and the labor market and thus to lead a life without poverty and social exclusion. In this view aesthetic education is an “add-on” and the right to aesthetic education is a “second-rate” right.

An opposite view has to start with clarifying the meaning of “aesthetic education”. Its relegation to a second-rate right often follows from misconceptions about what really is meant by it. The position taken here is that aesthetic education is a necessary condition for a child’s well-being and well-becoming. So what misconceptions does one come upon?

2. Misconceptions of “aesthetic education”

2.1 Aesthetic education as teaching artistic competence?

According to a quite common understanding aesthetic education is all about teaching of artistic competences, for example in school or after-school art- or music-lessons. Obviously, all children should partake in art and music courses and they should be taught about art and the history of art – not only because children by doing so can build up their “cultural capital”, but more importantly because aesthetic education enables to understand art-works and promotes one’s ability to artistic-symbolic (self)expression. Aesthetic education in this classic, art-related understanding is important, but aesthetic education is more than that and must not be reduced to that.

2.2 Aesthetic education as means to an end?

Sometimes and in the wake of an instrumental understanding of education, aesthetic education is misunderstood as means to an end, too¹. In this understanding aesthetic education is important, because it is helpful for deducing goals from of aesthetic experience, especially for forming or training useful so-called “key-skills”. It is true, key-skills also useful in its economic application, can be developed by aesthetic education. But surely that cannot and must not be the principal reason to claiming a basic right to aesthetic education. Why not? Because

¹ See also M. Parmentier (2013)

that would mean an economic reduction missing altogether the autotelic character of both aesthetic experience and aesthetic education. It might seem that I fall for that trap of (mis)understanding aesthetic education as a means to an end myself – talking about the right to aesthetic education as necessary condition for a good life or for enabling social participation; however: aesthetic education can be useful for the life because it firstly ends in itself. I am well aware that in many cases social work and social policy unfortunately tend to follow that instrumental understanding of aesthetic education.

2.3 Exaggerated expectations

Finally I would like to reject some possibly exaggerated expectations on aesthetic education, which may be grounded in a certain idealistic tradition. Sometimes people expect the all-round-perfection of man and mankind of aesthetic education. But attention! Yes, aesthetic education is very important, but we must not inflate its meaning. The best education including the best aesthetic education cannot compensate severe social or economic disadvantages. Poverty often is associated with a lack of aesthetic education, but poverty-preventing must not be confined to aesthetic education – important as it is. Exaggerated expectations on aesthetic education inevitably lead to disappointment which in turn can cause contempt and ridicule for its advocates and their cause. That leads to the next question: What is aesthetic education and what is it aiming at / are its targets?

3. What is aesthetic education aiming at?

Aesthetic education enables to gain and to reflect aesthetic experiences in acting and perceiving. When we talk about the right – and even the basic right – to aesthetic education it is aesthetic experience what is at stake. Probably all human beings by nature are able to aesthetic experience. But all children need a specific (aesthetic) education to develop this ability or at least to avoid gradually losing it.

Of course education is not the only condition for aesthetic experience: Many poor children grow up in residential and living spaces with a serious lack of aesthetic stimuli, and the daily fight for social and economic survival leaves little room for aesthetic experience. In many cases the beauty is too expensive: “There are so many beautiful things in the world that are impossible to describe. Only one thing saddens us: the (...) prices overshadow all the beauty that exists.” (C.N. Jesus, p. 36) Therefore aesthetic experience and the ability to reflect upon it

is not exclusively dependent on education, aesthetic education, however, is still its necessary condition.

Aesthetic experience is not a superfluous luxury good – it is a basic functioning and important for a good human life. Aesthetic experiences – enabled by aesthetic education – are important, because they are a necessary condition for unlimited self- and world-relations, for freedom and because of that for a good life. Due to this – for now only postulated – relevance of aesthetic experiences to a good life it becomes clearer why there is a basic right to aesthetic education.

But what is aesthetic experience? This is a much contested question in modern aesthetics and there is a lot of confusion. Richard Shusterman (1997, p. 29) remarks: After an earlier celebration of aesthetic experience today “not only its value but its very existence sometimes has been questioned.”

The following shall explain my conception of “aesthetic experience” by drawing some of its essential features. The importance of aesthetic experience will become clear and because of that the importance of aesthetic education as its necessary prerequisite.

4. Essential features of aesthetic experience

4.1 “Aisthesis” as sense perception

Aesthetic experience is grounded in bodily sensuality. Sense perception is not only a first and unimportant step of aesthetic experience to easily be forgotten over the further course of experience and reflection. As “aisthesis” it is essentially sense perception.

Even in the context of conceptual art which intends to primarily give us “food for thought” and claims to foremost have cognitive value and not to be sensual-emotional, the spectator has to be aware of her/his senses’ perception.

Because of that aesthetic education aims at getting conscious of one’s sense sometimes perception (this has to be learnt and must not be lost again) and has to contribute to appreciate and appraise sense perception. Aesthetic education is not only but also education of senses.

4.2 Experience of freedom and free self-activity

Aesthetic experience motivates to reflexive-playful treatment and to interpretation. By an aesthetic experience something happens in my head and mind, which both remains related to the essential sense perception and which is different from other kinds of reflecting and reasoning; for example it is more playful (whatever that means exactly) and free – it is a free playing.

We are in a “free mood” (to quote Friedrich Schiller’s famous “freie Stimmung”) when we have an aesthetic experience. In other words: Aesthetic experience is an experience of freedom and aesthetic education is a call for free self-activity². We have to learn this free playing firstly in childhood and we can unlearn and forget it without aesthetic education.

4.3 Experience of object’s appearance here and now

This free self-activity is essentially connected with aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is not about conceptual definitions or intentions of utilization, but is related to an object’s appearance (in German: “Erscheinen”)³. Aesthetic experience relates me to an object how it appears; I’m not related it in order to define or to use it.

This might sound a little too simplistic and yes, we do use some works of art as signs or symbols, too. Nevertheless the relation to an object’s appearance is essential for aesthetic experience and that relation is different to other kinds of experience and reflecting, which are the focus of non-aesthetic education. I do not devalue the effort to conceptual definition and intentions of utilization – we need that and we have to learn that; but aesthetic experience related to the object as appearing can promote an unlimited encounter with “appearing reality” and thus can promote openness of mind and heart.

Because aesthetic experience’s objects appear here and now aesthetic appearance is an experience of presence too. The object appears here and now and I experience it (and myself) here and now. Living in the “here and now” is important for good life and aesthetic education thereby can help to avoid that we unlearn and lose that.

4.4 Affective experience of being-involved

Aesthetic experience is an affective experience of being-addressed and being-involved and is an experience with a certain hedonic valence: Something appeals to me and my senses, concerns and “calls” me and this experience is affective. I feel that the object is meaningful to me

² J.G. Fichte (1796, p. 39): Education is “Aufforderung zur freien Selbsttätigkeit”

³ See also M. Seel (2003) who focuses on “Erscheinen” in his aesthetics.

and this feeling in aesthetic experience can be a specific kind of pleasure. This kind of pleasure is different from mere sensual pleasure – taking into account that the distinction between *aesthetic* pleasure and *mere sensual* pleasure (for example in the context of sexual satisfaction) is an issue of dispute.

Maybe we do not feel this specific pleasure every time; aesthetic experience – especially in the context of modern art – can have another hedonic valence too. But it is always a *feeling* of significance: I feel that something is meaningful and I feel what it means although that does not role out its integration into a reflecting and interpreting process.

4.5 Self-experience

Aesthetic experience is self-experience and experience of my own experience. Aesthetic experience implies that I am completely present at and involved with the “object”; I’m self-forgotten. Having said that, and this just seems to be inconsistent, I become aware of myself: an aesthetic experience can lead to myself becoming conscious of me experiencing something. Due to this specific self-reference aesthetic experience – enabled and supported by aesthetic education – is the primary basis for education as self-education.

Aesthetic education thereby also can promote self-respect and self-esteem: An aesthetic experience through due its effect on self-consciousness can effectively promote self-respect and self-esteem, although it has to be said it can be connected with failure, crisis and self-doubts, too.. Enabling aesthetic experiences by aesthetic education – protected by an effective right to aesthetic education – is one of the so-called “social bases of self-respect” (John Rawls, 2001, p. 60) and therefore a matter of distributive justice.

4.6 Aesthetic experience and art

Aesthetic experience understood as outlined above has its place not only in the context of art. There does exist an interaction between aesthetic experience in general and experiencing art, and this interaction is important for aesthetic education:

On the one hand aesthetic experience (enabled by appropriate education) can enable to experience art, which itself is a specific – indeed an important – kind of aesthetic experience.

Someone who has been taught conscious sense perception and aesthetic experience in the

“normal life” outside the world of art is also capable of aesthetic experience within this particular context.

On the other hand practicing and perceiving art can promote aesthetic experience “in general”, as it sharpens the senses and enables to perceive “the world” with different and fresh eyes.

5. Roles and responsibilities

What kind of aesthetic education actually enables aesthetic experience and its reflection? Who in the educational system is responsible for what?

- First of all *parents* and the family – within the limits of their own resources and cultural capital – have the responsibility to offer opportunities to child-oriented aesthetic experience and to ensure that their children make use of educational opportunities.
- *Pre-school education* should offer space and opportunities for sensory perception, of oneself, others and the world, e.g. through playing and non-verbal-self-expression, symbolic-artistic-self-expression, combined with supported, dialogical reflection (possibly according to conceptions of “philosophy with children”). Pre-school education should be an important first step towards “aesthetic literacy”.
- *School education* has to accomplish two things – so far as possible with regard to the goals of school⁴: On the one hand school education is responsible for the teaching of artistic competences, i.e. the ability to perceive and understand symbols and works of art as well as the ability of symbolic self-expression, worthwhile in itself as well as preconditions to aesthetic experience. On the other hand school has to promote the appreciation and enabling of sensual-aesthetic experience⁵ also in “non-aesthetic” school subjects, e.g. geography, biology.... Although art-related aesthetic experience (which has a particular importance) and aesthetic experience in general need to be distinguished, we must not reduce aesthetic education to art-education!
- Not least *out-of-school-education* is important, too, – and probably more important than aesthetic education in school. Aesthetic experience is a specific experience of freedom and because of that aesthetic experience depends on free spaces. Out-of-school-education – if not understood merely as extending school education as sometimes happens – can free up

⁴ See also S. Bender (2011) who describes a fundamental conflict between school’s purpose and aesthetic education

⁵ See also B. Engel (2004), who talks about “spürbare Bildung” (sensible education)

spaces for young people in a particular way, offering at once a supporting and stimulating setting for more informal, experiential self-education. There are a lot fine examples of such out-of-school aesthetic education by youth work organizations usually called "cultural education", but implying aesthetic education as an important part. And there are cultural institutions (for example art museums) being active in child-oriented art education.

Given that there is a basic right to such kinds of aesthetic education the state has the primary duty to ensure this right. At least if a state has ratified a treaty that guarantees the right to education, it has the obligation to respect, protect and fulfill this right. As with other social and cultural rights, the full realization of the right to education can be hampered by a lack of resources and can be achieved only over a period of time, particularly for countries with fewer resources.

6. Aesthetic education and justice

6.1 Deficits can affect children regardless of socioeconomic status

Aesthetic education is important for all children, for childhood itself and for their adult life, too. Nevertheless there are considerable deficits – even in countries with a well-developed educational system like Germany.

That does not only apply to disadvantaged and poor children. *Vis-à-vis* an all-embracing economistic reduction of education and in the view of a general prevalence of a reduced understanding of rationality and a preference of calculating reason the deficits can affect children regardless of their socioeconomic status: There are a lot of middle and upper class children who seemingly enjoy lots of aesthetic-education-activities. But looking closer one can see that these really are all about disciplining, about teaching key skills for economic and social competition or at least about acquiring "cultural capital" for later successful social distinction. All that may be reasonable and justified, but it is not aesthetic education as set out above.

6.2 Poverty and limited access to aesthetic education

But the limited access to aesthetic education is a concern of social justice, too, because there are unequally spread possibilities and capabilities connected disadvantage, economic poverty and social exclusion.

This is contrary to the claim that education, including aesthetic education, has to be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for all children. These “4 A s”, interrelated and essential to education, were developed by the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomaševski (2001). To be a meaningful right, education has to be defined/characterized by them:

- *Available*: Education is free (or at least not too expensive) and there is an adequate infrastructure
- *Accessible*: The educational system is non-discriminatory and accessible to all; positive steps are taken to include the most marginalized.
- *Acceptable*: Education’s content is relevant, non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate.
- *Adaptable*: Education evolves with the changing needs of society and challenges inequalities.

6.3 The situation in Germany

In Germany there are many schools, institutions and organizations being very active in aesthetic education. So there is a wide range of aesthetic-education-activities. Many children benefit from them – but not all⁶.

- Sometimes especially informal activities are too expensive for low-income families – so some educational opportunities are not *available* in the sense of the “4 A s” to all children.
- Even if activities technically are open to anyone, *access* can still be blocked: Many cultural and educational offerings are geared towards children only with a certain educational background, which quite often equals family background. Not always but in many cases a low socio-economic status or poverty is closely connected to a lack of cultural-aesthetic knowledge and a lack of aesthetic stimulation, In consequence children who do not meet the necessary requirements do not benefit from aesthetic education geared towards children with a specific “cultural capital”. Sometimes it does not even occur to disadvan-

⁶ W. Schneider (2010) has examined to what extent cultural and educational politics consider and fulfill children’s rights.

tagged children that certain offerings might be of interest to them, and sometimes they fear entering an alien world.

- Aesthetic education sometimes is neither *acceptable* nor *adaptable* due to its non-recognition of sociocultural differences. Some young people – disadvantaged people too – are already concerned with aesthetic issues but in their own way and in their own so-called subculture. Aesthetic education which wants to get at these people has to be sensitive to such differences and has to respect and value young people's own cultural-aesthetic values.

It has to be assumed that a considerable proportion of people living in so-called “relative poverty” not only has financial problems but is disadvantaged with relation to aesthetic education, too. In Germany the so-called “Bildungsarmut” (educational poverty) is one of the most discussed issues in social policy. Poverty relating to aesthetic education is an important and in my view sometimes overlooked aspect of “Bildungsarmut”.

7. Need for political action

What can be done for the full realization of the right to aesthetic education?

Because preschool-, formal and informal educational activities cost money, realizing this right for all people is a question of resources – but not exclusively. At least two more needs of action – especially in countries like Germany – have to be addressed:

First: The gap between cultural and educational policy on the one hand and social policy on the other urgently needs to be bridged. At least in Germany this separation is a big problem especially for many organizations involved in informal aesthetic education for disadvantaged children. They fall prey to unclear political areas of responsibility – with negative consequences with regards to political support, refinancing and integration of this important kind of aesthetic education into a coordinated overall strategy of poverty alleviation.

Second: There already are many good approaches and conceptions relating to aesthetic education within the realm of social work and of youth work on the one hand (even if sometimes with a problematic slant to “use” aesthetic education as means to an end) – and also in the realm of aesthetic theory and of art pedagogy (even if sometimes lacking a theoretical foundation and conceptual clarity). In order to realize the right to aesthetic education for all children both perspectives and all the involved professions in theory and practice have to be brought together – a lot still remains to be done. Maybe philosophy can be of help to this endeavor by

clarifying concepts and by keeping the “big questions” intimately related to aesthetic education alive, namely the question on good life and on good life’s conditions.

References

Bender, Saskia. 2011. Kunst und Schule im Konflikt, in: *Kunst. Schule. Kunst*, ed. Kirschenmann, Johannes / Lutz-Sterzenbach, Barbara. München: kopaed.

Engel, Birgit, Spürbare Bildung. Über den Sinn des Ästhetischen im Unterricht, Münster 2004
Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1796. Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre. In: *Fichtes Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. III. Berlin. 1971.

Jesus, Carolina Maria de (1960). *Child of the dark*. Trans. D. Clair. London: Penguin Books.

Parmentier, Michael. 2013. Freiheit in der Erscheinung. Zum “Zweck” ästhetischer Bildung heute, hier und überhaupt. *Pädagogische Korrespondenz* 48: 79-92.

Rawls, John. 2001. Justice as Fairness: A Restatement. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Schneider, Wolfgang. 2010. Kulturpolitik für Kinder. Eine Studie zum Recht auf ästhetische Erfahrung und künstlerische Praxis in Deutschland, München: kopaed.

Seel, Martin. 2003. *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Shusterman, Richard. 1997. The End of Aesthetic Experience. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 55, No. 1: 29-44.

Smith, Ralph A. 1989. *The sense of art. A Study in Aesthetic Education*, New York: Routledge.

Tomaševski, Katarina. 2001. Human Rights Obligations: Making Education Available, Accessible, Acceptable and Adaptable. <http://www.right-to-education.org/resource/primer-no-3-human-rights-obligations-making-education-available-accessible-acceptable-and>. Accessed 4 february 2015.