

The Issue of Assessment in Visual Art Courses of Greek Primary Education

Antonis Vaos, Tzina Kesimidi
(University of Patras, Greece)

Abstract: The issue of assessment, in the field of visual art education, is faced with several reservations by the educational community, despite its contribution to attempts of improvement at the offered educational programs. This current thesis is intent on presenting a cohesive image of this issue in Greece, through the study of two parameters: the aspect of the official educational policy, as depicted in the current legislation setting, and the proposed approaches of the scientific community, in order to search for common ground or divergence in these two frameworks.

The results, despite the agreement that seems to arise in the main directional principles given on national level, indicate essential discrepancies between them and the parameters demanded by the rules of visual art education. Disagreements can be located on carriers, methods, objects and even the purposes of assessment. According to all these findings a question arises on how and in what degree these directions can be useful for the teachers in school-class.

Key words: visual art education, educational assessment, primary education, official Greek educational policy

1. Introduction

Assessment in the field of visual art education is an issue that, since its birth, has been faced with intense concern. Forms of assessment that are based on measurement, grading and control, and fail to describe the multiple aspects of the educational work and the variety of the educational outcomes, should be considered incompatible with the principles and objectives of art education (Shepard, 2001; Cannatella, 2001; Dorn, 2002). Along with the consideration of finding a compatible assessing process, additional difficulties emerge from a number of other factors, such as teachers' reluctance and their lack of confidence to formulate judgments in this area (Blaikie, 1991; Gruber & Hobbs, 2002; Dorn, 2002). Moreover, other factors are the relatively recent introduction of new forms of assessment in Greek primary education that require the development of special professional skills, teachers' insufficient relevant theoretical training, and the recent Law of 2013 on the Assessment of educational work, which has been linked in their consciousness to control and accountability.

However, the discussion about assessment in art education is constantly growing. It is widely accepted already that the meeting of these two fields can lead to a deeper understanding of the importance and the central role of art education and serve as a basis for improving the art educational programs provided (Eisner, 1996;

Antonis Vaos, Professor, University of Patras; research areas: art & art education. E-mail: vaos@upatras.gr.
Tzina Kesimidi, Ph.D. Candidate, Kindergarten Teacher, University of Patras; research areas: education, art education. E-mail: tzina.kesimidi@gmail.com.

Mouriki & Vaos, 2009; Brewer, 2008). In the last decade, special emphasis has been placed on this issue by international organizations and several related research studies have been published. As pointed out by Brewer (2008): “What should assessment look like, and how do we go about creditably assessing it?”. Still, it should be noted that despite the fact that the research interest of the studies has already focused on the foundation of proposed assessment models, internationally, in Greece there are no relevant suggestions in the literature.

This current thesis is intent on presenting a cohesive image of the issue of assessment in visual art education in Greece. This pursuit is attempted through the study of two parameters: the aspect of the official educational policy, as depicted in the current legislation setting, and the suggested approaches of the scientific community (which is consisted of visual artists, art theorists and art education teachers). The two above frameworks are being compared in terms of the various directions they set, namely the carriers, the methods and techniques, the objects and the purposes of assessment. The choice of an analysis based on these interdependent directions is based on the most common categorization in educational assessment found in the literature. This comparative research is expected to contribute in the search of common ground or divergence in these two frameworks. More specifically, the findings of the research highlight special information on how and in what degree the directions that result from the positions of Greek educational policy can be harmonized or not with the assessment framework derived from the theoretical reflection of the scientific community in relation to the terms and conditions of the discipline of art education.

2. The Assessment Framework Derived From the Discussion Within the Scientific Community

In attempt to make a mapping of the suggestions made by the scientific community on how to assess the art education programs in relation to the main directions previously mentioned, we conclude with the following summary:

Regarding the assessment carriers, it is suggested that we apply a collective internal assessment or self-assessment, where the procedures are organized and monitored by the actors of the art education program itself. Thus, it is proposed to leave the definition of the standards and the assessment criteria in local school districts, schools, teachers and students, in order to take into account, the cultural context. This way, the content of the assessment is going to be clarified as a result of the concerns and the needs of each teacher at the level of his or her own school community (McCollister, 2002). However, the need for appropriate training of teachers is widely accepted (Dorn, 2003), in order for them to be able to construct and use various assessing tools (Brewer, 2008).

Regarding the assessing methods, that has to do with the data extraction techniques and the ways of their processing, there talks around the development of distinct and appropriate assessing methods. These methods have to be in line with the nature, the principles and the objectives of the artistic processes and the aesthetic experience, taking into account the variety of the artistic tradition. In this context, it is recommended to use alternative methods, such as calendars or other recorded audio and visual files, presentations in the form of small exhibitions and the use of portfolio or processfolio. At the same time, it is supported the combination of various qualitative and quantitative assessment tools and techniques, such as the use of two portfolios collected in different time periods or a combination of a digital portfolio and a metacognitive-reflective diary, etc. (Eisner, 2002; Dorn, 2003; Zimmerman, 2003; Brewer, 2008). The above combination is outlining a degree of flexibility in the range of tools.

To quantify the outcomes of the learning performance, it is proposed to construct and use rubrics, based on the assumption that rubrics can describe a variety of competence and achievement levels, both in a completed visual artwork and in the creative process (McCollister, 2002).

The objects of assessment refer to the total of the parameters, meaning the degree of activation and the level of cooperation of all stakeholders in the educational process, the quality and the efficiency in the formulation and implementation of the programs and the evolution of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. In particular, in terms of assessing student performance (Dorn, 2002; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002; McCollister, 2002; Brewer, 2008), it is suggested that we examine the following points: the quality of experience gained on a cognitive and methodological level, the aesthetic responses, the art products as well as the processes of creation, the development of metacognitive skills, such as criticism and reflection and the degree of deeper interest that students will eventually develop on art.

The ultimate goal of assessment in art education is the continuous feedback and the qualitative improvement of the teaching and learning process. In this context, assessment is not an end in itself, but an integral part of a program, which penetrates, informs and shapes the course of work, offering the possibility of didactic redesigns and improvements. The more the teacher's expectations are clarified, the easier the teaching intervention gets, defining a common knowledge and skills base, and the students' interest and motivation become stronger (Beattie, 1997; McCollister, 2002). In addition, the discussion about the goal of accountability at state level grows, with the expectation that this process may highlight also the value of art education (Dorn, 2003; Brewer, 2008). Therefore, assessment targeting suggests the pursuit of standard-setting rather than standard-testing. (Dorn, 2002).

3. The Assessment Framework Derived From the From the Official Greek Educational Policy

Afterwards, we will try to capture the picture regarding the assessment in art education programs in Greek primary education. In this context, we will examine the views of the official Greek educational policy, through the study of the current legislation. The above views will be presented in terms of the respective directions, that is, in terms of the implementing bodies, the methods, the assessment objects and the purpose of assessment.

Regarding assessment carriers, it is stated that assessment should have an internal and collective character, although it is mainly the teachers' responsibility, following, though, specific criteria. The method of recording and the frequency of application is left to the teacher to decide. Also, the involvement of the students themselves in the whole effort and the cultivation of self-assessment and hetero-assessment skills is mentioned among the basic principles of the assessment of students' progress. In Primary school teachers' books for the visual arts, the student is asked to assess herself/himself, the work of her/his group and the other groups in the class, as well as each teaching unit in relation to specific given directions.

As far as the methods are concerned, it is suggested that we use various alternative methods and assessment techniques, emphasizing the processes of acquiring the knowledge. Thus, in Preschool Education curriculum (Government Gazette B 304/13-3-2003) and in the Kindergarten Teacher's Guide (Diafermou et al., 2006), are suggested the following methods: the course and results of projects, the collection of works in a file, the systematic observation and recording by the teacher of the way the children work, the organization of portfolios. At the same time, the initial/diagnostic, the gradual/formative and the final/total are defined as student assessment processes. In Primary school (Government Gazette B 303/13-3-2003) as methods are also included: the written or

oral examinations, as well as the combination of different techniques (e.g., test and oral examination). The assessment criteria, that teachers and students are going to use, are given through the curricula of every cognitive subject. More precisely, they arise from the special purposes and the learning objectives stated, while they are also included in the teaching books of the Primary school. Regarding the means of expression of the assessment result, the use of a descriptive form of expression is suggested in the Kindergarten and the first two grades of the Primary School. Yet, for the needs of the upper classes of the Primary School, the necessity of combining the descriptive form with traditional ways of quantitative expression of the evaluative result is stated. For grades C', D' of the Primary School, it is suggested to use verbal form of expression and for the three last grades E, F and G it is suggested to use verbal and arithmetic form of expression.

According to the kindergarten teacher's guide and the elementary schools' curriculum (Government Gazette B 303/13-3-2003 Diafermou et al., 2006), objects of assessment seem to be the learning progress, the socialization, the inherited attitudes, values and behaviors of students, as well as their participation, cooperation, way of working and the way of dealing with the difficulties they encountered. The teacher is also called to assess the effectiveness of his teaching methods, the degree of achieving his teaching goals, the organization of the class as a learning space in preschool education, the teaching books' and materials' adequacy in primary school and the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

According to the preschool and primary educations' curricula, the purpose of the evaluation (Government Gazette B 303/13-3-2003) is to support and to continuously offer feedback to the educational process, so as to improve the quality of the school education offered. For this purpose, a number of smaller goals are identified, such as identifying learning gaps, adapting the design of teachers' educational practices, taking measures to prevent school failure, achieving learning objectives and ultimately the student's progress and improving teachers' professional skills. According to the P.D. 8/10-1-1995, the goals of assessment also refer to the continuous information of teachers and trainees about the results of their efforts, but also to the information of the school principal, the school counselor and the student's parents.

4. Comparative View and Concluding Remarks

Based on the data quoted, we will try to highlight the points at which the assessment framework, formed by the positions of the official Greek educational policy, converges or deviates from the assessment framework formed by the positions of the scientific community for assessment in the field of art education. At first glance, there seems to be convergence within the general philosophy of these two assessment frameworks, however, focusing more specifically on the field of art education, it seems there are substantial discrepancies. More specifically, although both frameworks suggest the use of collective internal assessment or self-assessment, still, the official Greek educational policy strictly defines specific guidelines at state level, without taking into account the needs of the local school districts, their special cultural characteristics or the participation of all stakeholders in the educational process. Both contexts suggest the use of alternative methods and assessment techniques, as well as the combination of qualitative and quantitative forms of expression of the assessment result. However, the official Greek educational policy makes suggestions only for the last grades of primary school, but again, a general report is made with no relevant comment about the assessment tools and techniques relative to the art education programs.

Similar findings can be found as far as the assessment objects are concerned. More specifically, although in

both contexts all aspects of educational work are identified as objects of assessment, the framework guided by the official Greek educational policy focuses almost exclusively on the assessment of student performance. At the same time, it is more than obvious the one-sided focus on the assessment of cognitive development, neglecting the assessment of children's metacognitive and reflective skills or the learning strategies they develop during the visual experience. Still, in pre-school education, there are no specific reports on the assessment of art education programs. Finally, in both contexts, the accounting objectives intertwine with those of the feedback and the quality upgrading in the learning and teaching intervention. The emphasis is given to the latter, although, the formal educational policy, still, does not refer specifically on the field of visual arts. By the same token, the assessment objectives do not specifically address the learning achievements succeed in the visual arts programs, but focus on informing teachers, learners, parents, and supervisors about overall learning outcomes.

In conclusion, a more general finding that emerges from what has been said is that the formal Greek educational policy, apart from certain general directions, does not actually make connections with the field of art education, nor does it suggest any compatible and specialized assessment method. The above finding is more profound in Preschool education, as the teaching material for the Visual Arts class in Primary school provides the teacher with some more specific directions, although not in a coherent and systematic form. According to all these findings a question arises on how and in what degree these directions can be useful for the teachers in school-class. Considering the role assigned to the teacher as the main carrier of assessment, both by the official Greek educational policy and by the discussion of the scientific community, it is understood that the investigation of the Greek reality regarding the issue of assessment in art education is not limited to the present study. In order to form a more complete picture, a study should be made around the beliefs and practices of primary school teachers regarding the assessment in the field of art education and around the factors and variations that may be related to the above attitudes.

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