Elementary school level art education issues in Serbia

Abstract: Elementary school level Art Education in Serbia is facing many challenges, starting from rigid National curriculum, through lack of extracurricular and elective activities in schools to indifferent teachers working with young students. The article exposes main problems regarding this issue, tending to also indicate possible solutions that could be implemented in coping with known problems. As a starting point, article suggests stepping out of the framework of traditional teaching concepts and embracing diverse possibilities modern education has to offer, referring not to institutions on national level but to schools and teachers themselves.

Key words: art education, curriculum, extracurricular activity, elective courses, interactive teaching, modern teaching concepts.

1. Introduction

Art education has an important role in shaping educational systems, tending to meet students’ needs in a rapidly changing world. It has been identified as a key factor in social and economic development in Europe, thus becoming a theme of diverse cultural, political, social and economic debates more frequently. Art education offers students valuable opportunity to experience and build knowledge and skills of self-expression, imagination, creativity and communication, team work and respectfulness for the expressions of others and that of their own. [12]. Engagement in a quality art education also has a positive influence on overall academic achievements of an individual. The fact remains, however, that art education in Serbia is not even fulfilling the basic educational standards, regulated by the national curriculum.

Art education is a complex term including fields of music, fine arts (painting, sculpting and printing), dance, drama, film, photography, creative industry, design, architecture. This paper is dominantly focused on the area marked as fine arts education, therefore considering drawing, painting, sculpting and printing and its implementation in elementary schools in Serbia. Many factors influence quality of art courses in schools, including national state cultural and educational policy, through individual schools’ policies and teachers’ personalities and educational backgrounds. The paper will expose main problems regarding conducting this subject at the elementary school level in Serbia and give certain number of suggestions aiming to encourage more professionals from relevant fields to act, react and give their own contribution to solving those problems.

2. Scope of the problem

Elementary education Law of Republic of Serbia includes artistic competencies in general education goals and outcomes within: gaining quality knowledge and skills and forming
linguistic, mathematics, cultural, media and informatics literacy, necessary for continued education and active participation in family and social life; developing productive abilities, creativity, esthetic perception and taste, as well as skills to express in different art forms; enabling students to understand different art forms and use them for their own expression [4].

“Out of school art education in Serbia is left to local or municipal cultural institutions or individual artists to deal with. There were projects to link teaching and cultural institutions, and also, stimulated by the Institute for Cultural Development, museums, and children cultural centres. Also, many cultural institutions in provinces have created different proposals for workshops with school children, so that schools can choose and integrate workshops in their work. So, in the last 10 years there have been more official and unofficial attempts, besides the work of National Council for Education, to introduce "free", creative, and elective artistic programmes in primary schools” [2]. Results were negligible. Additional problem is disappearing of extracurricular activities from many schools’ programs.

Strategy for development of education in Serbia 2020 [13] gives clear perspective on the existing problems and disadvantages of current educational practice, proposing specific measures towards its improvement. Main disadvantages of curriculums, named in this document, are too extensive and rigid programs and not clearly defined extracurricular teaching concept. Some art disciplines are not even included in the elementary and secondary school program. It is concluded that elementary school students do not develop artistic and cultural literacy nor do they gain basic cultural needs and practice, important for a development of responsible and culturally conscious citizens.

What the Strategy proposes in order to solve those problems is for art education to be systematically regulated by a specific document on art education from preschool to university level. That document should deal with all the relevant matters starting from art schools establishing, developing more quality systems of identifying talented students, to enabling art education available to all children, especially those living in rural areas and children from marginalized groups [13].

Actions considering formal and informal education correlation, linking schools with cultural institutions, creative industries and professionals from art and cultural fields, are also proposed within the Strategy as additional necessity towards art education improvement but also towards raising interest and motivation in students for learning and work. Proposed measures include development of new and specific methods for teaching art subjects at the university level and to educate art teachers and professors working in elementary schools to recognize artistic affinities in children.
3. Naming the main problems

The last recommendation from The Strategy refers to a worrying reality which considers the fact that level of quality in lower grades of elementary school art courses is often a result of insufficiently informed and educated teachers in art field. These teachers have gained basic, elementary knowledge regarding art techniques and practices but no skills enough themselves in order to perform creative work, hence approaching teaching this subject with a certain anxiety which eventually leads to inadequate educational results. Students do not obtain diverse information nor are they acquainted with various artistic expressions; they graduate from school deprived of many artistic skills and knowledge. On the other hand, higher grades elementary school art classes are led by professors who have university level art diplomas. Being artists themselves, these teachers are well competent in art field but the question remains, how qualified are they as pedagogues. Bachelor level art study programs in Serbia provide basic education in pedagogy, psychology and art teaching methods, covering only basics of these complex scientific disciplines.

The second issue regarding elementary school art education in Serbia considers lack of communication and cooperation between schools and cultural institutions on advancing curriculum regarding art subjects. Some attempts of this kind have been conducted through short-term projects and that short time frame was their main problem. Their goals were not to achieve substantial impact on children’s education but to perform creatively entertaining workshops during school breaks. Even though these kinds of activities can offer children quality experience of working with different art techniques, direct contact with art works or cooperation with renowned artists, their real effectiveness would have been secured only through implementation of mentioned activities on a regular basis. This would consider making similar activities integral part of extracurricular or elective school program, which are already lacking.

Additional problem to not having extracurricular activities in many elementary schools in Serbia (as mentioned previously) is having only 45 minute per week for conducting art classes (visual arts and music art separately) in higher grades, envisaged by the National curriculum [9]. Drawing, painting and sculpting are offered as elective courses with one class a week (realization of which depends on each school’s individual program).

Finally, the last problem is related to the realization of art classes at the elementary school level. This considers teaching concepts, teaching methods and type of pedagogical interactions being practiced in conducting art courses. “Efficiency of education is directly related to choice of teaching methods and depends mostly of teachers themselves” [7]. Even though art courses by its nature are ideal for implementing modern and innovative methods and approaches
to education, considering high level of students’ interaction and their full activity in the class process, reality shows no significant shift from traditional teaching concepts. One cannot neglect the fact of existing exceptions among motivated teachers who create their classes’ flow with innovative approaches, but they make a minority group. Additionally, not only that art courses should nurture active participation of students, they should also be designed to meet individual student’s affinities and abilities which often is not the case.

4. Possible solutions to defined problems

Initiation for developing more efficient education, including art education as well, on the national level in Serbia has been seen through the work of National Council for Education and Strategy for development of education in Serbia 2020 publishing. General goals and outcomes defined by the National Law on Education are and should stay main guidelines for all actions performed within formal and informal art education projects.

Even though this issue requires work on a national level, Serbia, as a country staying in its transitional policy period for so long, is not in a position to undertake more substantial actions than already has. It is more likely to achieve some results approaching the problem on more local level. More precisely, schools should make the most of their independent policy making to introduce changes into their own School programs. News introduced into existing school curriculums does not have to be drastic. It would be enough to begin with small steps which would lead to development of artistic and cultural literacy of their students as well as to developing their basic cultural needs and practices, to enable students to actively participate in art classes and motivate them to gain knowledge, skills and abilities in art field.

More specified goals schools should consider, aspiring to achieve envisaged art education outcomes, are to prepare plans for individualization of art courses, following good practice examples; to create a yearly plan of cooperation with cultural institutions on conducting extracurricular activities; create a plan for hiring professional artists on implementation of specific art course units; prepare proposals for art teachers professional specializations.

Cooperation of schools with art and cultural institutions on art education implementation is of big importance for reaching high quality educational results. Therefore, cultural institutions should accept their responsibility in this delicate process of working with pupils and create programs adjusted for different students’ ages. These educational programs should be developed in cooperation with local schools, in order to be compatible with schools’ programs. Not only can these institutions enable direct contact for students with works of art, but they can become a unique working space where students can practice their work, a creative space for communication, team work and interaction with their cultural and social environment.
Permanent education and professional specialization of art teachers and professors needs to be enabled as a measure of ensuring the best teaching practices within individual classes. As already mentioned above, there are two types of art courses lecturers at the elementary school level. In first four years, teachers are responsible for all courses within their classes, while in higher grades, from 5th to 8th, there are art professors being in charge. There are several faculties of education in Serbia, where students can obtain a BA teacher diploma. These institutions endeavor to provide a wide range of activities for students in order to fully enable them for a good quality pedagogical work. When it comes to visual arts group of subjects, students get theoretical and practical training within a diversified program. However, university curriculum determines number and hours for implementation of all courses in a way that does not overburden students’ schedule so students can gain only basic knowledge and skills when it comes to art field. When graduate student enters a classroom as teacher, question is how they will conduct their art courses. Therefore, seminars and trainings for teachers should be organized in detail in order to introduce them to new trends and teaching techniques regarding art education.

On the other hand, higher grades art professors are graduates from art universities. They studied to be painters, sculptors, designers but found their stable employment within schools. They did get education in pedagogical group of subjects but not comprehensive enough. A promising move has been made in Serbia, considering this issue, with the launch of master study program for subject teaching professors (example of Faculty of Education in Jagodina). This program enables graduates from all academic fields to specialize in teaching. Being quite new, this program has not done any changes yet but it gives some brightness to the future of elementary school art education in Serbia.

Finally, aiming to enrich knowledge, skills and abilities students gain in art field during their elementary education, teachers can take a lead and start micro projects in their own classes, preparing for their work with students in a more motivating and challenging manner. Individuals should step out of traditional school frames by keeping in touch with contemporary teaching practices. There are many examples of good practice in the world and even in Serbia already and the number of innovative approaches to art education should be expected to grow in the future. The biggest emphasis has been put on individual student’s work and adjusting of lesson programs to specific and individual intellectual and mental capacities of each student [6]. Such preparation of courses can be demanding and time consuming for teachers but envisaged positive outcomes and long term results should stay the main motivation in their work.
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