



## DEVELOPING VALUES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS THROUGH THE STUDY OF ART OBJECTS

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**Abstract:** The paper begins with some issues related to aesthetics, aesthetic education, art and axiological education. The empirical research has the general assumption that secondary school students and youth have difficulties in selecting values. The objective of the research was three fold: to design, to organize and to carry learning activities from which students shall acquire educational values through the study of art objects. The exploratory research was conducted on a sample of 50 students (25 in experimental group and 25 in control group). The content sample included fairy-tales and short stories (*Beauty and the Beast*; *The money earned* by Alexandru Mitru) and artistic topics on several well-known art objects (The Endless Column, Table of Silence, The Gate of Kiss, Peleş castle, Voroneţ monastery, and St. Michael's Cathedral from Cluj-Napoca). The tested hypothesis stated that *if secondary school students are involved in learning contexts where they perceive, analyze and explain artistic objects then they develop aesthetic and ethic values*. The learning context students were exposed to represents the independent variable and the outputs – the educational values themselves – represent the dependent variable. In order to test for the hypothesis we planned a formative didactic experiment. In order to test the hypothesis the pre-test/post-test design was used.

**Key words:** aesthetic education, aesthetics, axiology, value judgment, kitsch

### 1. Theoretical background

There are few Romanian scientific papers dealing with aesthetic and axiological education of students. *Aesthetics* studies the essence, the laws, the categories, the structure of reflective and creative attitude of values related to the existing objective criteria in the aesthetic conscience (Macavei, 2002, p. 238). The aesthetic categories sustain the creativity and the judgments on aesthetics. The main *aesthetic categories* are: the beauty, the sublime, the ugly, the comic, and the tragic. Aesthetic categories are considered values. Tudor Vianu states that aesthetic values are “the absolute goal of conscience” (Vianu, 1982, p. 16). *The domains of aesthetics* include: nature, art, social life. *Art* is the creative human activity objectified in different structures (objects) that communicate ideas and emotions; by using different languages and techniques it transmits spiritual states during the receptive-contemplating act.

*Aesthetic knowledge* means assimilation and processing data, facts, messages, and aesthetic impressions, leading to their appropriation and integration into cognitive, affective and attitudinal structures of the receiver. We distinguish between experience, the aesthetic feeling, value judgment, attitude and taste. *Experience* includes the entire set of lived interactions both as a receptive subject of aesthetic reality and as an inner experience separated from the live one. *Aesthetic feeling* includes the responses generated by the contact with the aesthetic phenomenon. On a mental level, *judgments about existence (descriptive)* and *value judgments* are generated. *Aesthetic attitudes* determines the perception and appreciation, creates evaluation sheets for the aesthetic object. Aesthetic judgment refers to the “intuitive pleasure”. The taste is spontaneous and is primarily based on intuition and instincts; based on voluntary control it can also be the result of experience. The aesthetic process includes several *stages* as reception, processing and psychological reaction. *Aesthetic education* represents the activity, the process and the result of perception, reacting and creating the beauty and in

a broad sense, of aesthetics. *The main goal* of aesthetic education is developing the aesthetic conscience and behavior. *The ideal* or the perfect informative-formative model of aesthetic education is to develop the maximum human potential to perceive, to experience and to value aesthetics, and to develop the potential to create new values in order to beautify the social existence (Macavei, 2002).

*Axiological education* is education through and for values. Axiology of art is the artistic perspective that emphasizes on the value of the objects. The concept of *value* refers to the entire set of significant objects for human beings: an object becomes a value when an individual establishes a personal relation with that object. Unknown things to humans are not values. *The values of education* use all already existing values. The sole condition is that they would represent the message promoted by *teleology, content, methodology* and *epistemology* of education. *Teleology of education* is focused on values. The goal of every educative action is a value in itself. This value is not external for the students, but a specific, internal value. Education itself is a set of actions aiming to develop and to value the students. Therefore, teleology of education as a system of epistemological and praxiological ordered objectives is a system of values designed to be developed for the students (*knowledge, abilities, attitudes*) (Macavei, 2002).

## 2. Statement of problem

Previous papers state that youth and children appropriate behavioral patterns and values from the contexts they live. Their attitudes and behaviors are based on the learnt models and values. The present society is characterized by the general tendency of youth to follow negative models and to develop a system of values inadequate to a knowledge society and moral values. Therefore, we wanted to assess the ways we could determine students to change their system of values using art objects. Based on these they could develop adequate social behaviors and attitudes. We also aimed to discover efficient ways to influence students to perceive art objects in an adequate manner, to understand and to appreciate them and to generate a correct value judgment on those.

## 3. Research objectives

*The main objective of the research* is to design, to organize and to carry some learning activities in which students would learn educational values by the study of art objects followed by analyzing and interpretation of these contexts and behaviors showed by students.

*Specific objectives* are: to analyze the reference list related to aesthetic and axiological education; to identify the values appropriated by secondary school students and the characteristics of aesthetic education for these students; to setting clear psychological and educational criteria for aesthetic education in secondary schools; to identify methods and techniques for developing aesthetic and axiological education; to evaluate the progress of aesthetic and axiological education registered by secondary school students due to the use of these methods.

## 4. Research plan

In order to meet these objectives, during the school year 2010-2011 we carried on an exploratory research at the Colegiul Național "George Coșbuc" from Cluj-Napoca. *The sample of subjects* consisted from 50 VI<sup>th</sup> graders – 25 in the experimental group and 25 in the control group. *The content sample* included fairy-tales and short stories (*Beauty and the Beast, The money earned* by Alexandru Mitru) and artistic topics on several art objects (The Endless Column, Table of Silence, The Gate of Kiss, Peleş castle, Voroneț monastery, and St. Michael's Cathedral from Cluj-Napoca).

The research hypothesis stated that if secondary school students are involved in learning contexts in which they perceive analyze and explain artistic objects, they develop aesthetic and ethic values. The learning context students were exposed to constitute the *independent variable* and the educational outputs represent the *dependent variable*.



II. Analyze the following picture. Describe feelings associated with you seeing the picture of Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci.

III. Explain the differences between an 'art object' and an 'ordinary object'.

Table 2 shows the results of the initial test by the experimental and control group.

**Table 2.** Results of the initial test for the experimental and control group

	Item	Experimental group			Control group		
		Yes	No	Sometimes	Yes	No	Sometimes
<b>Money/wealth vs. Poverty</b>	1	9	10	6	10	9	6
	2	20	5	-	21	4	-
	3	18	7	-	17	8	-
	4	21	4	-	20	5	-
<b>Work vs. Laziness</b>	5	6	7	10	6	7	10
	6	7	8	10	7	8	10
<b>Truth vs. Lie</b>	7	9	9	7	8	10	7
	8	9	9	7	10	9	6
<b>Honesty vs. Dishonesty</b>	9	14	6	5	15	5	5
	10	16	5	4	16	6	3
<b>Modesty vs. Egotism</b>	11	5	15	5	6	16	3
	12	2	20	3	2	20	3
	13						
	14	20	2	3	21	2	2
	15	2	15	8	2	16	7
	16	2	18	5	2	18	5
	17	15	10	-	14	11	-
	18	10	15	-	10	15	-
	19	15	-	10	14	-	9
	20	-	25	-	-	25	-
	21	-	25	-	-	25	-
	22	2	20	3	2	20	3
	23	20	2	3	19	3	3
	24	-	-	-	-	-	-
25	15	10	-	14	11	-	
26	-	-	-	-	-	-	

As for the *materialistic values* we notice that many children wish for an expensive car, a big house and friends with money. Therefore they assign a big value to money and to (material) wealth. As for *work*, we notice that many students do not think yet that a well done job is a value. *The truth* is a sensitive matter, many students still using lie in order to get away from troubles and problems they face.

As for *fashion*, we notice that many students from both groups enjoy wearing fashionable cloths. Therefore, looking like the others they will be more easily integrated into peer-groups. Students often display the tendency to wear similar, even identical cloths even if it does not fit their body or personality. Their physical appearance becomes ridiculous. The fact that they do not adapt fashion to their personality means that they lack the values of 'beauty', 'ugly' and 'original'. They do not have the courage to display their personality; they ignore their traits trying to be as similar to the others as possible. In respect to originality of clothing there is also another problem: if the person wears the cloths in an original way it also means it wears them in a beautiful manner. During the experiment and schooling we could try to teach students to differentiate between original and imitation, meaning teaching the difference between beauty and ugly.

As for *movies, plays, and music*, students from both groups enjoy an artistic piece from different categories. But they find it difficult to explain why they like it. They attend certain artistic plays or watch different movies because they like it. They do not watch opera or theatre plays; they do not

listen to certain music styles because they do not appreciate them. Their attitude is not based on a value judgment make. We also notice that liking or disliking is not similar to appreciating/devaluing something. We consider that we can not change their liking patterns, but we can support them to appreciate other music styles. Through active involvement in educational activities we could teach students to analyze an artistic object, to understand its value. As for *literature*, girls prefer romantic novels. Secondary school students do not like poetry.

The feelings displayed by the Mona Lisa painting are briefly described using only one-two sentences. This means that they do not have previous knowledge on this matter.

The third task allows us to notice that secondary school students do not have clear criteria on which they would differentiate between an art object and an ordinary object. They notice that an art object is unique, but other objects have their uniqueness too. Students appreciate that art objects are beautiful, but other objects are also beautiful.

## 6. Didactic formative experiment

During the didactic formative experiment we identified certain methods and techniques adequate for the aesthetic and axiological education of students. We also planned learning contexts which will facilitate aesthetic education for secondary school students. We studied the aesthetic and axiological education at students (perception, understanding, creation of art objects) and assessed the progress registered by them. Students from experimental group were involved in learning contexts in which they perceived, analyzed and explain different art objects.

**Table 3.** *Experimental activities used with students*

Experimental activities	Values
<b>No. 1</b> <i>Subject:</i> Beauty and the Beast	beauty vs. ugly; good vs. bad
<b>No. 2</b> <i>Subject:</i> St. Michaels's Catholic cathedral from Cluj-Napoca	beauty vs. ugly
<b>No. 3</b> <i>Subject:</i> Voroneț Monastery	beauty vs. ugly
<b>No. 4</b> <i>Subject:</i> Sculptural ensemble from Tg. Jiu of Constantin Brâncuși	beauty vs. ugly
<b>No. 5</b> <i>Subject:</i> Castles and palaces: Peleş Castle vs. Roma palaces (houses)	beauty vs. ugly; wealth vs. poverty; modesty vs. egotism
<b>No. 6</b> <i>Subject:</i> The money earned by Alexandru Mitru	work vs. laziness; truth vs. lie

Experimental activity no. 1 focused on the fairy-tale Beauty and the Beast. Students should have met the following objectives: to identify the physical, psychological and ethic qualities of characters; to characterize the characters emphasizing on their strengths and weaknesses; to compare characters among them and with their self; to argue for the decisions made by the characters.

The second experimental activity focused on the catholic cathedral from Cluj-Napoca. Students had to identify the architectural elements of a certain style, to analyze the cathedral, to argue the value of an art for this building. During the activity, they answered several questions like What are the features of gothic style? What are the specific elements of flamboyant style? Where the workers did took the models from? What do you like at this building? What do you appreciate in it? What do you find ugly? What do you dislike in it? etc..

During the third experimental activity called *Voroneț Monastery*, we aimed for the following objectives: to identify the specific architectural features of a style, to analyze Voroneț Monastery, to argue for the value of this building. During the activity several questions were also asked: Why walls were built around the monastery? What architectural feature is specific to Voroneț monastery? What are the features of Voroneț monastery? Where the workers did took the model in building the monastery? What is the monastery famous for? What is the specific color of the monastery? What award did the monastery, along with other painted monasteries, won? Which are the painted churches from Bucovina listed in UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites? What do you like/dislike in Voroneț

monastery? Why the exterior painting is considered valuable? As a painting style where it could be included?

The fourth experimental activity focused on the sculptural ensemble from Tg. Jiu. At the end students should have met the following learning objectives: to describe the Gate of the Kiss, The Table of Silence, the Endless Column; to explain the significance of these objects; to argue for the value of these art objects. During the activity students answered the following questions: How is the kiss represented on The Gate of the Kiss? According to Mircea Eliade, what the gate represents? How many chairs are around The Table of Silence? What do you think the Table represents? What do you think The Column represents? Why the work of Constantin Brâncuși is world wide appreciated? What do you find beautiful/ugly on each object? Students were also asked to write a one page text about the feelings they have when seeing one of these three works.

The next activity focused on castles and palaces. The following objectives had to be met: to describe palaces, to explain the motives they were built, to compare a castle with a palace, to argue for their value of art objects. Several questions were answered during the activities: What style does the Peleş castle have? What do you find impressive at the exterior of Peleş castle? What do you find impressive inside the castle? Why do we consider Peleş castle as an architectural art object? What is valuable inside the castle? Students also had the assignment to describe one of the rooms shown in the pictures.

During the second part of the activity they had several other questions to answer: What the pictures represent? Who are the owners of these buildings? What is the purpose of these buildings? What were they built for? What do the owners need such huge buildings? What architectural style these buildings have? What impact these buildings have on the rural or urban environment? What do you like/dislike about these buildings? Are these considered art objects? Why? What is kitsch? Students were also asked to give examples of other objects included as 'kitsch'.

The last experimental activity focused on the story by Alexandru Mitru and following learning objectives were set: to identify the mistakes made by parents and their children, to analyze the behaviors, to argue for their personal opinions, to evaluate the mistakes according to their own reference value system, to make a decision for the parent when the child makes a mistake, to give pro and cons of a statement, to anticipate the story according to the contexts and characters, to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of a character etc.. The content of the story allows students to compare the father's behaviors with the child's and with their own's.

## 7. Post-experimental research

During the post-experimental research we designed and applied the final test for those two groups of students. Their capacity to perceive, evaluate an art object and to make a value judgment about it was assessed. We analyzed and monitored the progress registered by students in judging art objects and displayed in their aesthetic and axiological education.

**Table 4.** *Final Test*

<p>1. What is the message the author reveals to the reader in the following verses?          "The biggest revenge/ Is when your enemy          Has to admit/That you are good and he is evil." (B.P.Haşdeu, <i>Răzvan and Vidra</i>)</p> <p>2. Read <i>Allegory of the frogs</i> (students received the written text). What is the morale of this story?          "Once upon a time there was a group of frogs who wanted to compete among themselves. Their goal was to reach the top of a high tower. Many people gathered to see and support them. The race was about to begin...Still...No one believed that the frogs could reach the top of the tower. All you could hear were claims like "What pain! They'll never make it!" or "The tower is too high..."The frogs abandoned one by one, except for one who continued to climb...People continued to say: "Is too hard! She'll never make it!" more and more frogs continued to abandon.          At the end, all the frogs quit, except the one who, alone and with an enormous effort, reached the top of the tower. The others wanted to know how he did it. One of them approached him to ask him how he had done it, to finish the race and discovered that he was deaf!"</p>
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3. Look at the picture of the the church *Sagrada Familia* by Gaudi in Barcelona. Why is this considered an art and not kitsch?



4. Look at the two statues form the picture. What do you think they represent? What is the information we gather by analyzing them?



5. Read the following verses (students received the written text). Explain its literary value.

”My enemies die because my heart is strong  
And because I am 3 minutes smarter  
All my life I have done what I wanted  
And what I wanted God gave me

Live my enemies, all my enemies  
They are not like me, I am not like them  
And I got used to have them  
Around me all the time” (Florin Pește, ”Live my enemies”).

Analyzing the results from the experimental and control group we notice that those from the first group have better results in perceiving and explaining an art objects. This demonstrates the efficiency of the formative activities they were involved in (figure 1).

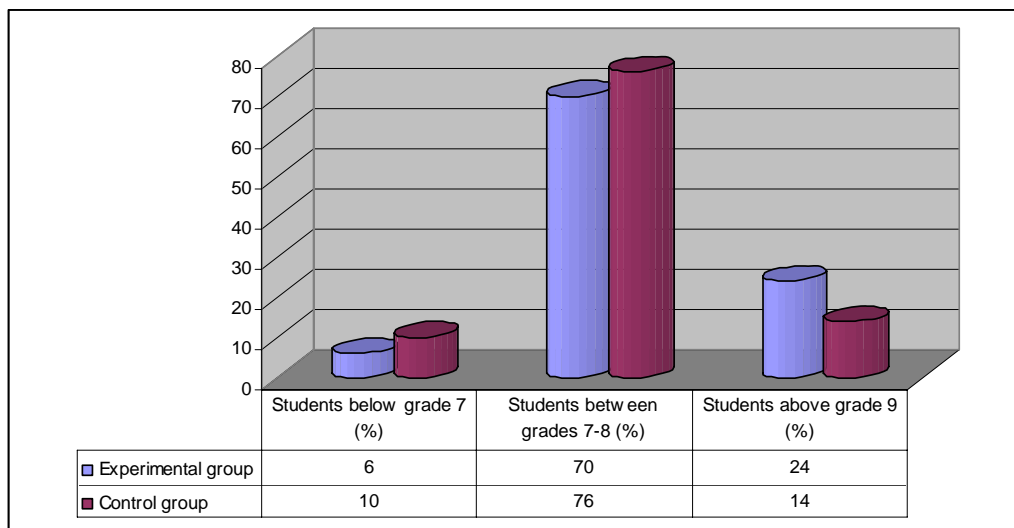


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the final test

### 8. Conclusions

At the initial testing we identified what students like and do not like and their difficulties in understanding an art object. Because there is a big difference between what we like and what we appreciate as valuable, during the experimental activities we focused on supporting children to recognize values and lack of values and to differentiate among art objects and ordinary objects. Students understood that less valuable objects reveal everything to you without any effort from you to

think. That is why there are easily accepted by the general public. Valuable objects include information that is not easily accessible and that challenge you to solve problems and to think.

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