

ART AS A BASIC FACTOR IN THE FORMATION OF KEY COMPETENCES IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract. This article reflects the author's views on the significance of art, in its integral entirety, as a basic factor in the formation of key competences in children and students. The concepts of competences, abilities, education through art, as well as the specific goals of visual art education in the various educational stages indicated in the normative documents – from preschool education to high school education – including the areas of competence for each of them are considered.

Keywords: art; key competences; abilities; areas of competence

The topic of the article requires clarification of the terminology in at least two directions: competences and art.

Competences are, as a rule, associated with abilities, and abilities are seen as the capacity to achieve something, i.e. knowledge-based skills, with the concept of competence coming from Latin (Lat. *competens*, *competentis* – ‘competent’, Dictionary of foreign words in the Bulgarian language) It follows that competences can be viewed as abilities, though not innate ones, but “ones that are developed through quality learning, in an appropriate pedagogical environment, and through acquisition of serious practical experience” (Zwell 2000).

Today, the concept of *competences* is used in even more spheres and life contexts, which prevents the formulation of a uniform classification of competences. There are individual competences (social, emotional, cognitive, civic, and professional) and organizational competences¹.

Michael Armstrong, one of the world's most famous leadership and people management experts, divided competences into two types: behavioural or “soft” (emotional intelligence, communication, teamwork, decision-making skills, leadership, etc.) and technical or “hard” defining specific professional skills and abilities. He claimed that competences are not knowledge and skills per se, but the ability to successfully apply them (Armstrong 2007, p. 558).

According to the famous pedagogue academician Andrey Viktorovich Khutorskoy, there is a hierarchy of competences in education, with some of them being

more general or more significant than others. He defined them as “a set of interlocking personal qualities (value and meaning orientation, knowledge, skills, habits, abilities, and ways of acting) conditioned by the experience gained from activity in a certain socially and personally significant sphere... Students’ competence implies at least minimal experience to apply competences” (Khutorskoy 2002).

Based on the thesis of division of the content of education into **meta-subject** (for all subjects), **inter-subject** (for a cycle of subjects and educational fields), and **subject** content (for each subject), Khutorskoy organized competences in three hierarchical levels:

- *Key competences*: referring to the general content of education.
- *General subject competences*: referring to a certain range of educational fields and subjects.
- *Subject competences*: formed within the framework of pedagogical contexts / lessons.

In the 1920s, several discussions took place related to the basic competences to be possessed by individuals. As a result of them, complexes of competences were outlined that are considered particularly important and significant for the realization of individuals in both personal and professional aspect, i.e., related to life skills such as adaptability, social skills, non-routine problem solving, self-management and self-control, and systems thinking.

Gradually, because of the search for a “conceptual basis for school-based comparison of achievements in international and national systems”, the concept of **key competences** gained ground¹.

The subject of key competences and competences in general is not a new one. Its formal beginning dates to December 2006, when the European Parliament, on the recommendation of the Council of the European Union, adopted the Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. The framework covers eight groups (modules) of key competences, which are listed below. Each of the eight key competences is clearly defined and the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that relate to it are indicated.

During the time of the Bulgarian Presidency, with the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union dated 22 May 2018, the key competences were updated, without, however, changing the understanding of them as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The number of key competences also remained unchanged. As a result, the eight modules (groups) of key competences look like this:

Module 1: (2006) Communication in the mother tongue; (2018) Literacy Competence (primarily related to native language communication competences and targeting reading literacy).

Module 2: (2006) Communication in foreign languages; (2018) Multilingual competence (partially overlaps with literacy competence in terms of communication competences, but the emphasis is on the field of foreign languages).

Module 3: (2006) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; (2018) Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology, and engineering.

Module 4: (2006) Digital skills (digital competence); (2018) Digital competence.

Module 5: (2006) Learning to learn skills; (2018) Personal, social, and learning to learn competence.

Module 6: (2006) Social and civic competences; (2018) Citizenship competence.

Module 7: (2006) Initiative and entrepreneurship; (2018) Entrepreneurship competence.

Module 8: (2006) Cultural awareness, creativity, and cultural competences (2018) Cultural awareness and expression competence¹.

It is extremely important to indicate that all key competences are equally important, interlocking, and overlapping and complementing each other to a certain extent. “The key competences are all considered equally important; each of them contributes to a successful life in society. Competences can be applied in many different contexts and in a variety of combinations. They overlap and interlock; aspects essential to one domain will support competence in another. Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication and negotiation skills, analytical skills, creativity, and intercultural skills are embedded throughout the key competences”².

Here, the significance of art, creativity, and cultural competences should be considered.

The idea of education through art is as old as the civilization itself. According to the eminent British writer, critic, and art expert Kenneth Clark, “John Ruskin says that great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.” (Clark 1977, p. 47). There is no exact and specific answer to what art is. Each nation has its own understanding, definition, and idea of art. Many classifications have been made of what “art” is. For Aristotle, art was mimesis; for Kant, it was a conscious ability of subjects; and for Hegel, art was beauty. Modern society could not exist without any of the traditional arts. It is a society of visual communication and multimedia, the foundation of which is the image. Today, art is applied in global computer networks, too. Exhibitions are created that are not material but exist only virtually, especially in quarantine times.

With the concept of **key competences**, results-oriented learning is brought to the fore and emphasis is placed on the application of knowledge in real-life situations, thus pushing education away from its traditional object orientation and fo-

cusing on cultivating key competences. And what is particularly significant here is, since key competences overlap, interlock, and penetrate each other, it is advisable to acquire them **in an integrated manner through training in all subjects**.

Integrative processes are based on the main starting point that the world is integrated, comprehensive, and united. Therefore, the process of its assimilation by adolescents must also be comprehensive and integral. In the process of developing children's creative abilities, an important place is occupied by the **complex-integral approach**. What are the results of application of the integral approach in art education? (Legkostup 2006, pp 24 – 26).

- Permanent and deeper assimilation of necessary knowledge and skills with less effort and tension on the part of adolescents.
- More casual assimilation of knowledge from other domains and their transfer from one activity to another.
- Stimulating creative and visual art activity and increasing the quality of works.
- Formation of aesthetic taste and attitude towards reality and works of art.

Three variants of integration into the complex organization of the specific teaching and educational process in visual arts, music, etc. are outlined:

- *Mental integration*: the essence of the psychological aspect of the approach.
- *Cognitive integration*: the essence of the content aspect of the complex-integral approach.

– *Methodical integration*: determines the set of methodical means.

Integrative relationships in learning and education through art can be considered at *three levels: global, external, and internal*.

At the global level, they are among the **spheres of aesthetic impact**:

The basis of the artistic impact is the *aesthetic perception of reality*. Thanks to it, perceptions are systematically enriched; semantic and logical connections are clarified in building children's visual representations of various objects, phenomena, events and processes, and their aesthetic qualities and specifics are revealed. Active cognitive activity contributes to the development of children's imagination, thinking, and feelings, without which the creation of new forms, images, and situations is impossible.

Another significant aspect of the aesthetic impact is the *perception of works of art*, as it helps to better understand the real world and know more deeply the reality and its reflection in artistic images. Through art, an ability to see the typical and characteristic and summarize the phenomena observed is cultivated.

Visual art activity is the third sphere of aesthetic impact. By depicting, adolescents reflect their impressions and attitudes to reality. At the same time, their knowledge, skills, and habits of working with various visual materials and techniques are strengthened and enriched, basic mental processes are developed, and "...optimization of relationships with the environment, based on emotional

self-regulation and conscious feeling of the value of their own life positions expressed through a specific product of children's creativity, is set as a prerequisite (Konakchieva 2017, p. 80).

Second-level integration can be defined as external. An important prerequisite for enriching children's knowledge and creating an evaluative attitude towards natural and social environment, on the one hand, and developing children's creative abilities, on the other, is the integration between the types of activities and arts considered as the product of such activities: visual art activity and visual art, musical education and music, development of connected speech and literature; dramatized play and theatre, etc. They define the scope of the so-called external integration links. Visual art activity in preschool and primary-school age logically integrates the other directions around itself. The general artistic development of adolescents in the modern teaching and educational process can be realized through the interaction of different types of arts. Hence, *two essential and mutually influencing aspects* stand out in artistic learning and education: the formation of artistic culture, knowledge, and experience in the perception of artistic values, and the formation and development of artistic and creative abilities in various types of arts.

Internal integration is the third level of integration. Based on the content, form, and meaning of works of art, it takes place between:

– *Types of visual arts: fine and applied.* Connections between painting, graphics, sculpture, applied and decorative arts, and artistic crafts are developed based on primary and secondary common means of expression.

– *Different genres:* still life, interior, landscape, portrait, and figural composition are the basis of integrity both between types of visual arts and visual art activities.

– *Visual art activities:* drawing, appliqué, modelling, and applied ones based on thematic integration.

– *Materials, techniques and means of expression:* Through the way of drawing, adolescents acquire skills and accessible knowledge about painting and graphics. The examination of works of art is closely related to the types of visual art activities and their implementation. On the other hand, children need some knowledge of the specific "language" of art to realize some specific similarities and concepts.

– *Organizational forms:* pedagogical contexts and lessons, as well as forms for organizing artistic-aesthetic activities outside educational institutions: excursions, visits to museums, galleries, art studios, etc. (Legkostup 2006, p. 27).

The concept of key competences is enshrined in the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA) and secondary legislation.

The regulatory framework through which education and training in preschool age are carried out is synthesized in the state educational standard: ORDER No. 5 on preschool education dated 03.06.2016, SG No. 46 of 17.06.2016, effective

01.08.2016.³ It specifies the requirements for conducting and the expected results of training in each age group and educational field. Both the horizontal relationship between them, as well as the possibilities for upgrading by age groups and connection with primary school education, are described. Unlike *school education*, in preschool education *games are the leading and main activity*, and through it the acquisition of **key competences** is prepared: it lays the foundation for problem-solving skills, critical thinking, taking responsibility, and making decisions, for initiative, creativity, and teamwork skills. And this is embedded in each educational field referred to in Art. 28, para. 2 and the Appendix.

The *Visual Arts* educational field is aimed at developing a variety of visual art activities. Much more systematically, children are involved in cognitive, visual art, and creative activities to prepare for school, such as skills for solving individual and group tasks, planning, etc. Graphic skills and detailing are purposefully mastered while preparing the hand for writing. Familiarity with applied and decorative arts and sculpture is also more in-depth.

Through the educational field, ideas, skills, and attitudes related to depicting and recreating objects and phenomena from the surrounding environment are cultivated in children. Children's general and specific perceptions and skills develop, through which they express their ideas and experiences in the world of shapes and colours around them. Visual art activities enrich the aesthetic feelings and experiences of children from an early age. Through organized and systematic work in the educational field, children develop their cognitive and visual art skills in *three main cores: Artistic Perception, Visual Art Materials and Techniques, and Visual Art Creativity*³.

The Music educational field presupposes a wide range of activities, the basis of which is the emotional activity of children. Problematic highlights are also marked here regarding the social, cognitive, and musical and artistic preparation of children for entry into first grade. In view of this, the field is focused on learning a larger number of songs, as well as improvising instrumental accompaniment to songs. The development and enrichment of children's speech are further associated with determining the sonority of music by using several concepts.

Through the content of the *Perception, Reproduction, Music and Play, and Musical Expressiveness Elements educational cores*, development of musical performance skills and skills for listening to music, promotion of spontaneous children's artistry, as well as stimulation of children's interest and desire to sing, listen to music, enjoy, and experience it are achieved³.

Preschool age is the most sensitive period of children's development. This is the time when children discover and get to know the world through their senses (smell, taste, touch, sound, light) and develop and improve their power of observation, with the ability to make observations being an essential part of the *competence approach*. The objects and phenomena observed can only be ascer-

tained, and their registration takes place verbally or through a drawing. Thus, when placed in a problem situation, children develop a sense of applying research approaches and skills to express assumptions and hypotheses by using integrated means. In this way, preschool education lays the foundations of problem-based and result-oriented learning, which is a prerequisite for their development in *school education*, too.

The regulatory basis for its implementation is Order No. 5 on general education dated 30 November 2015 (effective 8 December 2015). According to Art. 2. (1) General education ... covers the 8 groups of *key competences* from the Framework, while, at the same time, a ninth competence significant for our education system has been derived, i.e., skills to support sustainable development and healthy lifestyle and sports, and *cultural competence and skills for expression through creativity* are specified in item 8⁴.

“The formation of cultural competence implies accumulation of knowledge about the world and national cultural heritage, helps to develop creative abilities through the expressive means of visual arts, and expands students’ knowledge of the interrelationship between culture and art and the resulting changes in the ideas of artists of all times. Skills ... refer to the ability to appreciate art and the aesthetic enjoyment of it, to express oneself through a variety of means of expression ... the ability to relate one’s own positions to the opinions of others. Cultural self-expression is seen as crucial for the development of creative abilities necessary for various professions,” wrote Prof. Mariana Moinova (Moinova 2017, pp. 83 – 84).

General education is carried out through the study of 20 general-education subjects, incl. *visual art and music*. General-education subjects are linked to key competences, and the Visual Art and Music subjects provide opportunities for the creative presentation of ideas and experiences and emotions by using different means, and they are directly linked to the acquisition of cultural competence and skills of expression through creativity. PhD Gergana Avramova wrote “Creativity in children is not just a means of entertainment, but a source for exploration of the inner world and the surrounding reality. By applying art pedagogical techniques, new skills and competences can be accomplished... The development of creative resources is a guarantee of successful realization, adaptability and sense of satisfaction in children.” (Avramova-Todorova 2022, p. 25).

In the Bulgarian education system, the concept that is most directly related to competences is *school preparation*. In the school education system, the word ‘standards’ is often used to refer to the requirements for educational results. The competences described in the state educational standard (DES) for general-education preparation (GEP) in a subject are closely related to the curricula, where they are “decomposed” by school years and through which they are achieved. Another element important for the “standards” is the description of expected re-

sults by cognitive verbs which indicate the different thought process levels, i.e., remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating, and which link them to the educational stage, e.g. in elementary education, the lower levels of memorization, understanding, and application prevail, while in the following educational stages the ratio changes in favour of the higher ones, i.e. analysing, evaluating, and creating¹.

Each curriculum contains:

1. Brief presentation of the curriculum.
2. Expected educational results in the subject at the end of the school year.
3. Educational content (topics, competences as expected educational results, new concepts).
4. Recommended percentage distribution of compulsory study hours.
5. Specific methods and forms for evaluating student achievements.
6. Activities for the *acquisition of key competences*, as well as interdisciplinary connections.

My focus of a visual art specialist is on the field of visual arts. Further on in the Order⁴, the specific goals of visual art education in the various educational stages are indicated:

Lower primary education

- Developing creative abilities and imagination.
- Cultivating an aesthetic attitude when communicating with works of art.
- Getting to know the different types, genres, and means of expression of visual arts;
- Mastering skills for using tools and techniques of depicting on a plane and in real space from life, memory, and imagination.
- Cultivating a conscious interest in visual art with examples from Bulgarian and world art.

Areas of competence: object and environment; object and image; spectator and work of art; visual communication; materials and techniques.

Upper primary education

- Perceiving and realising creative ideas, objects, and actions that reveal important aspects of history of art and culture.
- Acquiring specific knowledge and skills through visual art activity.
- Developing motivation and imagination through forms of creative expression and communication.
- Cultivating aesthetic and artistic culture in students and stimulating their creative abilities.
- Developing knowledge about contemporary visual culture and existing models for its description and analysis.

Areas of competence: art and society; visual activities; visual culture and electronic media.

High-school education

- Cultivating a sustainable interest in Bulgarian and world art and its cultural and historical significance.
- Studying significant ideas and approaches of art history.
- Understanding the development of art styles and genres.
- Expanding knowledge about means of expression, depicting techniques and technologies, and their application in art.
- Visualizing and sharing social experience and aesthetic orientation in modern cultural environment.

Areas of competence: art and art history; artistic activity; visual culture and media.

The brief analysis of visual arts curricula from preschool education to high-school education in Bulgaria shows that they fully cover the requirements of Module 8 ***Cultural awareness and expression competence*** of the European Reference Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning described in the Official Journal of the European Union of 04.06.2018:

“Competence in cultural awareness and expression involves having an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms. It involves being engaged in understanding, developing and expressing one’s own ideas and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts.

Essential ***knowledge, skills, and attitudes*** related to this competence

This competence requires knowledge of local, national, regional, European and global cultures and expressions, including their languages, heritage and traditions, and cultural products, and an understanding of how these expressions can influence each other as well as the ideas of the individual. It includes understanding the different ways of communicating ideas between creator, participant and audience within written, printed and digital texts, theatre, film, dance, games, art and design, music, rituals, and architecture, as well as hybrid forms. It requires an understanding of one’s own developing identity within a world of cultural diversity and how arts and other cultural forms can be a way to both view and shape the world.

Skills include the ability to express and interpret figurative and abstract ideas, experiences and emotions with empathy, and the ability to do so in a range of arts and other cultural forms. Skills also include the ability to identify and realise opportunities for personal, social or commercial value through the arts and other cultural forms and the ability to engage in creative processes, both as an individual and collectively.

It is important to have an open *attitude* towards, and respect for, diversity of cultural expression together with an ethical and responsible approach to intellectual and cultural ownership. A positive attitude also includes a curiosity about the

world, an openness to imagine new possibilities, and a willingness to participate in cultural experiences”².

The aesthetic and educational functions of visual art have deep pedagogical traditions, both on a national and global scale, which is a good reason for the artistic and creative activity of children to start from an early age in educational systems. How could this be realized in practice?

First, through purposeful contacts with works of art, ***adolescents learn and acquire skills to live in society***. This happens both in kindergarten or school, and outside of them when visiting public and private cultural environments: museums, galleries, and art gatherings. Children are brought up to respect people, artists, cultural environments, and the objects in them. When perceiving accessible works of art, children are enriched with new ideas and concepts, and their knowledge expands.

The second area of impact through works of visual art is *communication and mastery of speech*. In front of a picture, sculpture or graphic sheet, adolescents overcome the stage of description and, through discussion, exchange, and opposition of opinions, sharing ideas, etc., try to formulate correct phrases. They learn to use the vocabulary specific to the “language” of artists and how to express themselves in precise words and terms.

What is more, children *acquire basic writing skills and prepare for reading*. Based on some depicting techniques seen in the works of artists and applied in their own visual art activity, children get acquainted with different types of lines, application of spots and colours, graphic decorative elements, and signs necessary for mastering writing skills.

Through their own narratives of what they saw and the way they transform it into drawings, *elementary reading and retelling skills* are created, as artistic perception is related to art and implies both active participation of thought processes, feelings, experiences, imagination, and a relevant evaluative attitude (Legkostup 2006, pp. 20 – 22).

Another area of the teaching and educational process related to art and its works is *the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to reason*. Communicating with works of art teaches children to observe, concentrate, and remember.

Targeted contacts with works of art develop *the abilities of perception*, i.e., observation, analysis, comparison, and synthesis, *stimulate the development of speech, logical thinking, imagination, and creative expression of adolescents*. Conditions are created for the transfer of enriched knowledge and skills from visual art to other activities, thereby contributing to the development of children’s intelligence and the formation of creative personalities.

The cognitive function of art is realized both in the *artist – work of art* unit and the *work of art – subject of aesthetic perception* unit. It is not only a means of knowing, but also an object of knowledge.

It should be noted that art is not only an additional source of knowledge in relation to other channels of information and a means of its transmission, but also a means of cultivating a developed ability to perceive as well as aesthetic assimilation of reality, an ability to make sense of certain historical collisions and the psychological and other aspects essential for people of the reality they live in. As widely known, Brecht wrote that “by observing artists, one begins to learn from the artists’ ability to observe.” Artists teach us the art of perceiving reality.

Characteristic of the teaching and educational process of visual art is that, unlike other subjects, the conceptual apparatus is not exhausted in a given school year but is increased and unfolded gradually and spirally throughout the entire educational period.

As a conclusion, I would like to share the thesis of the experts from the Artis school, which was conferred the status of innovative school by the Ministry of Education: “Education in arts and foreign languages develops some of the most important skills of the 21st century: critical thinking, creative approach to problem solving, adaptability, emotional and social intelligence, and lifelong learning.”⁵ They further added that the focus of training should be on these skills, not on the professions of the past. The skills that art and languages develop are at the heart of innovation.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Fourth Industrial Revolution Report, 50% of jobs are already taken by robots, and over 5 million jobs will be lost in the next 5 years. Artificial intelligence will outperform humans at more and more tasks. Many activities will be fully or predominantly automated⁶.

Scientists from Yale and Oxford even predict that by 2026 computers will be writing better essays than humans. However, computers and robots will not be able to replace humans entirely as they interact with other humans, and in that interaction, they need to think critically and manage effectively. “These abilities are cultivated to a very large extent through arts and foreign language pursuits. And from an early age, too,” Artis explained⁵. According to Dr. Borislava Ivanova, “Balanced use of artificial intelligence technologies and promotion of interpersonal communication and social skills of adolescents are prerequisites for laying a sustainable foundation for establishing a stable relationship between innovation and traditions in Bulgarian education” (Ivanova 2023, p. 174).

The skills developed through art and languages are at the heart of innovation. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Skills Outlook 2017 report, people trained in arts create innovations. “Arts must be an integral part of countries’ innovation strategies,” the OECD concluded in the report⁷.

To understand the significance and meaning of art, let us recall Hippocrates’ catchphrase *Ars longa, vita brevis* or Life is short, art is eternal!

NOTES

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