

The background of the slide features a child's artwork. On the left, a portion of a dark brown wooden table is visible. To the right, a paint palette with various colors of paint (red, blue, yellow, green) is shown. The main part of the image is a colorful, abstract painting with large, irregular shapes in shades of blue, red, pink, and yellow. The text is overlaid on this artwork.

# From Art School to Basic Education in the Arts

Elisse Heinimaa

## Art Schools for Children and Young People

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Elisse Heinimaa  
Espoo School of Art  
elisse.heinimaa@kolumbus.fi

# From Art School to Basic Education in the Arts

## Abstract

The 1980s were a significant chapter in the history of Finnish art education. During this time a new school system, art schools for children and young people, was founded outside the collective all-round education school. Today, operation according to the original mission of the art school is also organized in educational institutes other than special art schools for children and young people (e.g. civic and workers' institutes). In the 1990s, the Finnish National Board of Education created a







concept called basic education in the arts that covers all fields of art. In my article I present the origin, reasons and consequences of art schools.

**Keywords:** art education, development, association, network, curriculum





## Art schools for children and young people in Finland – A new phenomenon in the field of art education

In the founding phase of art schools, over 25 years ago, a group of art teachers, artists and parents joined forces to start a grassroots-level

movement whose objective was to organize art education for children and young people. In the great school reform in the early 1970s when Finland switched its school system to a nine-year comprehensive school, the number of art subjects was sharply reduced in the curriculum.

As a result of the situation a state of will emerged, and since 1978 art teachers

started to speedily found art schools. Municipalities, individual persons, art associations, supporters' associations of art schools and artist organizations founded art schools. So, immediately from the beginning there were both municipal as well as private art schools. UNESCO's International Year of the Child was celebrated in 1979, and it forced decision-makers to listen to matters concerning children. An



economic boom prevailed in the country, and as a result municipalities were willing to fund new services.

### **Forward together!**

The operation was started in art schools with a clean slate, because the founders were, indeed, creating a school form that had never before existed. The founders had to rely on their own reason, experience and help of colleagues in all matters concerning school management. In municipalities the school and culture administration adopted a laissez-faire approach, allowing the persons planning of opening an art school. The purpose, objectives, contents, competences of teaching staff, premises and countless other questions were discussed here and there, and also together within a National seminar

in 1981 and within an association founded in 1982.

A development work group (Airasmaa, Grönholm, Ekman-Björkman, Hahtonen, Hassi, Saarelainen, Fredriksson), for art schools, founded in 1982, received a grant from the Ministry of Education from grants allocated to the promotion of children's culture; this grant generated a report titled Art schools for children and young people: Background and development

objectives (Airasmaa et al., 1985). The report notes that a coherent education system is missing in the field of fine art. "A child interested in art or a young person aiming at vocational education must move from a club, institute or one school to another, and the art education offered in them is not always neither target-oriented nor connected to the previous education (Airasmaa et al., 1985, p. 7)". The work group presented that a coherent education system should be created for fine art.



### **The task of the art school for children and young people and the act on basic education in the arts**

The above-mentioned development work group for art schools defined the art school for children and young people for the first time. "An art school for children and young people is an educational institute whose task is to offer



all-round art education that develops the overall personality for children and young people of 5-16 years of age, to support and broaden the art education offered in nursery schools and comprehensive schools as well as to create preconditions for vocational education of fine art and other visual arts. Art schools provide target-oriented basic education of fine art that progresses in accordance with the curriculum taking the level of development of the pupil into consideration as well as offer advanced special studies (Airasmaa et al., 1985, p. 75)".

The "all-round art education that develops the overall personality" mentioned in the definition referred to the fact that schools were ready to take in any child or young person that only had enthusiasm and motivation to engage in art as a pupil. Rather than developing a vocational education that would produce small starting artist,



education in the art school was considered to benefit any child or young person whether his/her life career was going to be in the field of art or not. The education provided was all-round education, and at the same time of such high quality that it "created preconditions" also later to possibly continue on to vocational studies of art. "Developing the overall personality" refers to an idea that engaging in art has an impact on the person as a whole – it is not a question of practicing only a

narrow ability or skill, but, among others, thinking, emotional life and observation will develop with the help of art. (See Airasmaa et al., 1985).

In the definition, support is given to art education in nursery schools and comprehensive schools. This was an important education-political definition of policy. It sent a message that art schools do not replace art education in nursery schools and

comprehensive schools, because the education in art schools does not concern the entire generation.

In the year 1983 art schools received their own budget within the state Budget, from which the government started to allocate discretionary state subsidy to the schools. The first Act on Basic Education in the Arts (463/1992) came into force on 27th May 1992. It was revised in 1998 (Act number 633/



1998).

The need for art education for children and young people also in other fields of art than fine art and music was anticipated in legislation and, thus, a concept “basic education in the arts” was created, which refers to education in different fields of art outside the comprehensive school in accordance with the Act and legislation.

The Act of 1988 defines basic education of art as follows: “Basic education in the arts is target-oriented education in different fields of art progressing in levels organised primarily for children and young people, which at the same time gives a pupil readiness to express him/herself and to seek his/her way into vocational and higher education in the relevant field of art (Act on the Basic Education of Art (1998) 21.8. 198/633).” The Act has been drawn up in the spirit of the first definition of the art school. The Act also requires that basic education in the arts be organised in accordance with the national core curriculum drawn up by the Finnish

National Board of Education. In 1992 when the first Act on Basic Education of Art came into force, consulting official of the Ministry of Education, Paula Tuomikoski, characterised basic education of art as an example of modern administration. “The most essential guidance tool in the basic education system is quality objective: education planned and given by a competent art teacher in accordance with the national core curriculum (Porna & Väyrynen, 1993, p. 13)”.

### **Spirit of the art school and development of the curriculum**

The development work group of the art schools for children and young people drew up a curriculum, which acted as a trend setting model for the curriculums of art schools until 1992. The work group stated cautiously: “Although a coherent curriculum was drawn up for art schools for children and young people the work group emphasises that the success of the operation of art schools depends essentially on the

education being renewing, experimental and enthusiastic. A possibility must be given for trial operation of art schools for children and young people. Co-operation among art education, specialists in pedagogics as well as creatively working artists will become more central in future (Airasmaa et al., 1985, p. 9)”.

The spirit of the art school can be described as a creative and experimental atmosphere that has inspired schools throughout the years. When resources of art education were continuously reduced in comprehensive schools, art schools were needed to create ideal conditions to provide art education. Enough time was required for education (at least 2x45 min./week/group), the size of the teaching groups needed to be small (10-12 pupils/group); professional working tools and materials, appropriate teaching premises, proper teaching tools as well as competent teachers were required. Within the limits of these boundary conditions it was possible to organize experimental education,

















in which a student's own thoughts and ideas could be taken into consideration.

Assertion of the status of art schools with the help of legislation required creation of collective bases of curriculum for all schools. In 1991 the Finnish Association of Art Schools for Children and Young People appointed a curriculum work group that drew up The Curriculum for Art Schools (1992) and proposed to the Finnish National Board of Education that it be the premise for the core curriculum for basic education in the arts. The Finnish National Board of Education, indeed, used the art schools' own curriculum as a basis for its work (Fredriksson, Hahtonen & Heinimaa, 1992).

The work groups appointed by the Finnish National Board of Education have three times (in 1993, 2002 and 2005) drawn up the national core curricula for basic education in the arts, which have since acted as a framework for municipal and school-specific curricula. The Finnish national core Curriculum (from now on FNCC) for the advanced syllabus of basic education in



the visual arts was completed in 2002, and the equivalent core curriculum was completed for general syllabus in 2005. During the year 2016 and 2017 the Finnish National Board of Education will complete the renewal of the core curricula.

In the core curriculum for advanced syllabus basic education of visual arts is characterized in a form true to the original spirit of the art school.

"- - - The need for artistic learning must derive from a pupil's own motivation, and a pupil must have an active role in studying and learning". "... In the education, inquiring and functional learning should be exploited alone and in interaction with others. The objective is that a pupil him/her-self sets problems, processes information and discusses and forms assumptions (FNCC, 2002, p. 9)".



"... Learning of visual skills and knowledge as well as an inquiring, problem-centered attitude toward learning and expression require

continuous interaction between the pupil, the teacher and the group. Observation, working and play must be the central work forms. A pupil's own experiences, skills, knowledge as well as interest are the bases of education. The joy of working and learning should be strived to maintain with choices of subjects and themes (FNCC, 2002, p. 10)". The chapter of introduction to art stresses that "education must be creative" as well as "inquiring and problem-centered" (see FNCC. 2002, p. 16).

Along with the new curriculum art schools started pupil assessment and the possibility to have a final assessment. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine how the pedagogic thinking in art schools has changed and developed over the years. In what ways the education is renewing, experimental and enthusiastic today? And does the original spirit of the art school still stay alive in the 2010s?



The article is abridged and revised. The original article (English version) can be downloaded on web page <http://youngart.fi/in-english/> The Finnish version was originally published in Finnish in Stylus art education magazine in the year 2006.

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