

## ARTS EDUCATION IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL AS SPACE OF CHILD'S MENTAL WELL-BEING

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**Abstract:** *The paper describes educational means affecting a child's mental and social well-being within the framework of compulsory education, especially in the first part of primary education. It gives specific possibilities that arts education offers for the creation of well-being. It sets the positive climate requirement as an essential prerequisite for the attainment of arts education goals.*

**Key words:** *Framework Educational Programme for Primary Education (FEP PE), arts education, child's health, self-fulfilment through the arts, mental well-being, social safety.*

The goals that education sets for itself respond to the needs of the society. The goal of the present-day concept of education is to equip children with competences for learning, problem solving, as well as with communicative, social, interpersonal, civic and labour competences (FEP PE, p. 14 ). That will allow them to function in rapidly changing life conditions. The content of the curricular document is structured into **educational areas**, which allows for a greater content integration and the mutual interpenetration of the contents of different subjects and even different areas. The uniqueness of every child needs to be respected, and for that reason support is given to the development of his/her individual abilities, characteristics, knowledge and skills. The curricula reform does not automatically entail a transformation of the school. It is made up of people who either implement the reform or approach it formally, without essentially influencing the existing concept of tuition.

The school should cultivate the entire personality of the student, and should do it in an environment that will also contribute to the child's mental well-being. To quote O. Čacka (2000, p. 5) - "*there are indisputable analogies between work in education and work in plant growing, in at least that both are "conditioned by multiple factors" consisting of not only the quality of "seeds, soil or the gardener's skills", but also of a number of various factors that that are difficult to control ("pests, weather, storms, etc.). Thus, advancement is promoted by not only "moisture, warmth and light", but*

*undoubtedly also by gradual enhancement of resilience.*” And it is the enhancement of “resilience” that can, in compulsory education, be related to the goals of the Man and Health educational area, and, in more general meaning, to the process of instruction in which some specific instruments are implemented.

If man’s health is interpreted according to the FEP PE (2007, p. 72) as a “*balanced state of physical, mental and societal well-being*”, the school should offer conditions that will generate such “well-being”. For that reason, it is necessary to first deal with aspects that affect the child’s health in school and which can realistically be influenced.

Our attention will mainly focus on primary education. A child coming to the school to start compulsory school attendance is full of expectations and assumptions about what it is like to be a pupil. He gradually frees himself from the influence and safety of his family, begins to get to know other authorities. The child’s daily routine changes, he now has new duties, and gains new social experience. Contrary to the pre-school days spent mainly in the family circle, he now finds himself in a new environment among people he does not know. He is forced to adjust to many new situations, get accustomed to new relationships. Children will cope individually with each unfamiliar situation. If a teacher looks for ways how to make it easier for children to adjust to school, he may opt for “bridges” from the pre-school to the school education age. One of them may also be the arts education. In the pre-school age, the child discovers the charm of creation, spontaneously captures his personal experiences, and projects his individual knowledge and experience into art forms. At that age, self-fulfilment through the arts is a playful activity for children and it is associated with pleasant experiences. The author agrees with the opinion expressed by J. Slavík (2007, p.166) who believes that “*the quality of experiences and the way in which we accept or express them to a large extent determines how we manage our life and to what extent we are satisfied with it*”. Creating something even in the process of compulsory education should be a pleasant experience for children. If, e.g., a child is learning new art techniques, he should become a small “discoverer” amazed at, and enjoying, the process of creation. Arts education should offer art games and experiments to children. Their role, however, is not to only “sweeten” the stay at school for the children, the game as a teaching method should always point to some educational contents.

Art works may also become an important statement for which the child often lacks the right words.

To teach pupils find visual representations for what they experience is, according to J. Slavík (2007, p. 166), one of the most important tasks of art study programmes. It is an area where, according to the above author, education and arts meet with care for mental health. Arts education often deals with sensitive topics that may reveal the child’s not only positive experience and experiences. They may, e.g., be connected with the life of their family. It is therefore necessary that the teacher very sensitively responded not only to children’s visual communications but also to their refusal to work according to an accurate description, or to comment on their own work. If the teacher reduces his evaluation criteria to externalities only, to the mastering of the creative language, completion, elaborateness, etc., he may deeply hurt the soul of the child that grapples with the content of the theme. Teachers thus should sensitively manage the “testing of communication effects” (one of subject matter areas of arts education in the FEP PE) to prevent ridicule of the child and his art work. I hasten to add that children should learn to control and accept

subjectivity as part of both creation and reflection processes, in the case of sensitive topics they should find support in teachers to prevent the above situation.

It is not uncommon in school practice that teachers insist on the assigned format, on copying a model with which the children's works are then compared. Any "deviations" are considered errors that deserve negative evaluation, which, consequently means that they get poor grades. That is contrary to creative artistic solutions that should be a matter-of-course in arts education. According to many authors (e.g. Jurčová, Kusá, Kováčová 1994), promoting creativity in individuals which should, generally speaking, be one of priorities in education "*depends (besides personal aptitudes) primarily on the pro- or anti-creative social climate*" (in O. Čačka 2000, p. 173). A criticism or refusal of the originality of an artistic statement may mar the child's "creative courage". To arts education, it introduces fear of the child to come up with ideas, to test something new, to execute the assigned task in a unique manner. For some children, experience with their teachers' incompetent interferences with their work lead to life-long traumas and feelings of distrust in their own creative ability. If a child is exposed to teachers' moods, must cope with their injustice, lack of understanding, the result may be the child's reduced attentiveness, which may impair his performance and be the cause of not only poor academic results but also of the nervous system impairment (O. Čačka, 2000, p. 174).

Arts education may offer one more enriching nook for the children. Specializing in art therapy, i.e. the therapeutic use of art making, J. Šicková emphasizes that "*the creative process is usually a valve for its creator, it makes internal purification and fulfilment possible*" (2002, p. 22). The present-day arts education offers, among others, a different concept that is oriented at understanding the pupil - the creator and perceiver of the work of art. The concept is called animocentric. According to J. David who pursues a career in spiritual and sensory education, artistic work is a means through which "*we discover our internal psychological space and connect it with the universe. In this way we also discover our "internal shape"*" (J. Slavík 1997, p. 165). From the quotation it follows that the attention is centred on the meaning of life, individual and of all the mankind, and care of spiritual aspects of human existence. Spiritual and sensory education is associated with teaching activities of M. Pohnerová. In this concept, sensory perception is considered a source of intensely lived experience, the importance of artistic form is lessened by the expression. With his artephiletics, also J. Slavík professed his adherence to the animocentric concept. The concept of arts education represented by H. Babyrádová, who focuses on symbols in child art and on rituals in the arts education context, also falls under the same category. It is characteristic for the above concepts of arts education that they stimulate experiential art although they place emphasis on different components of creation (construction, meaning, expression). They promote a child's self-fulfilment setting out from his uniqueness. The ambient of mental well-being in which thus conceived arts education takes place is a necessary precondition.

The school should be a safe space not only for children that present no problems but also for pupils with poor academic performance or those who have to cope with personal or health problems. Here, too, arts education can play an important role. Children experiencing difficulties in subjects where emphasis is placed on rational cognition should get an opportunity to reach satisfaction and self-fulfilment in other areas of education. Arts education offers children the opportunity to "excel" in the space of sub-

jective imagination. Thus it offers them conditions that promote their self-confidence, whereby the children become aware of their abilities.

If we look farther afield at activities that, from a broader perspective, affect children's health such as good posture, relaxing physical activities, they are often associated only with physical training in school practice. We should note that arts education also offers activities that take place "outside the school desk", or even outside the classroom. If children are, e.g., given an opportunity to choose where to do creative work and with whom, we may expect that their creative work will be much more relaxed, and the well-being will also contribute to the creation of many original works. Pro-creative well-being may further be enhanced by listening to music or reading. Arts education linked to physical activity and stay outside the school may find inspiration in visual arts. Creation in action brings many experiences to children, naturally leads them to cooperation in solving artistic problems, teaches them to sensitively perceive the environment which they make unique by their intervention rather than devastating it. Children may move around relatively freely, enjoying their stay outdoors, outside the school space.

The examples outlined here confirm that arts education may become not only space of children's mental well-being but, at the same time, it interprets well-being as a sine qua non for the implementation of its formative and educational goals.

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## VÝTVARNÁ VÝCHOVA NA ZÁKLADNÍ ŠKOLE JAKO PROSTOR DUŠEVNÍ POHODY DÍTĚTE

**Abstrakt:** Příspěvek prezentuje prostředky výuky, které mají vliv na stav duševní a sociální pohody dítěte v rámci povinného vzdělávání, především na prvním stupni ZŠ. Ukazuje konkrétní možnosti, které pro utváření pohody nabízí výtvarná výchova. Vymezuje požadavek pozitivního klimatu jako nezbytného předpokladu realizace cílů výtvarné výchovy.

**Klíčová slova:** RVP ZV, výtvarná výchova, zdraví dítěte, výtvarná seberealizace, duševní pohoda, sociální bezpečí