

Original Paper

The Position and Role of Artistic Literacy in Undergraduate Elementary Education Major

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Abstract

Artistic literacy is one of the key components of implementing quality education in schools, and art education serves as the primary pathway to improve the artistic literacy of undergraduate elementary school teachers. The core objective of art education is to cultivate aesthetic creativity. Currently, the state of art education in rural primary schools in the western regions of China varies. As a specialized undergraduate major in elementary education aimed at nurturing new teaching professionals, it is important to determine the goals of artistic literacy and emphasize the position and role of art education in fostering students' comprehensive abilities and qualities. This study focuses on the positioning of artistic literacy in undergraduate elementary education majors and explores the desired artistic literacy for students.

Keywords

artistic literacy, undergraduate level, elementary education, positioning and role

1. Introduction

Creativity is an intellectual quality, primarily a thinking quality, with imaginative thinking playing a predominant role and often manifested in the form of intuitive thinking. As we know, art education plays an irreplaceable role in cultivating imaginative and intuitive thinking abilities. Therefore, it is easy to understand its significant importance in nurturing creative individuals. Art education is one of the main components of implementing quality education in schools and serves as an important pathway to improve the artistic literacy of undergraduate elementary teachers. Therefore, it is essential to consider how to implement art education in the undergraduate elementary education major, how to integrate aesthetic education throughout art instruction, and how to cultivate the artistic literacy and aesthetic abilities of undergraduate students majoring in elementary education. This will contribute to

their comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, physical fitness, and artistic pursuits, enabling them to possess good cultural cultivation, high comprehensive qualities, and abilities. Hence, it is crucial to give attention and conduct research on these aspects when offering art courses in the undergraduate elementary education major.

2. Method

2.1 Survey Method. Investigation of the Current Status of Art Education in Rural Primary Schools in Western China

Currently, the state of art education in primary schools in China shows disparities between the eastern and western regions, as well as between urban and rural areas. The current status of art education in rural western primary schools is a source of concern, with varying levels of quality. The key issues can be summarized as follows:

2.1.1 Lack of Teacher Development in Art Education

In rural primary schools, there is a severe shortage of art teachers, with low educational backgrounds and poor teaching capabilities. Although some township primary schools offer art classes, they lack specialized teachers, resulting in the assignment of teachers who have only minimal understanding or no prior exposure to art education. These teachers lack knowledge of art theory and are unable to demonstrate proper drawing techniques. Taking Yunnan's art education teacher resources as an example, "In 2001, there were 217,658 full-time teachers in primary schools in the province, with only 15.13% having a higher education degree or above. The qualification rate of full-time primary school teachers was 4.4 percentage points lower than the national average, ranking 28th nationwide. The qualification rates for specialized teachers in physical education, music, art, and labor skills were even lower. In the same year, a total of 38,731 substitute teachers were hired in primary and secondary schools across the province, a decrease of 3,520 compared to 2000, accounting for 11.58% of the total number of full-time teachers. Substitute teachers were mainly distributed in rural schools, particularly in mountainous areas and areas with ethnic minority populations, where substitute teachers mostly lacked the necessary qualifications." Currently, a significant proportion of substitute teachers in rural areas still exist, and teachers with limited knowledge of art instruct students to copy textbook drawings, resulting in unorganized and laughable artworks. These phenomena have had a negative impact on consolidating the achievements of the new curriculum reform.

2.1.2 Teaching Methods and Teaching Philosophies Are Outdated

Due to insufficient awareness and an incomplete evaluation system, education authorities and teachers at all levels have retained traditional teaching methods and philosophies. These conservative teaching concepts and methods seriously hinder the development of art education. This is mainly manifested in the following aspects. The educational notion of distinguishing between "primary" and "secondary" subjects: Due to the traditional education system's emphasis on exam-oriented education and the pursuit of high enrollment rates, most people, from government and education authorities to school

leaders, parents, and teachers, have a biased perception of subjects. Courses such as music, physical education, and art are often undervalued due to their “secondary” status. In schools where these subjects are offered, they are often sacrificed for the so-called “primary” subjects during critical periods, making it impossible to implement art education systematically and with proper planning. The educational notion of distinguishing between “primary” and “secondary” subjects, combined with a lack of emphasis on art courses from school leadership and lenient evaluations, directly contribute to an “get it over with” and “casual play with students” attitude among art teachers.

2.1.3 Limited and Outdated Teaching Methods

Traditional classroom teaching methods, along with “rote learning” and “passive receptivity” teaching approaches, are widely present. In actual teaching, there are very few or almost no teaching methods that can genuinely improve teachers’ teaching skills and practical management abilities while being lively, interactive, and practical. Even with the increasing popularity of modern teaching methods like computer multimedia instruction, television teaching, audio recordings, and slides, many teachers still rely on traditional methods like textbooks, chalk, and blackboards. These outdated and backward teaching methods greatly reduce the effectiveness of the teaching process. Some art teachers may genuinely want to teach art well, but due to a lack of fundamental knowledge, they can only have students copy existing works. This monotonous teaching approach turns students into mere “photocopiers,” unable to cultivate their creativity. Additionally, this type of teaching significantly disconnects from the realities of rural students’ lives and deviates from the principle that “art originates from life.” In such teaching environments, students can only passively accept knowledge.

2.1.4 The Lack of Art Teaching Facilities

Many rural primary schools lack and have outdated educational facilities, especially when it comes to dedicated art teaching aids. The majority of rural schools do not have dedicated art classrooms or student art exhibition halls. Furthermore, there is a severe shortage of comprehensive teaching equipment, such as handicraft studios and multimedia devices. Regardless of the subject, students are confined to one classroom, and art teaching tools are limited to a single art textbook, a piece of paper, and a pen. The art teaching process often simplifies to mere copying, and activities involving hands-on crafts, art appreciation, and comprehensive exploration are rarely conducted. This lack of facilities hinders normal teaching activities. Many subjects face challenges in meeting teaching objectives due to the inadequate teaching facilities, let alone achieving educational modernization and informatization. Limited access to information further hampers educational research activities and leaves remote rural schools with minimal scientific research engagement. These factors contribute to a stagnant teaching approach among rural teachers, who often adhere rigidly to traditional practices, remain content with the status quo, and lack innovation in their work.

2.1.5 The Negative Influence of Parental Beliefs on Art Education

Family education has a significant influence on the development of school education. The economic and cultural backwardness in rural areas leads to a narrow understanding of art education among

parents. This is manifested in several ways: Firstly, there is a lack of comprehension regarding art teaching and creative activities, with such activities often considered as distractions from serious academic pursuits. Secondly, there is a backwardness in aesthetic concepts of art. Many parents of rural students have lower levels of education, and they tend to evaluate artistic creations based on their realism rather than artistic expression. This hinders the development of students' creative abilities. Thirdly, parents do not provide adequate financial support for learning materials. The awareness of educational investment among rural farmers is relatively weak, and students have limited funds to purchase necessary learning materials, including basic art supplies.

2.1.6 The One-Sidedness of Teachers and Students' Understanding of Curriculum Resources

The textbook has always been the main curriculum resource in China's school education. The prolonged and exclusive use of textbooks often leads to a closed-off perspective, where many rural areas perceive textbooks as the sole curriculum resource. When it comes to developing and utilizing curriculum resources, the only consideration is ordering and using textbooks. Backward teaching ideologies and a lack of art teaching facilities have limited schools in terms of curriculum resources, including their main sources, foundations, contents, and conditions, preventing the formation of an organic whole. For example, many schools organize activities such as spring outings and tree planting. However, these activities are often limited and lack variety, failing to effectively utilize these opportunities to develop art education resources and enrich art teaching activities.

2.2 *Analytical Method. Analyzing and Studying the Position and Role of Art Education in the Cultivation of Students' Comprehensive Abilities and Qualities*

The unique stage of primary school students' growth demands a focus on art education. Human understanding originates from observation, and within human perception, the visual sense plays a crucial role. Over 80% of information is obtained through visual means. The nature of art education as a subject is precisely essential in training visual perception. The special stage of primary students' psychological and intellectual growth requires art education. In primary education, the knowledge and skills of art enrich our teaching language and improve our educational capabilities. Additionally, when using multimedia courseware in teaching, the usage of images, graphics, and videos requires a foundation in art knowledge to achieve optimal teaching effectiveness. The use of teaching aids and simplified drawings can enrich our teaching methods, resolve teaching difficulties, and better stimulate students' inquiry, thereby improving the quality of teaching.

2.2.1 Artistic Literacy Is an Essential Quality for Students Majoring in Elementary Education

In June 1999, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council held the third National Education Work Conference since the start of reform and opening up. They issued the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education" (referred to as the "Decision" below), which provided guidance for constructing a socialist educational system with Chinese characteristics in the 21st century. The "Decision" stated that implementing quality education

means comprehensively implementing the Party's educational policies, with the fundamental aim of improving the overall quality of the population. It emphasizes focusing on cultivating students' innovative spirit and practical abilities, nurturing "socialist builders and successors with ideals, morals, culture, discipline, and comprehensive development in ethics, intelligence, physicality, and aesthetics." The Party Central Committee and the State Council placed a high importance on arts education, making it an important aspect of implementing quality education comprehensively. The "Decision" also set specific goals and directions for our undergraduate elementary education program, raising new and higher requirements for elementary school teachers with undergraduate qualifications in the 21st century. Firstly, they should possess noble sentiments, lofty character, and broad-mindedness. Secondly, they must have solid professional knowledge and a reasonable knowledge structure. Thirdly, they should have excellent cultural and artistic literacy, as well as comprehensive abilities, including strong practical, creative, and aesthetic capabilities. Fourthly, they should be proficient in using modern educational technology for teaching and scientific research, guided by advanced educational concepts and ideas.

2.2.2 From the Comprehensive Promotion of Quality Education and the Need to Cultivate Talents Adapted to the Modernization of the 21st Century, art Education Also Plays a Positive Role

The advent of the information age and consumerism emphasizes the importance of art education. Film, internet, advertising, and photography, various images saturate our lives, indicating that visual information is the primary means of communication. People's lives are influenced by fashion trends and consumerism, but they also face the fact that the virtual world seems more realistic than real life. Only by immersing oneself in the global cultural environment and possessing a higher aesthetic discernment can individuals find healthier ways of life. The era requires art education, the era requires the deepening of art education. Within our education system, art education has been effective in training visual perception because art itself is a form of art that directly appeals to our visual senses. In art education, students benefit significantly in perceiving the form and value of beauty, directly promoting intellectual development, fully reflecting the value of implementing aesthetic education.

To meet the needs of primary education reforms and developments in the 21st century, art education is necessary in the undergraduate elementary education major. The comprehensive, interconnected, and interdisciplinary nature of the undergraduate elementary education major requires the inclusion of art education. In recent years, as educational reforms have deepened, primary education nationwide has gradually implemented small-class teaching. This places higher demands on teachers responsible for specialized instruction: they must not only handle language, mathematics, and foreign language teaching but also music, art, physical education, science, and computer instruction. This places new and higher standards on the teaching in our undergraduate elementary education major: the students we cultivate must possess richer comprehensive qualities to meet the challenges of significant developments in education and deepen reforms in primary education in the 21st century. In this regard, art education assumes the task of cultivating students' artistic literacy and skills that cannot be replaced

by other subjects. Clearly, our art courses are indispensable and must be strengthened as a foundational and compulsory subject in the undergraduate elementary education major.

3. Result

The objectives and positioning of artistic literacy

3.1 Possessing a High Level of Art Appreciation Ability

In the undergraduate elementary education major, students should have a higher level of art appreciation ability compared to primary school teachers who did not major in art and other non-art majors in general universities. They should have a deeper and broader understanding of the rules of art appreciation, basic art knowledge, methods and rules of art creation and form, and basic knowledge of artistic creation. They should also have a more acute appreciation of artworks and a broader understanding of the cultural aspects related to art. This highlights the characteristics of “university students” and the comprehensiveness of elementary education.

Therefore, while learning and mastering artistic skills is necessary, a greater emphasis should be placed on the comprehensive artistic cultivation, including the ability to perceive, experience, and appreciate art. The training in artistic skills and techniques should be conducted on the basis of developing good artistic perception. The fundamental goal of our art education is to foster an appreciation of art. Regardless of how advanced artistic skills and techniques may be, if a student has a narrow perspective, low interest, and a dull perception, their artistic literacy will not be up to par.

To cultivate students’ good artistic cultivation and healthy aesthetic perspectives, it is important for them to have a strong artistic perception and understanding. A good artistic aesthetic ability can only be achieved on the basis of a solid artistic perception ability. It is difficult to imagine that someone who lacks even a basic perception of form, space, structure, and color can truly appreciate an artwork, even with knowledge of certain appreciation methods and techniques. Appreciation methods and techniques are predominantly rational, while perception is more intuitive and subjective. A good artistic aesthetic literacy requires an organic integration of both. Therefore, cultivating a strong artistic perception is key to enabling students to achieve a good artistic aesthetic education.

A higher level of art appreciation ability is required. With a certain level of artistic perception, students must also have a broad artistic perspective and a good grasp of the methods and rules of appreciating artistic knowledge. This will enable them to enhance their cognitive understanding from a perceptive level to a level of thoughts, concepts, and cultural refinement, and genuinely possess a high level of aesthetic appreciation. To achieve this, we include courses such as art appreciation, exploring the principles of art, and an introduction to art artistry. Furthermore, in courses that focus on practical skills such as sketching and color, we also emphasize the organic integration of appreciation knowledge to achieve these objectives. Although we are not training specialized art teachers and most students can only reach a basic level in terms of artistic performance skills, this does not mean they can only achieve “basic” levels in terms of artistic aesthetic abilities and perception.

First-rate art critics are not necessarily individuals with exceptional artistic skills. They may even possess only a basic level of skills. This indicates that in terms of aesthetic perception and understanding, we should strive for excellence. This will allow us to reach a higher standard in the undergraduate level and emphasize the characteristics of being “university students”. While we may not achieve the same level of professionalism in art, as undergraduate students majoring in elementary education, we should aim for greater depth and breadth. This is due to the “comprehensiveness” and “general knowledge” required in elementary education. The requirements of this profession demand teachers to possess extensive knowledge in order to truly excel. Otherwise, we will be unable to address the various issues encountered in primary education. Art appreciation is fundamentally a humanities course. To achieve a higher level of appreciation ability, it is necessary to not only understand the necessary methods, principles, and knowledge of appreciation but also possess a broad understanding of humanistic literacy. The process of learning art appreciation itself enhances humanistic literacy. It is a process of using humanistic literacy to improve one’s character, soul, and moral cultivation while also participating in the “inheritance of civilization”.

Therefore, we mainly achieve these objectives through the following courses. These courses enhance students’ art appreciation abilities and improve their overall artistic literacy. Through these courses, our aim is to systematically master the basic methods and principles of art appreciation, with a clear understanding of its objectives and significance. Students should be able to demonstrate a higher level of appreciation ability for classical artworks from different cultures and be able to consciously apply the learned methods and principles to analyze and appreciate artworks.

3.2 Possessing Good Artistic Expression Abilities

3.2.1 Ability in Sketching and Color Sketching

Sketching and color sketching are the foundations of all artistic creation. They are important tools to enhance our observational skills, sensitivity, and expressive abilities towards objects. The observation methods in sketching include observing from a holistic perspective, which involves observing the object as a whole from multiple angles. This allows for comprehensive comparisons and correct understanding. This method is the fundamental observation technique throughout the process of painting. Comparative observation helps establish the correct relationship between various factors of the object. Three-dimensional observation involves examining the object from multiple angles to determine the spatial position and distance between various objects, thus ensuring the accurate representation of the object’s three-dimensional spatial relationships from any angle. Understanding observation involves simplifying the object to its simplest geometric forms, providing the initial motivation for understanding the object. Artistic observation, as painting is not simply imitation, allows for individual unique experiences and perceptions when observing the same object. Sometimes these experiences and perceptions are difficult to express through language, and can only be conveyed through the unique visual language of painting. Learning to perceive things with an artistic perspective is essential. In general, the observation method starts from the whole, then moves to the details, and

finally returns to the whole. In the teaching of form and color, the purpose is not only to acquire necessary skills but to train students' perceptual abilities, thus enhancing their overall artistic appreciation.

3.2.2 Primary Drawing Skills Focused on Simple Sketches

Mainly used for various drawings in subject teaching (such as hanging charts in language classes, geometric shapes in mathematics and science), as well as drawing and modeling in various promotional materials. The main methods to achieve these objectives include sketching, en plein air drawing, color theory, simple sketching, Chinese painting, etc. The basic requirement is for students to be able to accurately and proficiently draw various commonly used drawings in primary education, especially a large number of simple sketches and cartoon styles, and possess basic creative abilities.

3.2.3 Handcraft Skills Focused on Paper Art and Clay Modeling

Manual dexterity is extremely important in primary education because it often requires the creation of visual aids (such as paper-based models, masks, and clay sculptures) to optimize teaching. Among these skills, paper art is undoubtedly the most widely used, convenient, and effective modeling skill, followed by clay modeling. Regular use of modeling clay allows for the creation of various forms. Therefore, we have established mandatory and elective courses for paper art and clay modeling to enhance students' learning and mastery of the basic methods and principles of handmade creations. In addition, courses with a strong hands-on nature such as collage, recycling and design, and traditional handicrafts are included. These courses are also popular among primary students, enriching their creativity and imagination, further enhancing their manual dexterity training, and equipping them with more diverse and lively artistic skills for future art and other teaching activities. This enhances both the interest and effectiveness of teaching.

3.2.4 Practical Artistic Skills Focused on Patterns

Primarily used for various forms of promotion (posters, collages, bulletin boards, etc.) and for decorating stages, classrooms, school campuses, and living spaces. These artistic creations accomplish the goals of both "beauty" and "art education". These objectives are achieved through teaching courses such as pattern design, blackboard design, artistic lettering design, graphic composition, and blown plastic and paper block printing (more focused on decoration).

3.2.5 Other Abilities

The aforementioned artistic skills are targeted at all students, with the overall goal of being able to apply these skills effectively in assisting the teaching of other subjects. A small number of students with special talents (participating in art activities) should be able to reach the level of basic competence in teaching primary school art.

3.3 *Acquiring the Ability to Teach Art in Primary School, Especially in Lower Grade Levels*

In the undergraduate elementary education major, students not only need to possess a high level of aesthetic literacy and essential art skills, but many also need to have the teaching knowledge and abilities required for teaching art in lower grade levels of primary school. A small number of students

with artistic talents should possess the teaching knowledge and abilities needed to deliver complete art lessons in primary schools. They should also have preliminary research skills in art education.

4. Discussion

Art education is one of the main components of implementing quality education in schools and a key pathway to improving the artistic literacy of undergraduate primary school teachers. The core objective of art education is to cultivate aesthetic creativity. Currently, the status of art education in rural western primary schools varies widely. For students in the undergraduate elementary education major, who are being trained to become primary school teachers, they should have a good artistic cultivation, healthy aesthetic outlook, and a certain level of artistic expression abilities. On this foundation, they need to acquire the essential artistic skills and the ability to organize artistic activities in primary education. They should have preliminary knowledge and abilities to guide art education in primary schools. Students with exceptional artistic talents should have higher abilities to guide art education in primary schools and possess a certain level of reflective inquiry skills in art teaching.

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