

Development of Artistic Giftedness in School Students Within the Framework of Russian Education (in the 1920–40s)



Natalia Fomina, Leyla Pechko, Tatiana Koptseva

Abstract: *The article looks at the experience of identification and development of artistically gifted students in the framework of Soviet education in the 1920–1940s. The issue is examined in historical retrospective. The authors focus on the identification of children who are gifted in the sphere of visual arts. The research is based on the international collection of children’s drawings (1896–2017) at the FSBSI “Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education”. As a result of the research, the authors determined the preferable age for providing occupational guidance to children who are motivated for artistic creative activity. In addition, methods for identification of artistic giftedness have been suggested.*

Keywords: *artistic giftedness, school student, art education, artistic and creative development, visual art, children’s drawing contest, exhibition of children’s drawings, teenager.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian system of art education consists of two main components: compulsory (the educational sphere “art and literature”) and supplementary that includes clubs, studios, extracurricular activities at school, art schools and museum pedagogy. General education institutions are not always aimed at the identification of artistic giftedness, artistic and creative development of children who are motivated for artistic activities [1]. As a result, a great number of children with artistic and creative inclinations are left out of the scope of educational guidance. At the same time, there is a widespread view about universal artistic giftedness, which most often manifests itself in the sphere of drawing, since the majority of young children like drawing, sculpting or constructing.

At the turn of the 21st century, a group of leading Russian psychologists developed a practical framework of giftedness [2].

They rely on the concept “children’s giftedness” that implies emergence and vanishing of manifestations of personal qualities that characterize the development of a child throughout childhood. “Under the influence of changes in age, education, cultural norms, type of family upbringing, etc., the signs of children’s giftedness may fade away” [2].

Considering artistic giftedness as a talent for different kinds of art, A.A. Melik-Pashaev claims that it is based on “a special participating attitude to phenomena of life and striving for embodying the value content of one’s personal life experience in expressive artistic images. Apart from that, giftedness in a narrower domain, such as music, painting and other kinds of art, is developed under the influence of strongly pronounced uniqueness of the sensory sphere, imagination, emotional experiences, etc. [2].

The issue of children’s artistic and creative development was raised by art historians, artists, teachers and psychologists as early as at the beginning of the 20th century, when the traditional naturalistic styles of art gave way to the quest for new expressive forms and people were trying to find forerunners of future art in children’s drawings and literary works.

The outstanding psychologists A.V. Bakushinsky [3, 4], L.S. Vygotsky [5], their students and followers were trying to identify artistic priorities in the course of development of a personality, starting from early childhood to adolescence, in order to develop all natural abilities of a person.

It can be assumed that successful development of gifted children can be provided by a conceptual connection between art teaching and family upbringing in the context of modern art focused on the establishment of conditions for creative self-fulfillment of a school student in a particular type of art.

The objective of this research is the actualization of historically tested methods of identification and development of artistic giftedness in children in the framework of continuous art education, including family, that implies an interconnection between compulsory classes (art classes at school) and extracurricular classes (clubs, studios and art schools).

Research tasks:

Analysis of the historical experience of development of artistic giftedness of school students within the framework of Russian education;

Identification of specific features of artistic development of children that are motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts;

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Drawing up recommendations for teachers and parents for identification and providing psychological support to children that are motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research base: The international collection of children's drawings (1896–2017) at the FSBSI "Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education". The collection includes drawings by children and teenagers who won contests that were held in the 1930–1940s (5,000 storage units), individual collections of drawings made over a decade by children who were born in the 1920s and later became artists (215 storage units). A total of 5,215 drawings were analyzed in the course of the research.

Research methods:

the retrospective method of studying the artistic development of children that are motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts;

the integral artistic and pedagogical analysis of a student's work as a "text" that allows eliciting maximum information about its author, their teachers, researchers and life in general;

the biographic method that helps to reconstruct the development path of a gifted child from the first manifestations of motivation for artistic creative activities to the emergence of their professional identity.

III. RESULTS

Analysis of the practices of the Russian art education has shown that systematic art education of children motivated for creative artistic activity should be started in their adolescence.

Specific features of the artistic development of children that are motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts have been identified:

Early development and a wide cultural outlook;

Presence of aesthetic preferences expressed in favorite topics, characters, plots as well as clearly pronounced features of the graphic language;

A high degree of motivation encouraged by favorable conditions created by the family and teachers.

As a rule, students that achieve the highest levels of success are those who study at general education institutions and within the system of supplementary education according to study programs based on the integral framework of artistic and creative education.

IV. DISCUSSION

The issue of identification of giftedness in children became a subject of studies during the establishment of specialized art education. The first practices of identification of artistic giftedness took place at the Educatory College that was a part of the Imperial Academy of Arts from 1762 to 1840 and worked with children from 6 to 15 years old. Artistic giftedness was evaluated according to students' academic performance. The academic program included general education subjects and drawing, which involved copying of samples. Pupils also studied various crafts — it was mainly

done to keep busy those who did not show abilities for drawing [6, 7].

The famous architect V.I. Bazhenov, who became the vice president of the Academy in 1799, noticed the inappropriateness of the program for the age of students. He presented a report to the Emperor that contained the analysis of reasons why "the Academy cannot produce the expected results". Bazhenov suggested closing the Educatory College and discontinue the admission of young children to the Academy since their artistic abilities could hardly be identified. Instead, he offered to admit teenagers that were already literate and necessarily "showing successes coupled with good nature that will provide willingness and inclination" to art [6].

The main conclusions from the first experiences of Russian education are as follows: children's motivation for systematic artistic activities manifests itself during adolescence at the earliest; the effectiveness of art classes is provided by general culture and education shaping the personality of students.

In the first half of the 19th century, two art schools were established in provincial regions of Russia: the Arzamas School of Painting founded by A.V. Stupin, which existed for 60 years (1802–1862) and the School of Painting in the village of Safonkovo, Tver guberniya founded by A.G. Venetsianov (the second quarter of the 19th century). Both schools were managed by graduates of the Academy of Arts and admitted teenage and adolescent children of peasant serfs. Their experience showed the effectiveness of a special artistic environment for the development of children motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts. A.G. Venetsianov tried to formulate the essence of artistic talent. He believed that an artist should have "a spiritual feeling, which is quite scarcely spread by nature". Both artists who founded these art schools relied on the method of individualized teaching depending on creative abilities and genre preferences of the student.

Throughout the 19th century, the academic system prevailed in the majority of art schools and colleges. General art classes compulsory for all students included four courses:

- a) basic drawing;
- b) drawing plaster cast heads;
- c) drawing plaster cast figures;
- d) life drawing of human figures.

Simplified versions of this study program were used to teach drawing in gymnasiums.

At the beginning of the 20th century, private art schools were established by the Rerbergs, K. Yuon and I. Mashkov that restored the traditions of "apprenticeship schools". Besides, there were art studios that gave students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the current art trends. Correspondingly, the methods of evaluation of giftedness were also changing and implied that students would explore new aspects of art.

The foundations for identification of artistic giftedness among children who do not study at specialized art schools were laid in the period of universal interest in children's creativity at the turn of the 20th century.



The studies carried out by A.V. Bakushinsky showed and proved the necessity of “exhausting each stage and each form (of child’s development — the authors) to the end, to the utmost completeness of its life contents. A child should go through each stage at a regular pace, without slowing down or acceleration, disharmonious shifts towards a certain specialization that is too early or refinement of particular abilities and functions at the expense of others” [4]. Teachers and psychologists started to believe in the “wings of a child’s imagination” (G. Kerschenshteiner) that break free only when a creative environment is established in the class.

In the 1920s, special emphasis was placed on the personal quality of imagination that was tested in classes by “imaginative”, or decorative, drawing. The ability to perceive the world as a whole through the diversity of events taking place in the everyday life of children and adults manifested itself vividly when students drew compositions: the ones they observed, remembered or imagined. Due to age peculiarities, it seemed to young children (under 10) easier than life drawing of plaster cast figures [8].

In the 1920s, academic programs in art for general education schools were based on profound psychological research that was carried out during experimental classes, the results of which can still be found in the collections of the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education. These data were used by the outstanding psychologist L.S. Vygotsky in his work “Imagination and creativity in childhood” [5] first published in 1930. He believed that some strengths can be instilled in a person during adolescence. Primarily, it refers to the development of imagination, which Vygotsky viewed as “the basis for any creative activity” [5]. He proved that the degree of development of imagination depends on the experience of the person. Based on this premise he drew a complex dependence of creativity in children, teenagers and adolescents on their experience and age-specific preferences in the sphere of art (visual, literary and theatrical). “All else being equal, the more a child sees, hears and experiences, the more he knows and assimilates, the more elements of reality he will have in his experience and the more productive will be the operation of his imagination” [5]. Vygotsky also proved the early development of children gifted in a particular area.

The outstanding teacher and artist V.S. Shcherbakov, who worked with teenagers within the system of supplementary education, warned his colleagues against jumping to conclusions in terms of identification of a child’s abilities and talents.

“A characteristic feature of teenagers is the inconsistency of the main growth processes, <...> which requires the individual approach to be used by teachers. These processes cannot be considered in isolation from certain factors influencing the development of a student, the environment, mental development, etc.” [9]. S.D. Levin, who founded an art studio in the Leningrad Palace of the Pioneers in the 1930s, also supported these ideas [10].

G.V. Labunskaya and V.S. Shcherbakov thought that the degree of independence shown by teenagers when they developed artistic and figurative concepts in the course of creating compositions was an important indicator of children’s motivation for activities in the sphere of visual arts.

The collection of children’s drawings of the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education contains a corpus of 1,557 works by students of art studios created under the guidance of V.S. Shcherbakov in the 1930–1950s. The majority of works (landscapes, still lifes, interiors, portraits, illustrations) are the result of lengthy independent explorations conducted by teenagers who were fond of art. In the course of discussions with the teacher, young authors chose the best composition and outlined the way to implement their vision. The predominant material used at that time was oil, which exposes the expressiveness of the painting’s character and preserves the intensity of the color array, helping to overcome naturalism typical of teenagers and the academic system of education.

One of the essential requirements of art education provided to teenagers at art studios founded by V.S. Shcherbakov and S.D. Levin was familiarization with cultural life and modern art, regular visits to artists’ workshops, galleries and museums, plein-air painting in the streets of the city and during trips around the country.

The fact that proved high efficiency of V.S. Shcherbakov’s approach was professional self-identification of his students, many of whom became artists in the area of painting, graphic art, architecture and book illustration. Some of them became art critics.

Over the 1920–40s, the tradition of holding contests and exhibitions of children’s artistic creativity at different levels (international, all-Union, republican, regional and school level) was established in the Soviet Union. The purpose of these events was ideological and aesthetic education, as well as identification of artistically gifted children. In the second half of the 1930s, a network of art and music schools and studios devoted to different kinds of art located in centers of children’s artistic education, pioneers’ clubs and youth centers embraced all cities and villages of the country. Thus, most Soviet children were provided with equal opportunities to receive free professional art education.

During the analysis of the collection of the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education, representative material about the development of children motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts over the period of 5–10 years was found. Individual sets of drawings made by children who were fond of art were gathered in the 1920s by A.V. Bakushinsky, in the 1930–40s — by G.V. Labunskaya and V.S. Shcherbakov.

Collections compiled by these researchers contain sets of drawings made by children who chose artistic careers in the sphere of visual arts, applied and decorative arts, animation, architecture and other arts.

Among them — P.A. Balandin, L.M. Baranov, M.E. Biryukov, I. Bolshakova, I.S. Bolotina, P.P. Bunin, S.I. Vasilev, T.V. Vishnyakova, A.P. Vladimirov, G. Gladunov, B.E. Grigorev, T.B. Dontsova, E. Dolgushin, A.M. Dubovskii, B.V. Kotik, V. Korovin, A.P. Levitin, E.K. Lesin, A. Limorenko, T. Loboova, Yu. Malyshev, V.N. Manukhin, A.A. Melik-Pashaev, Ts. Mesropyan, D.Yu. Mitlyanskiy, T.V. Pligina (Tolstaya), G.A. Pligina (Moiseeva), Yu.S. Podlyaskii, V.V. Ponomarev, T.I. Prilutskaya, S.M.

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Salavatov, G. Samsonov, Ya.B. Sergeeva (Kaplan), I.K. Skorobogatov, I. Sokolova, V. and T. Solomatins, V.G. Starov, A.P. Tkachev, G. Ushakov, N.V. Favorskii, the Churakovs, S.N. Shilnikov, V.V. Shulzhenko, A.A. Shor, G.A. Shor, A.V. Shcherbakov, E.V. Cherkasova, V.A. Eisner and others; Bolshoi Theater ballet dancers Yu.G. Kondratov, M.L. Lavrovskii and others.

Children's drawing contests were a traditional method for the identification of children who were fond of drawing. Such contests were organized in the context of national events. For example, in 1936–1939, large-scale professional exhibitions were held and accompanied by the following events in the sphere of children's creativity: All-Union Pushkin exhibition dedicated to the 100th anniversary from the date of the poet's death; "The 20th anniversary of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army" (1938), "The 20th anniversary of the All-Union Lenin Communist Youth League" and "The Industry of Socialism" (both in 1939), "Stalin and People of the Soviet Country in the Visual Arts" (1939–1940), the Lermontov Contest in 1940–1941.

An important positive aspect of contests held in the 1930s is that their topic-based focus encouraged the development of cognitive exploratory interest in history, the surrounding reality, literature and various kinds of art in teenagers. The contest topic posed a great challenge to children who often lived far from museums and exhibition halls. They had to deal with it on their own: read books, collect photos and reproductions from journals, etc. In their search for compositional solutions, children frequently used the reproductions they have found. It was also an act of creativity and personal choice. Only those teenagers who were really keen on visual arts and ready to spend a long time elaborating their ideas could successfully take part in such contests.

In 1939, organizers of the contests G.V. Labunskaya and A.V. Shchekin-Krotova developed the criteria for evaluation of children's drawings that can be used to identify gifted children up to now:

"Originality and independence of works" [11].

"Seriousness of the approach used by young artists to convey the topic in general, constituent components that have been thought through, characteristic features of the depicted person, pieces of furniture, absence of randomness and indifference in this respect" [11].

Correspondence with age-specific possibilities expressed in "certain literacy of the drawing"; "You can't expect the same degree of literacy from children of different ages" [11].

"The artistic merits of children's drawings are a manifestation of individual abilities possessed by children — their personal sense of color and composition. <...> It is necessary to pay attention to the ability to use colors to convey one's ideas, the atmosphere of the depicted event, the plot, i.e. understanding color as one of the ways to represent the image and content of the topic. The same applies to composition: the ability to take into account the size and format of the sheet, the ability to fill it without overloading it or leaving empty spaces <...>, it is also important to consider the ability to create a rhythmic composition <...> and arrange the figures and objects depending on their meaning, primary or secondary, i.e. the ability to create a composition that complies with the requirement of the fullest representation of the plot" [11].

In the course of analysis of individual sets of drawings made by children who took part in children's drawing contests and exhibitions and later became artists, specific features of artistic development of children that are motivated for activities in the sphere of visual arts have been identified:

Early development and a wide cultural outlook;

Presence of aesthetic preferences expressed in favorite topics, characters, plots, as well as clearly pronounced features of the graphic language;

A high degree of motivation encouraged by favorable conditions created by the family and teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this research confirm the historically established view, according to which, during the period of adolescence gifted children develop stable motivation for the chosen type of artistic activity.

Art teachers, parents and teachers of supplementary education are recommended to use the following methods for identification of artistic giftedness:

- Observation of the child's everyday life in order to find out their favorite activities;
- Engagement of the child in a certain artistic activity (the level of engagement is one of the indicators of motivation for this activity);
- Observation of artistic development in the course of regular activities in order to identify the level of motivation for a particular kind of art, the type of motivation (cognitive, creative or combined — cognitive and creative), presence of endurance and stamina necessary in order to achieve a result;
- Analysis of the results of artistic activities against the indicators of artistic development of a certain child (stability of motivation, development path, the degree of manifestation of individual features: independence of artistic and figurative vision and its implementation, as well as the ability to implement the vision);
- Analysis of systematic results produced by the child in the course of their artistic activities (collections of children's drawings, essays, etc.) against age-specific criteria (identification of the degree of early development in comparison with children of the same age in terms of achieving artistic results).

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