Creating the cultural environment of a school fostering the creative development of adolescents

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Abstract The aim of the study was to determine the main components of the cultural environment of a school that contributes to the creative development of adolescents and the ways to engage the student to this cultural environment. The conducted study consisted of a standardized online survey of 1,542 school students between the ages of 12 and 18, the focus group method (involving 159 students from 15 to 17 years old) and SWOT-analysis of the creation of the school cultural environment in educational organizations from five regions of Russia. The authors argue that the cultural environment of a school is constructed based on the continuum of 21st-century art, which is understood as the spatial and temporal cultural environment that exists at the present moment and incorporates folk, classical, popular, and contemporary art. The article reports the results of a comprehensive study of school students' interest in and motivation for engagement in art, as well as the relevance of creating a holistic cultural environment of a school that unites fragmented knowledge based on the continuum of art. The main directions of activities to create the cultural environment of a school in interaction with cultural institutions are identified.

Keywords: cultural environment of a school, continuum of art, interaction with cultural institutions, interest, motivation, contemporary art

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, human life has undergone radical changes that defined the new traits of one of its vital spheres – art. The decisive role in this process is played by scientific discoveries and technological progress, which not only provided for great advancement in terms of the technologies of art, the newest means of expressing, recording, and transferring large volumes of information contained in artworks but also transformed the artistic environment, changing the very language of art.

Undoubtedly, modern society offers great opportunities for personal self-realization, provides free access to any cultural information, gives opportunities for creative work with the use of virtual reality, and presents individuals with the skills of living in a global multicultural world. All of this results in the absolute freedom of the new generation in the choice of cultural guides.

However, the same information society generates major problems: the information obtained on the Internet is often unverified or even dangerous for children adolescents; the fascination with virtual and augmented reality destroys the real private life of people, gives rise to infantilism in young people; traditional mechanisms of cultural development are being destroyed; cultural identity is being lost; the young generation is developing tolerance that reaches complete indifference; cynicism and rejection of national spiritual values; intergenerational links are being disrupted, which leads to the destruction of traditions. As a result of this comes a fear of the future. Alvin Toffler (1970), the American cultural scientist, voiced this issue at the end of the 20th century and warned that the salvation for the individual in the information society can be found only in local culture: the culture of family, ethnicity, personal circle of communication. It is the art that can form an emotionally sensitive and appreciative view of the world in which it is peaceful and interesting to live.

Rapid changes in the cultural discourse in modern society cause the concept of culture to blur, as culture becomes multivariate. This variability is particularly reflected in art, which, on the one hand, is the quintessence of an era, and, on the other hand, affects the general level of artistic preferences and cultural demands of modern society.

In this context, we can refer to the continuum of art of the 21st century. By the continuum of art, we mean the spatial and temporal state of humanity's integral culture, which continues throughout all historical epochs and includes folk (traditional), classical (academic), and popular art, and, most importantly, born at each moment of the continuum – contemporary art (Akishina 2017).

The art continuum as a spatial-temporal cultural environment accompanying a person at a given moment in time is presented in Figure 1.
In the context of the modern continuum of art, the problem of introducing the younger generation to the whole layer of artistic culture is gaining relevance. For students to understand contemporary art, it is necessary to acquaint them with folk, classical, and popular art that has left its mark in world culture.

Today, it is becoming clear that the disparate knowledge of modern adolescents needs to be brought to a holistic view of the entire history of art. For this reason, the issue of a system for the development of school students in the field of art to nurture their artistic preferences and demand for high-quality artworks arises acutely. In the context of the art continuum, there is a need to create a cultural environment in each school that is capable of educating the younger generation on the arts through their education, development, and upbringing based on the best examples of world art.

Problem statement

The problem of creating the cultural environment of a school as a systemic introduction of school students to art is relevant in the present day. The modern world is a space of wide choice and great opportunities for the young generation since society provides them with various forms of personal socialization (education, leisure, hobbies, etc.). The high level of development of information technologies, including the distance activities introduced in 2020-20201 due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, contribute to the transition of many forms of socio-cultural activities to the Internet space.

In 2021, employees of The Federal State Budget Scientific Institution “Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education” conducted a SWOT analysis of the current state of the cultural environment in educational institutions as part of the research project “Implementation of the model of an upbringing cultural environment in educational organizations”. As a result, the strengths of the process are identified as follows:

• the development and upbringing objectives of the cultural environment of a school;
• undoubted public and family interest in the cultural development of the younger generation.

The relevance of creating a holistic cultural environment in schools is confirmed by the existing threats that are voiced by teachers and parents:

• the exponential growth of the problem, that is, the slower we develop a holistic cultural environment, the more difficult it is to create an effective model of familiarizing modern schoolchildren with the arts;
• the expansion of aggressive and inhumane cultural forms that are difficult to counter with the usual means of traditional and academic culture;
• the insufficiency of online methods for introducing students to the arts, which has become especially evident during the pandemic.

The school’s systemic, holistic, and varied cultural environment has the potential to:

• solve the problems of developing a creative person capable of adequately appreciating the works of art;
• counter anti-cultural expansion;
• develop the potential of each individual within the system of the art continuum;
• solve the problem of the deterioration of the quality of modern art.

The conducted SWOT analysis also reveals weaknesses in the following aspects:

• the need to improve the skills of teaching staff in improving work in the sphere of art;
• the need to improve the skills of teaching staff in creating a holistic cultural environment of a school.

Thus, the results of SWOT-analysis of the current state of the cultural environment in educational organizations show the need to reinforce the development of children in the sphere of culture and art. Furthermore, it is necessary to create a cultural environment in each school based on the continuum of art in accordance with the needs of students and the opportunities of the region.
2. Methods

The present study uses the theoretical methods of analysis, synthesis, systematization, generalization of the obtained data, and pedagogical modeling.

The employed empirical methods include:
- a standardized online survey: the selected sample consists of 1,542 school students between the ages of 12 and 18;
- interview;
- diagnostics;
- the focus group method (involving 159 students from 15 to 17 years old):
- SWOT-analysis of the creation of the school cultural environment in educational organizations from five regions of Russia (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, the Komi Republic, and Leningrad and Nizhny Novgorod Oblasts, 214 schools in total).

3. Results

The main goal of modern education is a self-developing and freely self-realizing personality able to flexibly change the ways and means of life. Thus, the accent in modern education is shifting to the process of socialization, an important role in which is played by the continuum of art. The continuum of art affects all phenomena of art and culture, education included.

Herein, we should review the components of the presented model of the continuum of art in the early 21st century in more detail (Figure 1):

1. Folk (traditional) art is a critical component of the cultural continuum and it remains so despite that the ethnocultural environment from which folk art draws its strength is gradually disappearing. Often entire strata of folk art become cultural artifacts and museum pieces. The potential of folk art is, however, so great that it continues to be the source of inspiration for professional composers, artists, and writers and a guide for the upbringing and education of children.

2. Classical (academic) art is a concept that appears simple at first glance but is quite difficult to clearly define in the scientific context. Under classical art, we understand the works of high artistic level that have stood the test of time and have become the examples of perfection for the next generation in their country of origin and abroad. This occurs if the creator of an art piece puts it into the most perfect form, while reflecting all the complex and often acute problems of their time, and stimulates with their work the emergence of new authors who pick up their ideas and embody them in the most relevant and innovative forms.

3. Popular art is a phenomenon that stems from earlier times but made its proper appearance in the 20th century and is considered its characteristic feature. Popular art refers to the art pieces created for the mass listener and viewer audience and, accordingly, have simple forms and easily understandable content. The works of popular art are created for leisure events and festivities and provide for not only comfortable rest but for the formation of a new worldview. Thus, popular art can be defined as a branch of art that appeared in the 20th century, is aimed at the general public, is understandable to the unprepared listener, and contributes to the formation of a new view of life.

Contemporary art, that is, the art that is created and continues to be created by our contemporaries. The art appearing at each moment of the continuum in question and defined as “contemporary art” is gradually embedded in the mainstream of one of the basic components of this phenomenon, i.e. classical or popular art. This process is constant, and this quality allows us to treat contemporary art as one of the components of the continuum of art of the early 21st century (Akishina 2017).

Without a doubt, the continuum of art has a strong influence on the entire culture and especially on the emergence of the culture of the new generation, which is searching for its path in life and forming its interests and needs. In the sociological survey and focus groups, school students at the age of 12-18 years old express great interest in mastering the arts. However, the study reveals that the number of adolescents who engage in the arts is far less than of those potentially wishing to. The results of the conducted survey are presented in Figure 2.

Analyzing the survey results, we can note modern school students’ intense need for doing art. In particular, 84% of the respondents wish to study music, 62% – to engage in film art, 52% are interested in literature (to a greater extent with social networking content and blogs). The least interesting to the adolescents are theater (43%) and fine art (36%). The same types of art are of great interest with the application of computer technology, 91% of the respondents indicate that they would like to engage in various forms of artistic activities, but with the use of computer programs, electronic tools, and virtual Internet space. Thus, a small group of adolescents chooses academic fine art, with the majority of schoolchildren wanting to draw using computer programs. However, in reality, the level of engagement in the arts is low, even in popular art with the use of computer technology.

The conducted focus groups demonstrate several problems that prevent the students from satisfying their art needs. One of them is the lack of opportunities to engage in art since in big cities, it often requires traveling long distances, and in small towns, the students often do not have the opportunity to do what they want to. The students note the possibilities of online classes, but still express a desire for direct communication with a teacher and fellow students about music-making, drawing, dancing, etc. The detected latent problem of the adolescents; inability to satisfy their needs for artistic activities is
their lack of systemic knowledge about art, its types, stages, and artistic peculiarities. For example, the students show no desire
to do fine art since they only know of drawing and painting and have no idea about such modern types of fine art as installation,
art-action, anamorphosis, land-art, reverse graffiti, and many others.

Meanwhile, the demand for contemporary art among adolescents is very high (Figure 3). To the question “Why are you
interested in contemporary art?”, the students respond: “It’s the art of today, and I live now and want to understand what’s
happening in culture”, “I can ask the author a question”, “Contemporary art reflects the most important moments in life for
people today”, “I want to better understand other people, my contemporaries”. At the same time, the adolescents are not
always able to determine how the continuum of art affects modernity. Many students respond that they are not very interested
in the classical and popular art of the past and that no one needs folk art at all at present.

Of particular importance in the creation of the cultural environment of a school in the context of the continuum of art
is interaction with the regional cultural institutions: museums, theaters, exhibition and concert halls, libraries, etc. It is cultural
institutions that preserve and reproduce the whole continuum of art of the early 21st century. As the study shows, the most
effective models of the cultural environment of an educational organization are based on the integration of education and
upbringing at school in interaction with the regional cultural space.

As a result of the research, it is found that despite the proximity to information and the ability to work with it quickly,
the knowledge of modern schoolchildren is theoretical and poorly correlated with real life. Thus, 89% of school students have
some idea of the museums and theaters of the city and region, but only 25% of them have been to these museums and theaters;
56% of adolescents hardly ever visit the city center and are not familiar with its cultural and historical monuments (that is, they
do know about them but only through photos or video records on the Internet), etc. The synthesis of school education and the
programs of museums, theaters, libraries, etc. in the context of the continuum of art expands the possibilities of designing a varied cultural program and promotes high results in school students’ development (Olesina and Polyudova 2017 2018).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the most demanded model of the cultural environment is expressed by the integration of school education with the region’s socio-cultural resources with consideration of the modern continuum of art. The detected problems in the creation of the cultural environment in schools that hinder the effective harmonious development of modern school students include:

- difficulty in attending classes in the chosen art form (remote location, lack of a specialist, inconvenient time, etc.);
- lack or absence of opportunities to engage in contemporary art;
- excess of theoretical material in the classes to the detriment of active creative work;
- insufficient use of the potential of cultural institutions in the work of schools.

4. Discussion

The problem of creating a cultural environment capable of developing adolescents in the sphere of art is explored by several researchers. The process of the development of the cultural environment of a school has its functions and features, it incorporates its specific subjects, goals, and objectives, regularities and principles, patterns of school students’ development in accordance with the culture. Back in the 1920’s L.S. Vygotsky (1934), based on the cultural-historical theory, defined as one of the important factors of socialization the environment in which the child finds themselves, including artistic values, aesthetic landscape, and interior design, intellectually rich communication, and the socio-cultural context of the time (which in our study we interpret as the continuum of art).

Russian cultural scientist A.Ia. Fler (2013) states: “Cultural environment is a complex of cultural preferences of the population localized within the boundaries of a certain space. And these cultural preferences are mainly expressed in the norms of people’s social behavior, actually materialized in them”. The environment surrounding a person should be creative, thus, the modern policy of urban development pays much attention to the creation of a special creative, aesthetic, modern, interesting, and convenient space for life and activity. According to D. Jacob (2010), a creative city has the potential to become a special creative environment, so the researcher gives an example of a creative space created in Berlin that contributes to the development of the modern continuum of art.

Naturally, educators pay particular attention to creating the cultural environment of a school, as modern children need to create and immerse themselves in a special creative environment (Boyakova and Radomskaya 2019). The creation of a creative cultural environment aimed at the organization of children and adult communities is facilitated by the organization of a variety of artistic and musical events for children of different ages and their parents. For example, in Australia, there is an arts festival for children, which is a favorable environment for family interaction where art serves not only as an aesthetic environment but also as a sphere for cultural enrichment and development (Tayler et al 2006). Many European countries have programs to support creative school projects aimed at educating students through the arts. An example is the “Creative” program in Malta, which has already had 5’000 schoolchildren as its participants (Briguglio and Debattista 2017).

H. Ivon and D. Kuščević offer a detailed examination of the school as a cultural environment influencing the formation of personal culture in school students. The integrated approach to learning immerses adolescents in the space of cultural heritage, forcing them to live the world experience, freely and reflectively interpret information, and become active participants in culture. Students’ art projects inspired by the historical, cultural, and natural heritage of their environment confirm that such projects are an effective way to promote students’ personal development and sensitivity to art. They teach students the importance of preserving cultural heritage and participating in the cultural life of society, educating future participants and creators of new cultural values, primarily in interaction with museums as sociocultural sites (Ivon and Kuščević 2013).

In the USA, a special study was conducted on the opportunities of the relationship between schools and museums, as modern museums are becoming an important agent of dialogue between students and the arts in a broad understanding of the cultural continuum. E. Hooper-Greenhill’s study of the opinions of American educators about interaction with museums shows that 48% of the surveyed teachers see the importance of museums in giving students not only knowledge but also increased motivation for learning and development; 87% of the teachers emphasize the opportunity to develop students’ social and communication skills (Hooper-Greenhill 2007).

Based on the analysis of various studies on the problem, we identify the main components of the cultural environment of a school that contributes to school students’ mastery of the entire continuum of art.

1. **Cultural environment as a synthesis of all types of educational and upbringing activities:**
   - development of the cultural environment of the school through the use of new forms of education and upbringing based on the material of art culture and art;
   - improvement of the culture of teachers and development of the basic culture of schoolchildren;
   - detection of the problems in the cultural environment of the school that inhibit the process of its development; change and improvement of the cultural environment using the continuum of art;
organization of a unified interconnected system of education and upbringing of schoolchildren with the use of artistic and creative activities.

2. Cultural environment as a reflection of the continuum of art. Folk, classical, popular, and contemporary art are incorporated in lessons (lessons, extracurricular activities, collective and personal projects), in leisure activities, in the decoration of school premises, in projects related to the cultural institutions of the region.

3. Cultural environment as an activity.
   - Cognitive activity, which results in understanding the meaning of a museum exhibition, theatrical production, library project, their significance, and specificity.
   - Values activity, i.e. formation of students’ needs in the process of creating an artistic product, organizing an exhibition, preparing an excursion or a performance.
   - Communicative activity, which provides for the formation of communicative, informational, and socio-aesthetic competence; the culture of presentations of one’s creative works in various forms and with the help of technical means; (the dialogue forms of communication with cultural objects).
   - Creative activities, i.e. creation of artistically and emotionally valuable creative products (drawings, crafts, homemade books, models, etc.). To form students’ creative experience, it is necessary to design special pedagogical situations that require and create conditions for creative solutions.

4. Cultural environment as interaction with museums, theaters, libraries. The environment is built upon the active development of the cultural space, as there must be a personal appropriation of this space by all participants in the educational process: 1) the student feels the features of the museum (theater, library, etc.) space and understands the importance of this space for themselves; 2) the student has the opportunity for creative work, at least in the sphere of modeling and imagination; 3) the student becomes a real participant in the creative process and can modify this space.

5. Cultural environment as a virtual interaction with the continuum of art. The use of the Internet space and computer technology enables the active introduction of a variety of interactive technologies in work with schoolchildren, which enhances adolescents’ interest and motivation for the study of the holistic continuum of art.

5. Conclusion

The expected results of the efforts to create the cultural environment of a school in the context of the contemporary art continuum include:
- creating a system of pedagogical work aimed at introducing the basics of integrating the school with the cultural environment of the region, including the methods of selecting and structuring the content of education and upbringing;
- developing the scientific and methodical and didactic support on the issue of interaction between the school and cultural institutions in the region;
- organizing creative groups of like-minded people in educational institutions to implement the integration of the educational organization and cultural institutions in practice;
- identifying the cultural facilities and institutions for active interaction with schools;
- inviting prominent experts in contemporary art for meetings, master classes, lectures, and concerts;
- organizing and conducting monitoring studies (surveys, tests, etc.) in innovative platforms at the beginning and at the end of the school year to determine the level of school students’ development, creativity, and independence;
- holding scientific and practical conferences with practicing teachers on the use of the art continuum in the educational process;
- improving the competence of school teachers in working with innovative methods for the creation of the cultural environment of a school;
- exchange of experience based on specific activities carried out.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

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