



Оригинальное исследование

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**Functional capabilities of visual activity  
in environmental education of students in China**


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**Abstract.** *Introduction.* The relevance of the study is due to the increased need for environmental education of students in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this regard, visual activity in the lessons of fine arts has great pedagogical potential. *Purpose:* To identify and characterize the pedagogical potential of visual activity in the environmental education of students in the PRC. *Materials and methods:* The theoretical basis of the research was the works of Chinese scientists and practical teachers on environmental education and art education of students in China. The research methods were the theoretical and comparative analysis of the approaches of Chinese scientists to the implementation of the process of environmental education in the lessons of fine arts at school. *Results:* The pedagogical potential of visual activity is manifested in the functional capabilities of visual activity, which include: aesthetic-ecological function that promotes the manifestation of aesthetic and ecological behavior by students in all types of activities with a focus on universal values and awareness of their priority importance; cognitive-heuristic function that allows a student to penetrate the author's idea of the work, discover new knowledge and apply it in creative activity independently; communicative function that promotes the development of students' communicative skills in the process of communicating with each other, with the world of art and nature, introduction to national and world culture; social function that promotes the assimilation of social values, norms and behaviors, methods of analyzing the surrounding reality, types of relations accepted in society. *Conclusion.* Environmental knowledge is better assimilated in the course of visual activity if a student has developed an emotional and sensory sphere, artistic and imaginative thinking, aesthetic perception, which allows him/her to perceive natural objects and phenomena, create their own artistic image of them based on environmental knowledge and consolidate this knowledge with the help of visual means in the form of a specific artistic works.

**Keywords:** environmental education in China; visual activity; pedagogical potential of visual activity; functional capabilities of visual activity

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**Функциональные возможности занятий изобразительной деятельностью в экологическом воспитании обучающихся в Китае**

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**Аннотация.** *Введение.* Актуальность исследования обусловлена усилением потребности в экологическом воспитании учащихся в КНР. В этой связи занятия изобразительной деятельностью на уроках изобразительного искусства обладают большим педагогическим потенциалом. *Цель:* выявить и охарактеризовать, в чем заключается педагогический потенциал занятий изобразительной деятельностью в экологическом воспитании обучающихся в КНР. *Материалы и методы:* теоретическую базу исследования составили труды китайских ученых и педагогов-практиков по вопросам экологического воспитания и художественного образования учащихся в КНР. Методами исследования послужили теоретический и сравнительный анализ подходов китайских ученых к осуществлению процесса экологического воспитания на уроках изобразительного искусства в школе. *Результаты:* педагогический потенциал занятий изобразительной деятельностью проявляется в функциональных возможностях изобразительной деятельности, к которым относятся: эстетико-экологическая функция, способствующая проявлению эстетико-экологического поведения учащимися во всех видах деятельности с ориентацией на общечеловеческие ценности и осознанием их приоритетного значения; познавательно-эвристическая функция, позволяющая учащемуся проникать в замысел автора произведения, самостоятельно открывать новое знание и применять его в творческой деятельности; коммуникативная функция, способствующая развитию коммуникативных умений учащихся в процессе общения друг с другом, с миром искусства и природы, приобщения к национальной и мировой культуре; социальная функция, способствующая усвоению учащимися социальных ценностей, норм и моделей поведения, способов анализа окружающей действительности, видов отношений, принятых в обществе. *Заключение.* Экологические знания лучше усваиваются в процессе занятий изобразительной деятельностью, если у учащегося развита эмоционально-чувственная сфера, художественно-образное мышление, эстетическое восприятие, что позволяет ему эстетически воспринимать природные объекты и явления, создавать

свой художественный образ о них с опорой на экологические знания и закреплять эти знания с помощью изобразительных средств в форме конкретной художественной работы.

**Ключевые слова:** экологическое воспитание в Китае; изобразительная деятельность; педагогический потенциал изобразительной деятельности; функциональные возможности изобразительной деятельности

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**Introduction.** The problem of environmental education of young generation in any country is emphasized at the state level. In modern China it is not limited only to environmental education of students, but is aimed at the formation of the ability of young people to understand the interdependence of human life on Earth and the actions they take in relation to natural resources. As Chinese researchers emphasize, modern China is facing serious environmental problems, which are exacerbated by the country's large population, lack of natural resources and rapid economic growth, which together accelerates the process of environmental pollution (Wang Liqin, 2019: 31-32; Zhang Ying, Wu Bin, Chen Jiancheng, Li Yun, 2018: 9-11).

We have addressed the history of environmental education in China in previously published articles (Bessarabova, Fu Ying, 2021; Fu Ying, 2021). Despite the ancient traditions of environmental education of young people in Chinese culture, environmental education in modern China was fixed at the level of state policy after 1979. Since the beginning of the 1980s, environmental education in China has acquired the status of an integral component of compulsory school education, from optional classes to filling school disciplines with environmental content. Environmental education in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is aimed mainly at the formation of students' value attitude to nature; maintaining the desire for cognitive, aesthetic and emotional perception of nature; strengthening the sense of responsibility for the preservation of the natural world; the formation

of a scientific global outlook (Bessarabova, Fu Ying, 2021: 54-55).

Researchers dealing with environmental education in China (Zhang Xiaozhui, Zhang Feizhou, Wang Ke, Guo Xiaoxi, Li Meixiang, etc.) mainly address problems such as the educational process in preschool institutions, general education and higher education, paying insufficient attention to art education, in particular, the pedagogical potential of visual activity in education of students.

The analysis of the state of the problem has shown that its relevance is due to the contradiction between the social significance of environmental education of young people as one of the priorities of the educational policy of the People's Republic of China and the lack of knowledge of Chinese pedagogical experience about the specifics of educating students through visual activity.

**The purpose** of this article is to identify and characterize the pedagogical potential of visual activity in the environmental education of students in the PRC.

**Methodology and methods.** Today, Chinese scientists are exploring various aspects of the problem of environmental education: the theoretical foundations of environmental education in China (Wang Chen, Wen Yuanguang, Gu Long, Gong Lijuan, Yin Feng, etc.); the formation and the development of environmental education in China (Du Fengqiu, Ye Ping, Yi Wei, Kun Deyu, Liu Zenhui, Guo Chenchen, etc.); the organization of environmental education in China at different levels of education (Ye Zhijie, Kang Shihong, Lai Jiang, etc.).

The difference of the concept of this research lies in the fact that we study the problem of the environmental education in the PRC in close connection with visual activity, namely, in identifying the pedagogical potential of visual activity for the organization and implementation of the process of environmental education in a comprehensive Chinese school.

To achieve this purpose, we use the theoretical and comparative analysis of the approaches of Chinese scientists and practical teachers to the organization of the process of environmental education in the lessons of fine arts in secondary schools in order to determine the educational possibilities of visual activity in this article.

**Theoretical basis and methodology.** The theoretical basis of this research was the fundamental works of Chinese scientists on environmental education and art education: Le Aiguo, Li Gai, Li Guili, Ma Zhe, Ma Yanzhu, Meng Peiyuan, Peng Yavei, Xie Weihui, Xie Shanshan, Xi Jinsong, etc.

The methodological basis of our research was the holistic approach (V.S. Ilyin, N.K. Sergeev, etc.), which allowed us to consider the process of environmental education of students by means of visual activity in a comprehensive Chinese school as an integral phenomenon in the interrelation of its components.

**Research Results and Discussion.** It is necessary for our research to identify the role of visual activity in the environmental education of students; therefore, an important task is to analyze the concepts of modern Chinese scientists who are directly related to this problem.

Shang Shoushan points out that visual activity enriches the spiritual and emotional spheres of a child, influences the development of their thinking and imagination, enriches their horizons through the experience of communicating with art objects and the surrounding world (Shang Shoushan, 2022: 17-18).

Shi Chuandan and Gu Luna draw attention to the aesthetic value of nature in the course of visual activity in the classroom, noting that painting or drawing with the image of natural phenomena will positively affect the overall development of a child if nature itself becomes the

teacher (Shi Chuandan, 2018: 69-70; Gu Luna, 2018:14-15). We may say that the main idea that is traced in the authors' words is that wildlife always affects the emotional and sensory sphere of a student, and visual activity allows the student to realize the natural desire to express their feelings and attitudes to the surrounding nature. Thus, the student does not just depict the objects of nature seen on a piece of paper, but opens the door to their spiritual world.

Xu Shiying and Yang Mingxia note the positive impact of visual activity on the development of sensory perception of students, drawing attention to the close relationship of the student's ability to color perception and environmental literacy. Artistic generalization, according to the authors, leads to a generalization of the emotional attitude to the perceived object, and not the object itself. The student learns to catch different shades of color in the surrounding natural objects, which generate an appropriate emotional attitude to what they see and create a specific artistic image. Thus, in the process of presenting their vision of the world by means of visual activity based on environmental knowledge, the artistic and imaginative thinking of the students develop (Xu Shiying, 2022:92; Yang Mingxia, 2022:15).

Qian Weiyu complements the educational impact of visual activity by enriching the social experience of students. Since not only the teacher and the author of the work take part in the process of discussing and evaluating the results of visual activity, but also the rest of the students. They learn to interact during collective discussion, listen to each other's opinions, express and argue their point of view, form a worldview, which is directly related to the development of social skills of students in the process of engaging in visual activity (Qian Weiyu, 2023: 12-15).

Thus, Chinese scientists come to the conclusion that there is a powerful mechanism for the spiritual, emotional and social development of students in the visual arts classes, i.e. it can be argued that the diverse development of students' personality takes place in the visual arts lessons.

Some modern Chinese scientists (Lui Aijun, Guo Geng, etc.) believe that a person's

live communication with nature carries a great pedagogical potential, which must be relied upon during the ecological education of students (Lui Aijun, Guo Geng, 2022: 32-33). At the same time, these authors emphasize that the process of environmental education cannot be carried out in isolation from the aesthetic education of students, since an environmentally literate person combines cognitive activity and emotional perception of nature. In other words, ecological knowledge should lead to aesthetic experiences.

A valuable thought about the educational impact of visual activity is expressed by Wang Chen. According to the author, the world of nature is harmonious. In the process of observing the phenomena of nature and perceiving its objects, a student is imbued with this harmony of nature, creating in their imagination a complete picture or a certain artistic image, which is then embodied with the help of visual means, which helps to form the student's ability to perceive the surrounding reality holistically (Wang Chen, 2022: 23-24).

We have noted above that knowledge about ecology is more effectively assimilated in the process of engaging in visual activity and creates a basis for the formation of ecological awareness of students. Chinese researcher Huang Yun notes that a person with consciousness is able to perceive nature as a natural, harmonious, aesthetic unity in all the variety of colors, shades and shapes (Huang Yun, 2020: 72). This definition shows the aesthetic side of the process of perceiving nature, which is inseparable from the ecological knowledge received by students in art lessons. Consequently, environmental education is connected not only with the transfer of knowledge of ecological content to students, but also with the formation of a desire to become familiar with the high artistic and spiritual values not only of their people, but also of the entire human civilization.

Wang Li attaches great importance to working with color in art lessons, emphasizing that color contributes to the formation of a certain emotional attitude of a student to the created artistic image and to its specific image. The author notes the positive influence of color on the

formation of the student's sensory and moral sphere, which creates a favorable ground for the education of a respectful and careful attitude to nature (Wang Li, 2019: 13).

In general, Chinese teachers recommend giving time to work with color in art lessons, since in practice the ability of color to have a strong emotional impact on a person of any age has been proven. Therefore, taking into account this factor, a teacher will be able to create a positive mood in a classroom in order to assimilate better the educational material by students, including environmental content. Also, the teacher will be able to rely on the color factor in the verbal characterization of objects of nature and culture, thus developing the artistic and imaginative thinking of students.

Zhao Dan complements the previous concepts about the important role of color perception in the process of visual activity by pointing to the role of visual activity in the development of important mental functions of students, which include speech, thinking, visual perception and motor coordination. Visual activity helps not only to develop each function, but also to promote their interrelationship for the systematization of acquired knowledge, the formation of a model of ideas about the world. During the occupation of any kind of visual activity, a student builds in their mind a model of their idea of the object of the natural world, putting their knowledge into it, including environmental, communication experience, thoughts. Thus, the image of visual perception acquires a concrete embodiment with the help of visual means. Student's works always have an emotional code, which an attentive teacher will be able to rely on in the process of work, and, if necessary, influence the emotional perception of students (Zhao Dan, 2019: 21-22). In other words, the student tries to color their feelings and emotions in certain colors and transmit them through a specific image. As a result, with the help of visual means, the student does not show a specific object, but their knowledge about this object or phenomenon.

According to Lu Mei, ecological culture cannot be brought up through conversations and

parting words about the importance of preserving natural resources for humanity. Therefore, the author recommends influencing students through the development of their emotional and sensory sphere, artistic and imaginative thinking, aesthetic taste in the process of engaging in visual activity at art lessons, when a student learns creative perception of natural phenomena and objects, emotionally responds to them, communicates with them, reproduces them in their works, gives certain features, empathizes with them (Lu Mei, 2020: 12). According to the author, the educational potential of visual activity in the lessons of fine arts in terms of the formation of the ecological culture of a student is invaluable.

Emphasizing the importance of educating an ecologically cultured person, Chen Liping recommends educating students with an aesthetic and ethical attitude to nature, which should manifest itself in the student's desire to contemplate the beauty of the natural world, awareness of its value and the ability of its subsequent embodiment with the help of visual means, which are enriched by the student's live communication with nature. In general, according to the author, an aesthetic and ethical attitude to nature should form in the student's mind a sense of responsibility and rationality in relation to natural objects (Chen Liping, 2021: 23-24).

The above-mentioned researchers agree that modern Chinese society needs spiritual healing to counter the environmental crisis. Therefore, the authors urge the compilers of curricula to include environmental content in all school disciplines, since society needs a new type of citizens with eco-awareness, eco-culture, able to comply with environmental norms of behavior.

Chinese researchers, whose concepts are analyzed in this article, describe visual activity as a special kind of aesthetic activity that enriches the student's spiritual world, increases their social consciousness, and hence a sense of responsibility for preserving the environment. In different concepts, the authors highlight certain functional capabilities of visual activity in order to form the eco-consciousness and eco-culture of students. The results of the general analysis of

the content of the concepts allow us to conclude that visual activity has *aesthetic, ecological, cognitive-heuristic, communicative, and social functions*, which together contribute to the realization of the goals and objectives of environmental education of students.

Let us reveal the content of the named functions of visual activity. In the concepts of environmental education of Chinese researchers, the aesthetic function of visual activities is inseparable from the ecological one, therefore, the concept of *aesthetic-ecological function* is often found. The main task of this function of visual activity is to teach a student to see the beauty in people, in the surrounding nature and in himself/herself.

According to Liu Xiangzhong, performing an aesthetic-ecological function, visual activity acts as a means of forming aesthetic and ecological consciousness among students. A person with aesthetic and ecological consciousness has basic knowledge of aesthetics and ecology, as well as in the field of world and national culture, that is why he is able to notice, understand and enjoy the beautiful not only in art, but also in man, nature, while realizing the importance of preserving works of art, the richness of native nature for future generations (Liu Xiangzhong, 2022: 47-48).

According to Xie Weihui, painting classes have wide opportunities for the realization of the aesthetic and ecological function of visual activity. Since during the lessons a student works with color, he learns to find harmonious color solutions, to distinguish shades of the same color, to convey correctly the multicoloration of natural colors on paper. The ability to notice the color richness of the natural world not only helps to educate students' artistic taste, but also creates a solid foundation for the development of environmental skills that form the basis of environmental behavior (Xie Weihui, 2020: 148-149). Artistic taste is understood by the author as the student's ability to feel and distinguish the perfect and beautiful from the opposite, both in art and in life. The author is convinced that a person who knows how to notice, appreciate and enjoy the beautiful will never harm the natural world and tolerate such an attitude from other people.

The presence of artistic taste, according to the author, indicates the level of aesthetic and ecological education of a student.

Making a preliminary conclusion, it should be emphasized that the aesthetic-ecological function of visual activity contributes to the unity of aesthetic and ecological values and beliefs of a student, the formation and development of the student's artistic taste, the ability to admire, feel and reason about the beautiful, as well as to show aesthetic and ecological behavior in all types of activities with a focus on universal values and awareness their priority value. In other words, the implementation of the aesthetic-ecological function in the process of engaging in visual activity helps not only to form the social behavior of the individual, but also educates a student in a genuine human attitude to the world around him in compliance with the laws of nature, which can only be manifested by a holistic, humane, harmonious, creative personality with ecological consciousness and aesthetic and ecological behavior.

Performing a *cognitive-heuristic function*, visual activity is both new knowledge and enlightenment for a student. In other words, a student receives a certain amount of new artistic information in the process of engaging in visual activity, which he needs to form their artistic image, subsequently embodied with the help of visual means. The cognitive aspect of the lesson also includes a detailed analysis of the work of art (paintings, engravings, sculptures, etc.). For example, a student not only describes the content of a painting or an image of a sculpture, but also tries to get into the idea of the author of the work, paying attention to the plot, the general mood of the work, the means of expression used by the author. The heuristic aspect is connected with the process of self-discovery of new knowledge to students and assimilation for the purpose of application in further creative activity. Chinese scientists (Kun Deyu, Liu Tsenghui, Guo Chenchen) recommend that a teacher of fine arts turn to poetic means of expression in conversations about art in order to enrich the vocabulary of students – figurative comparisons; words denoting human qualities. It is also necessary to enrich the vocabulary of students with

professional visual terminology (Kun Deyu, Liu Tsenghui, Guo Chenchen, 2021: 13-16).

It gives us the opportunity to trace the manifestation of the *communicative function* of visual activity. If a child comments on his actions in the process of drawing or engaging in another type of visual activity, an adult needs to show attention and interest in their work with the help of leading questions. Through active, rather than silent drawing at an early age, a child is more aware of their actions and coordinates them along with the development of the above cognitive abilities. Active drawing not only enriches the child's speech, establishes contact with an adult (teacher or parent), but is also noticeably reflected in the drawing itself – the image comes to life thanks to the child's communication with those who are nearby and show interest in their work. Thus, visual activity helps to develop the student's communicative skills in the process of joint discussion of the completed works or visual materials proposed by the teacher: students express their opinions about each other's works, learn to argue the choice of means of expression, try to explain the intent of the author of the work, listen to each other's opinions, learn to agree or explain their disagreement.

In general, as Chinese scientists note, the communicative function of visual activity allows students to communicate not only with each other, but also with the world of art and nature (Ibid.). This function of visual activity allows the author of the work to reflect and reproduce the emotional and spiritual nature of the creative process. Contemplating works of art, a student joins both national and world culture, enriches their spiritual world, expands their horizons through the knowledge of the artistic heritage accumulated by human civilization.

The communicative function of visual activity, according to Wang Fuyan, is more actively manifested in younger schoolchildren, since at this age they are most susceptible to emotional and sensory cognition of the external world and the accumulation of knowledge about its diverse nature. Through visual perception, which is the leading one at this age, a child is able to perform various tasks: for example, to

find the necessary object in the picture, describe its special features, name common and distinct features in comparison with other objects (Wang Fuyan, 2022: 17-18). Thus, in the process of a detailed study of a work of art, a student is introduced to the beautiful during the lesson, and then transfers their new knowledge into real life, observing the surrounding nature and noting its beauty. Therefore, communication with art opens the door to the student not only to the world of beauty, but also to the real world, helps to understand the true values in life, causes a desire to do good and protect the living beauty created by nature. In general, Chinese researchers attribute the visual activity of a younger student to the leading productive activity, which provides a student with an opportunity to express their feelings, impressions and ideas about the real world based on the knowledge and experience gained.

Visual activity makes an important contribution to the process of *socialization* of students, helping them to assimilate social values, norms and behaviors, ways of analyzing the surrounding reality, types of relationships accepted in this society, which ultimately contributes to the entry of a person into society.

According to psychologists (Zhao Feifei, Li Dong), visual activity enables a child to enter the adult world with the help of their imagination, since the motives of visual activity are often aimed at bringing to life what is desired, but not yet available to the child. The visual activity of a student is a reflection of their new knowledge, impressions, experiences, dreams. Despite the fact that visual activity is more connected with the fantasy world of a child, engaging in any kind of it is very important for a socializing student in terms of mitigating psychological barriers that he may encounter in real life (Zhao Feifei, Li Dong, 2019: 34).

For example, while drawing, a child transfers to paper an artistic image created by him/her based on their knowledge and ideas about the object, so the images in children's drawings often do not correspond to reality. The image that is created by a child is significantly different from the image created by an adult author, since it depends on the degree of development of skills

and abilities. The child does not emphasize external similarity, but tries to reflect their perception of their environment, people, characters, relationships between family members, the atmosphere in the family, i.e. the world to which he is directly related (Ibid.). Consequently, as the authors emphasize, in the process of engaging in visual activity, a child learns about the outside world, including the world of social relations and current problems of modern society, which include environmental problems.

Shu Hongwei points out that it is the visual activity that helps to form the ecological consciousness of students in the course of classes. For example, drawing or painting classes not only saturate the working atmosphere in the classroom with optimism, the joy of discovering new things, but also give each student the opportunity to show their knowledge about the consequences of environmental problems in the world and declare their readiness to preserve natural resources (Shu Hongwei, 2023: 30). Further, the author recommends the organization of mini-exhibitions of students' works on an environmental theme with the involvement of parents. Since the family is an important institution for the socialization of a person, such projects will allow teachers to realize the social function of visual activity, as well as contribute to the solution of the educational task of forming the ecological consciousness of students. Immersion of students and adults in joint creative activity enriches and fills participants with positive communication experience, forms skills of cooperation, understanding and respect for the results of each participant's work, a sense of responsibility for the common cause.

**Conclusions.** It follows from the above that *environmental education by means of visual activity* consists in purposeful formation of students' ability to perceive and understand correctly the beauty of works of art, the development of aesthetic taste, the assimilation of aesthetic concepts and the use of aesthetic abilities in communicating with the natural world to realize its value in human life and the desire to protect and increase natural wealth.

The pedagogical potential of visual activity is manifested in its functional capabilities,



which are reduced to a number of functions of visual activity, collectively contributing to the realization of the goals and objectives of environmental education of students:

– aesthetic-ecological function, contributing to the unity of aesthetic and ecological values and beliefs of students, the formation and development of artistic taste of students, the ability to admire, feel and reason about the beautiful, as well as to show aesthetic and ecological behavior in all activities with a focus on universal values and awareness of their priority;

– cognitive-heuristic function that allows students to penetrate into the author's idea of the work in the process of a detailed analysis of the work of art, paying attention to the plot, the general mood of the work, the means of expression used by the author (cognitive aspect). The heuristic aspect is connected with the process of students' own discovery of new knowledge and its assimilation for the purpose of application in further creative activity;

– a communicative function that promotes the development of a student's communicative skills in the process of joint discussion of completed works or visual materials proposed by a teacher; provides an opportunity for students to communicate not only with each other, but also with the world of art and nature; to join both national and world culture; enrich their spiritual world, broaden their horizons through cognition the artistic heritage accumulated by human civilization;

– a social function that promotes students' assimilation of social values, norms and behaviors, ways of analyzing the surrounding reality, types of relationships accepted in a given society, which ultimately facilitates a person's entry into society. Visual activity makes it possible to unite students with common tasks based on creative search, during which they exchange thoughts, ideas; express personal feelings and experiences, positive emotions, learn to cooperate, i.e. there is an active process of socialization of students.

In general, a distinctive feature of visual activity, unlike other types of educational activ-

ities, according to Chinese researchers, is a direct connection with art. Since one of the leading functions of art is connected with artistic cognition of the world, the formation of aesthetic perception of reality, visual activity has a very valuable pedagogical potential for the education of ecological culture of students.

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