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# EPISTEMIC RECONFIGURATION AND APPROACHES TO LEARNING: A MENTAL-EMPATHIC APPROACH IN PRESCHOOL AND ART EDUCATION

*Abstract*

The article provides a fundamental analysis of the processes of epistemic reconfiguration in contemporary preschool and art education. The transition from an instructive to a socio-constructivist paradigm of learning is examined. Particular attention is paid to the phenomena of epistemic trust and mentalization as foundational elements in shaping the worldview of preschool children under conditions of global uncertainty. The role of art in constructing value orientations and facilitating the social adaptation of learners is also considered.

*Keywords:* epistemic trust, mental-empathic approach, preschool education, art education.

*Problem Statement.* The relevance of the study is обусловлена profound transformations in the system of social relations, which inevitably lead to a crisis of traditional educational models. In the 21st century, education ceases to be a process of transmitting static knowledge and instead becomes a space for constructing meanings. This issue is particularly acute in the fields of preschool and art education, where the object of influence is the emotional and sensory sphere of the child. The need to develop new methodological support that meets

the demands of modern children requires scholars and practitioners to seek innovative epistemological approaches.

The current stage of civilization is characterized by a state of «liquid modernity», in which global transformations of social relations outpace the ability of educational institutions to adapt. The traditional educational model, built on the principles of stability, hierarchy, and the reproductive transmission of knowledge, has exhausted its potential. In the context of the digital revolution and free access to information, knowledge is no longer a scarce resource, and the teacher loses the role of the sole transmitter of truth. Social transformations impose new requirements on the individual: flexibility, critical thinking, and the ability to empathize become more important than the mechanical accumulation of facts.

Therefore, the need for epistemic reconfiguration becomes актуальною – that is, a systemic reconsideration of the nature of knowledge, the ways of acquiring sociocultural experience, and the ethical foundations of interaction between subjects of the educational process. This is especially critical, on the one hand, for preschool education, which involves children who are highly sensitive to external influences and suggestion from adults, and, on the other hand, for art education, which directly affects the emotional and sensory apparatus of the individual. Reconfiguration implies a shift from “subject-based” to «meaning-based» learning, where art becomes a mediator in the child’s understanding of a complex surrounding world.

*Purpose of the article.* The aim of the study is to analyze and conceptualize the interrelation between epistemic trust, mentalization, and emotional experience as a foundation for contemporary approaches to learning, as well as to substantiate the possibilities of their integration into the educational process of preschool and art education.

*Analysis of recent research and publications.* Contemporary scientific approaches to child personality development increasingly emphasize the role of interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and cognitive-affective mechanisms that ensure the effectiveness of learning. In this context, the concepts of attachment, mentalization, and epistemic trust acquire particular significance.

Studies examining the relationship between the quality of child–adult interactions and the child's psycho-emotional state demonstrate that a supportive educational environment contributes to reduced stress levels and improved self-regulation. In particular, it has been established that a positive classroom climate and teacher sensitivity to the child's needs directly influence the child's ability for emotional stabilization and learning activity (Ahnert et al., 2012). In turn, the quality of close relationships serves as an important resource for self-regulation and goal attainment, confirming the significance of the emotional context in learning (Hofmann et al., 2015).

Attachment theory is fundamental for understanding processes of emotional regulation. As noted by J. Cassidy (1994), early relational experiences shape a child's ability to recognize and regulate their own emotions. These ideas are further developed within the theory of mentalization, which emphasizes the importance of the ability to understand mental states – one's own and those of others – as a basis for social cognition and interaction.

A central place in contemporary research is occupied by the concept of epistemic trust, understood as an individual's capacity to perceive information from others as reliable, relevant, and personally meaningful. P. Fonagy and E. Allison (2014) argue that the development of mentalization and epistemic trust constitutes a key condition for effective interaction in both educational and therapeutic settings. Further studies confirm that epistemic trust is associated with learning approaches, motivation, and the ability to acquire new experiences (Karagiannopoulou et al., 2026).

Considerable attention is also paid to the practical aspects of developing mentalization capacities in parents and educators. In particular, psychoeducational and parent-support programs focused on enhancing mentalization demonstrate a positive impact on interactions with children, especially in cases involving neurodevelopmental and behavioral difficulties (Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy, 2026). Similar findings have been reported in studies on child maltreatment prevention programs, where the development of parental mentalization competence contributes to improved parenting quality and risk reduction (Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė et al., 2023).

Thus, the analysis of scientific sources indicates that the integration of the mentalization-based approach, the development of the emotional sphere, and the formation of epistemic trust create a foundation for new educational strategies. These ideas are particularly relevant in preschool and art education, where interaction, emotional experience, and creativity serve as key factors in the development of the child's.

*Presentation of the main material of the study.* In the contemporary educational landscape, marked by a global crisis of social institutions, the phenomenon of epistemic trust emerges as one of the most critical factors for learning success. Epistemic trust is the fundamental human capacity to perceive information from another (a teacher, a parent) as reliable, personally significant, and relevant to one's own life. According to Peter Fonagy's concept, epistemic trust is defined as «the basic readiness of an individual to accept new information from another as having personal value and being credible» (Fonagy & Allison, 2014).

An older preschooler, upon entering the educational environment, often exhibits a high level of «epistemic vigilance» - a natural cognitive defense against irrelevant or potentially misleading information. Overcoming this barrier is possible only through the implementation of the principles of the «pedagogy of

kindness». This involves creating an atmosphere of psychological safety where the educator acts not as a controller of knowledge but as an authentic guide into the world of culture.

Within the scope of our research, which encompasses the fields of preschool and arts education, epistemic trust is established through the mechanism of validation of feelings. When an educator refrains from authoritarian judgments regarding the «correctness» of a child's perception of a work of art and instead takes a sincere interest in their emotional response, they signal the significance of the child's subjective world. This unlocks the mechanisms for internalizing complex cultural codes. Thus, trust becomes an epistemic bridge: the child «opens up» because they feel that their own perspective is accepted as valid and entitled to exist, even if it differs from other viewpoints.

Regarding the epistemic reconfiguration of arts education, particularly for children of preschool and primary school age, it cannot be viewed merely as a narrow pedagogical phenomenon; it is, first and foremost, a philosophical paradigm shift in the perception of child development. Traditional didactics were dominated by an «object-oriented» model, where the child was viewed as a recipient expected to master a specific set of techniques and art historical facts. However, modern conditions necessitate a transition to a socio-constructivist approach, where knowledge of art is born directly at the moment of the encounter between the subject (the child) and the artistic object.

Reconfiguration entails a radical change of «optics»: we shift from prioritizing the artistic product to prioritizing the internal transformation of the personality.

Epistemic reconfiguration legitimizes the child's right to subjectivity. In this model, knowledge is not viewed as «correct» or «incorrect» from the standpoint of academic pedagogy; rather, it is epistemically significant for the child if it assists them in structuring their own experience. Thus, reconfiguration ensures the

integrity of the cognitive experience, where art acts as a mediator between the child's inner world and external social reality. This is a path toward the formation of agency (subjectivity), where the child does not simply study art but learns to live within it.

Epistemic reconfiguration is not a mere change in curricula or an update of the list of artists to be studied. It is a fundamental shift in the «optics» through which we view child development. It is based on a socio-constructivist approach, wherein the child does not simply «consume» culture but actively constructs their own picture of the world through interaction with the artistic object and the educator. The focus shifts from the artistic result (a drawing or a craft) to the internal process of personality transformation under the influence of aesthetic experience.

In the context of global transformations, education must shift its focus from the question of «what to teach» to «how we internalize what we perceive». This involves a transition to a humanistic paradigm, where the educational program is developed taking into account the socio-economic characteristics of the region, the children's interests, and the family's requests. Such an approach allows for the creation of educational components based on the free choice of the learners, which is key to fostering the child's agency. Reconfiguration also requires the integration of various art forms, enabling the child to gain a holistic rather than fragmentary experience of cognition. If an art school fails to create conditions for the emergence of epistemic trust among the participants of the educational process, the learning process remains at the level of formal technical transmission. Epistemic reconfiguration – specifically within an art school – is the creation of a flexible, human-centered environment where the integration of different arts ensures the integrity of cognition. It legitimizes the teacher’s right to creative autonomy and the child's right to subjectivity in the process of artistic and aesthetic development.

Consequently, the epistemic reconfiguration of arts education fundamentally transforms the role of the educator. In the traditional system, the teacher acted as a carrier and transmitter of «absolute knowledge», creating a hierarchical distance and often provoking epistemic vigilance in the learners. The modern paradigm presented in this study requires a transition to the model of the teacher-facilitator and mentor. Regarding this, research by Hofmann, Finkel, and Fitzsimons suggests: «temporarily boosting relationship satisfaction may be functional for daily goal pursuit via a combination of cognitive and affective mechanisms, thus further integrating relationship research with socio-cognitive research on goal pursuit» (Hofmann, Finkel & Fitzsimons, 2015, p. 434).

This transformation is based on the principles of psychological and pedagogical support, where the teacher’s primary task is not instruction but the creation of conditions for the child’s own cognitive act to occur. The teacher-facilitator must possess skills in empathetic listening and mentalization. They are capable of «reading» the child’s emotional states during their contact with a visual image and delicately guiding the process of reflection without imposing ready-made interpretative templates. The teacher’s new role must encompass:

1. Flexibility of pedagogical design: the ability to adapt the content of the lessons "here and now," responding to the interests and psychophysical state of the child.

2. Stimulation of agency: encouraging the child to independently choose artistic tools and methods of expressing their feelings.

3. Dialogicity: structuring lessons as a «meeting of two consciousnesses», where the adult’s experience and the child’s experience are valued equally within the space of aesthetic experience.

Such subject-to-subject interaction ensures a transition from authoritarian pedagogy to the pedagogy of partnership. The teacher becomes a «significant adult» whose authenticity and openness serve as the primary tools for overcoming

epistemic alienation, which is critical for forming a resilient personality in the face of global transformations: «links between classroom participants and positive relationships provided information about the essential environmental conditions for students' stress. Students in unsupportive versus supportive classrooms had more level cortisol profiles, suggesting that low-quality classrooms impeded sufficient cortisol decreases at both the beginning and end of the week. Moreover, students with conflictual teacher relationships were less able to properly down-regulate stress than students with proximally balanced relationships showing the most optimal cortisol profiles» (Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein-Madry, & Milatz, 2012, p. 249).

If epistemic trust opens the path to knowledge, then mentalization serves as the direct tool for processing this knowledge. *Mentalization* is defined as the capacity to perceive and interpret behavior (one's own and that of others) through the prism of mental states – intentions, feelings, beliefs, and desires. Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė L., Byrne G. and Barkauskienė R. conducted pedagogical research based on the «Lighthouse» parenting program, with the following results: «Several mentalization-based group programs have shown promising results for parents facing difficulties in parent-child relationships. Results from 101 participants showed significant improvement in mentalization, parental adaptation, and family functioning, as well as a decrease in coercive parenting practices. The program emphasized curiosity toward the child's mind and a readiness to reflect on one's own feelings, thoughts, and behavior – core principles of mentalization-based work» (Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė, Byrne, & Barkauskienė, 2023). Later studies by Chelouche-Dwek G. confirmed this hypothesis: «Psychoeducation, a practice based on mentalization and supporting the child's personality, is associated with a significant improvement in the reflective functioning of relationships and self-efficacy. Parental accounts of transformed relational practices and transitions from reactive to reflective interaction resonate with a broader literature demonstrating

that mentalization-oriented group programs can improve reflective abilities and the quality of care in various family contexts» (Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy, 2026, p. 431).

A work of visual art acts as an «external container» for complex emotions. When contemplating a work of art, a child encounters intensive coloristic solutions that provoke an immediate emotional resonance. The process of mentalization here unfolds in two dimensions:

1. *Intrapsychic mentalization:* the child learns to identify their own reaction («What state does this color evoke in me? Why do I feel anxiety or elation?»). This promotes the development of emotional intelligence and self-regulation skills.

2. *Intersubjective mentalization:* through the educator's questions, the child attempts to «decode» the author's intention («What was the artist thinking when choosing these colors? What did they want to tell us about this sunset?»).

Such practice of «mind reading» through a visual image allows the child to transcend egocentrism. This approach stimulates «operating with knowledge in the process of engaging with works of art», which transforms art historical knowledge from abstract information into a living tool for social adaptation. A child who has learned to understand the «language of feelings» on canvas becomes more sensitive to the emotional states of people in real life, which is a fundamental outcome of artistic and aesthetic development in a transformed society.

A child's development in arts education is impossible without mentalization – the ability to perceive and interpret one's own and others' mental states (thoughts, feelings, intentions). Art here serves as an ideal trainer. By contemplating a work of art, the child learns to recognize the emotional state of the author or character, which is the first step toward developing empathy.

The ultimate goal of artistic and aesthetic development, according to our concept, is not merely the accumulation of knowledge about art, but the formation

of a holistic emotional-value-based attitude toward the surrounding world. In this context, visual art acts as a powerful tool for life-creation.

The process of forming value orientations begins with an emotional resonance to a work of art but does not end there. Through art, the child learns to transfer aesthetic categories (harmony, light, color, rhythm) into the plane of their own daily experience. Successful reconfiguration allows the child to:

1. *Operate with knowledge in real-life contexts:* using the language of art to describe their own states and understand the behavior of others.

2. *Develop an «ecology of feelings»:* through aesthetic experience, a careful attitude toward the world as a holistic work of art is formed.

3. *Transform the aesthetic into the ethical:* the capacity for empathy, developed during the contemplation of artistic images, becomes the foundation for moral choice and conflict-free social interaction.

Thus, arts education becomes the foundation for forming «aesthetic intelligence» – a special way of being in the world where beauty and meaning become the personality's internal compasses. This ensures not only artistic maturity but also a high level of social adaptability, as a child who possesses mentalization skills and epistemic trust is capable of a deeper and more constructive connection with society.

*Conclusions.* The epistemic reconfiguration of education, particularly in arts and preschool sectors, amidst the global transformations of social relations, is not merely a response to the challenges of the time but a conscious choice in favor of the humanization of society. Restoring epistemic trust between the child and the adult, using mentalization as a tool for cognition, and transforming the educator into a mentor/facilitator create the conditions for raising a holistic personality.

Art in this system becomes a universal language, and arts education must become the cutting edge for forming humanity’s new episteme – where

knowledge, feelings, and ethics constitute an indivisible unity. This is the path from education as an act of informing to education as an act of life-creation.

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