

## Artists as Inviting Personalities for Self Exploration and Social Learning at School

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### Abstract

In today's increasingly fast-paced societies, undergoing reformation in the aging schooling systems in order to prepare children to subdue the high amounts of pressure and stress and lead productive lives seems to be moving slowly, compared to the unexpected rhythms of the socio-economic changes. In that context a programme has been created at the School of Primary Education, based on the belief that art shouldn't rest only in the frame, but become itself a frame of the children's experiences, a means for self-exploration, enhancing at the same time social learning and cultural responsiveness in schools. At current stage we explore whether and how artists as inviting personalities can become an example to children for building their own identity, while opening widely the borders of relating effectively to others or to life's varied phenomena, as they learn how to communicate the subtleties of who they really are and what they believe in ways that words usually fail to fully capture. Children are asked to choose as a self-companion through their school year an artist, who greatly benefited from the arts' unique power as a tool for shedding light on his/her self-knowledge and for overcoming difficulties as well as a means of fostering meaningful connections with his/her social and cultural environment. Curricular goals and learning units are approached by adapting innovative and effective teaching practices through the arts, based on the life and work of the artists children have chosen.

**Keywords:** Art History, Learning through the arts, Art Education, Self improvement, Social Inclusion, Cooperation, Mixed ability classes, Art therapy

### Introduction: Thoughts before action

"I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." "Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere."

Albert Einstein

In today's increasingly fast-paced societies, the reformation of ageing schooling systems in order to prepare children to overcome high pressure and stress and lead productive lives, seems to be moving slowly in comparison with the unexpected rhythms of socio-economic change and technological development. As a result of the headlong rush to follow the curriculum, holistic approaches to learning and creativity are frequently pushed aside while young learners face underachievement, lack of inspiration and an inability to set goals. Feeling underestimated and emotionally disabled, they tend to become chronically discontent. Ironically, this is happening at a time when everything seems possible and neuroscience research is revealing the impressive impact of arts on the cognitive, social and emotional development of young brains (Sousa, 2006).

Every new academic year, debates are launched on how educative practices can become more concrete and effective in the holistic development of young learners as humans, not just 'possible' scientists. Proponents of art education argue that the nature and practices of arts embody intellectual freedom, as well as the unique power to transmit human values, reinforce greater respect for people, eliminate stress, minimise discrimination and break down boundaries. Artistic activities engage all senses and wire brain and soul for successful learning. Moreover, this 'learning' goes far beyond the singular knowledge derived from the various individual subjects. Education through the arts offers a combination of information, skills and thought processes that transcends all areas of human engagement and integrates exceptionally well with most subjects in the core curriculum (Efland, 2002; Newton, 2014). Furthermore, arts play an important role in human development, enhancing the growth of cognitive, emotional and psychomotor pathways. Therefore, educational systems

and practitioners at all levels have an obligation to expose learners to the arts at the earliest possible stage, and to consider their inclusion in the curriculum as fundamental.

According to Vygostki (1991, 1997), teachers can contribute to the enrichment of children's experiences by proposing, involving and enriching activities that broaden their cultural repertoire and contribute to the strengthening of 'superior' psychic functions (self-realisation, self-control, memory, attention, etc.) as well as the development of emotions and of personality. Art is the ground on which our internal and external worlds meet. 'Like other tools, art has the power to extend our capacities beyond those that nature has originally endowed us with. Art compensates us for certain inborn weaknesses, in this case of the mind rather than the body; weaknesses that we can refer to as psychological frailties' (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 5). Achieving or restoring the psychological balance, art acts as a catalyst in personal development, enabling the long-sought Aristotelian 'catharsis', the release of sentiments, the acquisition of self-knowledge, the surmounting of fears.

All of us involved in art education or education thought the arts and culture can advocate, I believe, that children's indirect or direct engagement with some form of art contributes decisively to their holistic growth. The results would be apparent sooner were art to be covered in schools not as a single-hour subject, but as a means of processing self-cognition, social behaviour and emplacement; as a tool of informal 'soul therapy' as well as one of acquiring academic knowledge (Malchiodi, 2012). As part of a new movement in schools, teachers use classic works of art to inspire students to observe closely, think critically and discuss respectfully key elements of the curriculum. Although such practices let children develop visual literacy, art is not meant just to be read as we read words. In order to attempt an innovative approach to children's lives (personal-social-cultural) with the aid of arts, children need to feel, experience and be inspired in open-ended artistic-educational interchanges. From the very first day of introductions in the classroom they should be given the opportunity to explore, through artistic means, elements of their character they never imagined existed, thereby getting to know themselves as well as their classmates. Each proposed artistic task should acquire a meaning which, because of the emotional involvement it allows, can contribute to their development of different capabilities that are also appropriate to social dynamics (Duarte, 1993).

### **Objectives and Methodology**

Within the framework of a new approach to acquainting children with one another in the classroom and finding out each student's abilities, disabilities, sentiments, thoughts and beliefs, a programme was created at the School of Primary Education (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Education, Greece). It was based on the belief that art should not rest only in the frame, but become itself a frame of the children's experiences as a means of self-exploration, simultaneously enhancing social learning and cultural responsiveness in schools.

The project is quite new, having been running for only a few months of the academic year 2016-17. It has been carried out in two regions, involving 50 children in their final year (6<sup>th</sup> grade) of primary school. In order to achieve a 'safe' research result reflecting the situation in the country as a whole and taking individual differences into consideration, the intention is to extend the project to several other areas and age groups during the current academic/school year (2017-18) at least, and to promote interdisciplinary connections between the Faculty of Education's undergraduate students and children in primary schools. Interaction will be enabled by employing multiple ways of communicating experiences and knowledge, and by creating and critically using multicultural pedagogic tools as well as our interactive Cleo @rtplatform (an innovative online educational platform that contributes to the dissemination of knowledge in arts and culture).

At this stage our aim is to explore whether and how artists as appealing personalities can become models for children in the process of building their own identity, widening access to ways of relating effectively to others and to life's varied phenomena as the children learn how to communicate the subtleties of who they really are and what they believe in, in ways that words usually fail to fully capture. By emphasising and examining the role of art in children's lives, instead of just looking for the aesthetic value of works of art, the project aspires to foster self-exploration and develop reflective social practices, beliefs and values that children feel close to or regard as being of great influence (Duncum, 1996, 2002; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

A variety of artists were chosen as alternative sources of inspiration—as appealing personalities who preferred to use their creativity and imagination to handle life's ups and downs. For many artists, like Matisse, Kahlo, Tapies and Beethoven, art became their refuge and in various ways a release for their sentiments and beliefs. Words gave space to lines, form and

colour, and an alternative 'therapy', not always consciously chosen, was employed through the empowerment of creativity and self-exploration. Struggle, passion and patience fought mediocrity and led finally to exposure and greatness. Thus, as inspiring models, artists can compel, educate and communicate ideas to children in ways that are more joyful, understandable and descriptive than words alone. By adopting artists as models, the emphasis is not on the excellence of their work but on their willingness to explore themselves, to overcome their 'difficulties' and set goals through art, but not only in art. Children more than anyone need creative types who will pick them up and dust them off when life gets tough. Even though today's societies are excessively focused on the external, art and artists can help children to explore, cultivate and honour their inner world. Artists express themselves in a universal 'language' unconventionally. For them, mistakes are the pathways to discovery, and patience the linchpin of their creativity. Genius takes time and artists pursue their passion as an end in itself, without ensuring reward or recognition. Children, as a result of their innate artistic sensibility, can draw lessons from artists on cultivating curiosity, finding beauty everywhere, handling criticism and socialising in alternative ways. One of the biggest lessons that art can offer children is how to resonate with their classmates, whether they are going through a pleasurable or traumatic experience, are extremely skilful or facing difficulties; in other words, they can learn to empathise, which might be more beneficial than any other knowledge. In real life, problems can often have more than one solution, and the artistic experience can teach children to explore deep into their souls, shed light on their inner darkness, express their emotions and use their judgment (Eisner, 2002).

In order to achieve a holistic approach the case study, the ideal method according to Yin (2008), was chosen as the main methodology for this research. At this first stage, the initial reactions of children and relevant observations highlighting the value of art in self-cognition were captured and analysed. The project also sought to underscore the usefulness of a rounded acquisition of self-, social, cultural and academic knowledge through the arts.

Particular sensitivity was shown in matters of inter- and multi-cultural orientation, given the range of ethnic and cultural origin in the classrooms. To ensure effectiveness, special care was taken in selecting artists across cultures, diversifying instructions and explanations for children whom we divided up into small, mixed groups, setting various goals and presenting cross-cultural models, and in the artistic/cultural freedom deployed by children during their self-presentations.

The data collected is significant and helpful in terms of allowing more careful observation and making relevant changes to the pedagogical scenario. Nevertheless, in order to interpret the results *in situ* and proceed to a generalised conclusion, the gathering of data [observational field notes, artworks, videos, wiki results and questionnaires in three phases—introductory, mid-assessment, final evaluation] from all those involved will continue during this academic year, involving more participants and establishing closer connections between the work done in the classrooms and in the university labs.

By the end of the project, and before setting out our final proposals for what changes can and should be promoted in the school curriculum according to the results of this study, a parallel analysis of the educational material—mainly textbooks—used in primary education is needed in order to investigate the links with art and cultural images, the conceptions they offer about various types of artistic and cultural expression, and the suggestions they propose for their use in fostering children's self-cognition and social development.

### **The basics of the approach**

Children were invited to discover themselves through various artistic modes of expression and to communicate their feelings, thoughts and beliefs. To ignite their creativity the project encouraged them to explore the life and oeuvre of various artists, to be inspired by them but not to set as their goal the aim of becoming like 'one of them'. On the contrary, they were encouraged to free their souls and expressive abilities and find their real selves. The approach followed adheres to Picasso's idea of creativity and innovation, expressed briefly in his famous quote: '*When I was a child my mother said to me, "If you become a soldier, you'll be a general. If you become a monk, you'll be the pope." Instead I became a painter and wound up as Picasso.*'

The project was organised around five basic phases, as follows:

#### *Double self-portrait /self-cognition, face1*

The instructor/ teacher showed the class Pablo Picasso's *Girl before a mirror* (1932, MoMA) and posed a clever, stimulating question to engage students in discussion about the intriguing image and spark inquiries about their inner and outer selves, self-portraits, psychographic portraits etc., in order to operationalise the challenge.

An explanatory link along with a photocopy of a short analysis of the painting was offered to each student (MoMA URL [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/publication\\_pdf/3153/Picasso\\_PREVIEW.pdf?1353958988](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/publication_pdf/3153/Picasso_PREVIEW.pdf?1353958988)).

Next, students were invited to introduce themselves to the class non-verbally, avoiding common first-day introduction tactics, tree charts, etc. They were asked to produce a double self-portrait in an attempt to express their inner–outer identity. Various media were available and a short video of various artists' psychographic self-portraits shown in order to mark the starting point of the activity.

Suggestions were offered—where needed—on how to split their faces into two, reflecting the inner and outer self: the way they feel and the way they believe they look. They were also given the freedom to construct their inner side by including things that they like and the thoughts and feelings that best describe them.



Fig. 1-3

#### *Muse month*

Working in small groups, the children were asked to search for information about one of the nine muses and to present their findings to the rest of the class in an imaginative and artistic way. They were then asked to make a puppet of their muse and to use it as their *deus ex machina*. The challenge was to respond as a group to all school activities and exercises, for a whole month, by monitoring, expressing and overcoming the difficulties they face inspired by their muse and the arts she nurtures. Experiences and artworks were exchanged on a wiki and at the end of the month each group story had to present their experience as a cartoon story or short film.

#### Main objectives:

- To serve as a threshold to the children's sensitisation and initiate creative thinking and problem solving through the arts
- To explore the expressive possibilities that arts can offer
- To cultivate creativity, imagination and critical thinking
- To stimulate psychokinetic development
- To learn to respect others through experience
- To encourage the expression of emotions.

#### *Talent takes time*

First, the concept of multiple interpretations was applied in the classroom to the oeuvre and personality, abilities and disabilities, beliefs, feelings, etc. of world-renowned artists. The selected artists were considered intriguing and appealing personalities, who revealed their difficulties in public as well as the benefits they enjoyed by becoming artistically active and creative.

Following on from these kinds of multiple 'diagnoses', in small groups the children then had to choose an artist and construct his/her profile by focusing on his/her work, life, diaries, theories and thoughts.

Each group was given ten days to organise a small exhibition on the artist's work and persona, indicating the special role art had played in his/her self-cognition, social emplacement, development and maturity. The children were expected to recognise and demonstrate how art had become both the artists' refuge as well as their Trojan horse.

Material on offer for each artist in the list included a selection of self-portraits and key artworks, a collection of his/her thoughts or writings, a short biography, web links and videos associated with his/her artworks.

Talking about these artists, their goals and artworks encouraged children not just to gain cultural knowledge but to look carefully, explore closely, distinguish, analyse, explain and meditate (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004; Pringle, 2006).

#### *Step into my shoes*

Children were asked to choose as a self-companion through their school year, an artist who greatly benefited from the arts' unique power as a tool for shedding light on his/her self-knowledge and for overcoming difficulties as well as fostering meaningful connections with his/her social and cultural environment. Curricular goals and learning units were approached from that point onwards by adapting innovative and effective teaching practices through the arts, based on the life and work of the artists the children had chosen.

Activities 3 and 4 were aimed at, among other artistic and emotional goals, helping the children to:

Develop their emotional intelligence and empathise with others in various situations

Explore 'greatness' from a different point of view and understand that 'talent' is a privilege open to all individuals

Conceive that each person expresses his/her sentiments in different ways

Realise the importance of the arts as a means of expression as well as a 'therapy' tool

Limit negative thoughts and quick judgments.

#### *Self-presentation, face 2*

At the end of the project, the children were challenged to portray themselves for a second time and to capture as many parameters of their personality in any way they preferred (through painting or other artistic media).

Stage 1 double-face self-portraits and stage 2 self-presentations were exhibited together and analysed in the classroom, focusing on the role that art played in their development.

Artworks, thoughts and interactions were uploaded by the children onto the Cleo @rtplatform, in a special area designed for this project.

#### **Reactions and first evaluation- results**

Interim outcomes at this stage of the project showed an improved classroom climate, the restoration of students' good opinion and attitudes towards learning and significant development in their social-emotional skills. Intrigued at participating in activities that engaged the various senses simultaneously and empathetically, the children came to realise by experience rather than in theory that the arts are not just expressive and affective but are also deeply cognitive. They admitted that before participating in the project they rated works of art in a museum as highly creative, but paid less attention or gave little credit to the creativity, innovation or greatness of a classmate's artistic work. Now, they felt that they had an almost deeper perception of what they were seeing, without preconceptions. Moreover, many confessed that they had never appreciated that their artistic work or artistic expression was a means of self-manifestation. With only a few exceptions, most children believed that their expressionistic abilities and skills had expanded. They were excited to find and experiment with these skills that related to more than art alone, applying them to the way they understood the world, saw other people and absorbed their lessons (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2009).

Even though the project was quite new and that there had been little time to participate regularly in various forms of art, quite a few children noticed a clear correlation between art and other achievements. For example, some of them who studied music and felt that they had a flair for mathematics and geometry, felt close to artists such as Klee and Kandinsky who had succeeded in both fields.

To sum up the findings of the informal first evaluation, we wish to underscore that the children had:

communicated effectively and learnt to work with diverse people

cultivated their capacity to notice, observe and then reflect on thoughts and behaviours in order to make more conscious choices

learnt to honour difference and foster meaningful connections within themselves and between each other, their schoolwork, and their world

found suitable channels for expression and communication of feelings by exploring and articulating their needs through non-verbal language

shown greater capacity to reveal their imagination

felt motivated to engage in classroom activities when given opportunities to express their authentic selves and the skills to communicate

felt valued and accepted and thus had become less inhibited in their engagement with artworks.

### **Conclusion: Implications and Concerns**

Old and insufficient educational systems today that lack the capacity to innovate, need to adapt to new findings regarding cognition and student learning. It is clear from the most recent research outcomes that 'pretty few curricula written for educators focus on art as a media, a non-verbal language' (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004), and it is both unfortunate and frustrating that today things have changed little. Recognising and admitting that the soul of education is threatened is not enough. All of us involved in one way or another in art education have been criticised for suffering from what Aristotle calls *akrasia*, weakness of the will to speak up, in this case to foster bolder decisions and structural change in the hierarchy of education. Assuming our responsibility, it is high time that we focused on setting alight this small but so significant glow called creativity. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, arts being one of them. Children who are given the opportunity to express their imagination freely become an asset to the entire world.

Stimulating and fostering creativity through the arts supports children to express warmth, compassion and care, and to cultivate connections with their classmates and other people, and helps to build trusting, safe and inclusive learning communities. More specifically, by increasing children's sense of self-perception and self-awareness, we reinforce social-emotional and character development as the fundamental denominator on which to cultivate their academic knowledge.

At this stage of the research project we have focused on how to motivate children, from the very first day, to express themselves through a non-verbal form of communication that feeds into their natural inclinations, with the outcomes of which calling for continued research attention. We need, however, to prevent further casualties of virtual learning by giving children increasing opportunities to create deep and meaningful personal experiences, as well as enhance mutual understanding in the classroom. It is important and necessary to expand this study and further examine whether the praxis of self-cognition and learning through the arts has the potential to become a generator of social understanding and a key to radical changes in educational systems that tend to a holistic approach to life knowledge.

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**Figures 1-3:** Examples of double self-portraits created by children involved in the project.