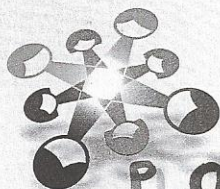




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**PLAY AND
PLAYING
IN EARLY
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**IGRA U RANOM
DJETINJSTVU
PLAY AND PLAYING
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD**



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DEEPENING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE THROUGH ARTISTIC PLAY

ABSTRACT

This work presents a pilot educational program for the art of photography, which was designed by the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education of University of Patras, and that was applied to pupils of a kindergarten class.

The program was based upon two basic characteristics:

- *The first characteristic has to do with the composition of artistic forms as a way of constructing a text, a medium for communication your thoughts, feelings and comments. From this perspective art is not neutral, nor personal and subjective, as usually considered.*
- *The second one has to do with a formation of a non-formal teaching approach based upon the artistic experience. Professional artists and learners are working together and they are getting involved in authentic artistic processes using the art of photography as well as the techniques of photographic collage.*

The cause for the initiation of the program was a catastrophic event, a very serious fire which caused the devastation of a forest in the area. Children through artistic play had the chance to think about this event, to form a "narration" of the event and its consequences and elaborate on their feelings. Moreover, through artistic work children had the opportunity to find their own ways to express their feelings, experiences, and, most important, to communicate their views and opinions.

With a non-formal and not pre-determined way of artistic work children worked, played and expressed themselves in an authentic and spontaneous way. Through such an open set of activities they had the chance not only to enrich their knowledge about artistic work but, also, to discover that artworks offer ways of expressing yourself and ways of making visible and communicative your opinions on current issues. Thus, in this program both art expression and literacy are compound in order to strengthen the communicative abilities of children.

The program is part of a broader attempt, taking place in the framework of the European Program "Education through Rehabilitative Art – Photo" (E.T.R.A.) funding by the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (E.A.C.E.A), in the frame of LL Program – Grundtvig

Introduction

This work presents a pilot educational program for the art of photography, which was designed by the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education of University of Patras, and that was applied to pupils of a kindergarten class. The program is part of a broader attempt, taking place in the framework of the European Program "Education through Rehabilitative Art – Photo" (E.T.R.A.) funding by the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (E.A.C.E.A), in the frame of LL Program – Grundtvig Multilateral Project.

During both the design and the application a special effort was given to the reclaim of E.T.R.A. approach for the art of photography in pedagogical context. Photography is an extremely privileged way of art especially when someone attempts to record and communicate with the reality around him. E.T.R.A. approach reveals some aspects of photographic art which are very useable in preschool or early school age, when the child is at the beginning point of a long way to explore and define himself and others.

The activities applied had two basic characteristics. The first one is related to the use of artistic forms, which, in compound with language, can help the elaboration and communication of feelings and experiences. Even though E.T.R.A. doesn't adopt the art therapy approach it reclaims some of its aspects. The basic principles of therapy through art have to do with the communication, the control and the solution of emotional conflicts through artistic creativity (Malchiodi, 2001: 157). The expression of oppressed emotions is one of the most important elements of artistic curative process, since it offers a way to negative experiences to be expressed. Moreover, it helps contradictory or undetermined emotions as well as stressful situations to be clarified. Thus, the person has the possibility to gain a symbolic control and through that to establish an inner feeling of safety and protection. These aspects can be reclaimed in education, especially in preschool education, when the children are struggling to understand not only the emotions but, also, the reasons of these emotions. The ability to comprehend and reply to increasingly complex emotional situations is gradually developed (Denham, Zinsser & Bailey, 2011). Visual arts in any case offer an alternative "way of speaking" and through them children can think about and share ideas, experiences and feelings, understanding in this way himself and others and, most important, experiences a deep relation with the world (Ardouin, 1997, Daucher & Seitz, 2003, Magouliotis, 2002). The attempt to describe pictures with language increases this understanding. Artistic education in this framework has nothing to do with the creation of "beautiful" artifacts. Artistic education has to do with the construction of a person, in other words a political creature according to Aristotle.

The second characteristic has to do with the attempt of creation of a non-formal didactic practice based upon the artistic experience. More specifically, it contains a situation in which professional artists and children are working together and get involved in authentic artistic processes, using the art of photography and the techniques of photographic collage. Based upon the decision to use E.T.R.A. approach, we didn't take into account any certain or predetermined body of theoretical and practical knowledge as a presupposition to be taught. Artists working with the children had to reveal their ways of thinking and doing. By doing so in a spontaneous way knowledge emerged as a necessity for the creation of visual forms and it was acquired as a result of collective and personal research. Thus, possible ways of creation of visual forms, as well as, the reasons these forms are produced were acquired by children "from inside", by participating to the creative process (Costantino, 2007, Eisner, 2004). In this framework, educational intervention

is not organized on the basis of a certain and concrete knowledge, but on the basis of the needs raised by the attempts of each team, its questions, needs, targets and possibly problems.

The educational program

The group under consideration consists of twenty three pupils of a kindergarten in Patras, Greece. For a period of two months the children worked with their teacher accompanied by two visual artists, Ganaelle Bressoud and Irene Mprati. Their activities were watched by some students of the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education. The initial cause was a catastrophic fire in a forest close to the school area. Photographic art was considered as a very appropriate medium of direct recording and commenting upon real events. But, photography as art, as any other visual expressive medium, has its own contracts and specifications. In this framework, the target of the project had two dimensions. The first one was children to clarify their experience through artistic game and the second was children to acquire and authentic experience of photographic art and to understand its function and specific characteristics.

The artists who worked with the children attempted through their participation to reinforce a climate of authentic artistic perspective and to guide children to compose a cohesive picture. Any kind of instruction was indirect and the knowledge was emerging in vivo in an unpredictable and a fuzzy way. By participation in an artistic act the learner realizes from within artistic concepts and develops the essential skills.

The program was divided into three, discreet but overlapping, stages:

- a) Activation of interest for the specific expressive potentialities of the art of photography
- b) Visit to burnt forest and photographic recording
- c) Creation of artifacts based on photographs with the collage technique and commenting on these artifacts.

The challenge for each stage was not only children to create visual forms but, also, to assign meaning and content and embed these forms to a broader frame of reference. More specifically:
Πιο συγκεκριμένα:

a) Activation of interest for the specific expressive potentialities of the art of photography

A basic element of intervention under consideration is that both the approach and the creation of visual forms should be considered as fully interrelated procedures. Contact with artwork Η επαφή με το έργο τέχνης expands the ability to create visual forms and vice versa (Chapman, 1978, Herrmann, 2005). Without a structured and meaningful connection of these two aspects, there is a risk for the artistic activities to remain in a practical level.

Children studied journals with photos of various events and they were encouraged to comment on these photos. Through the discussions children understood that photography is an artistic form, which offers many and specific chances to record events and situations from natural and social world. Children were asked to observe the details and the impressions these details bring on. Later children were presented with newspapers with photos of the fire in the forest. Excerpts from texts and captions of the photos were read to them. With these readings a new cycle of discussion was launched, during which children was called to express their own feelings about the catastrophic fire and to compound their speech with the pictures in the photos. This way their interest on various communicative and expressive possibilities of photographic art was fully activated.

One of our attempts was to be clear to the children that by doing art we are not touch at

only happy and attractive issues but, every aspect of reality, even those which are unpleasant or unlovable. From this perspective there is no issue that could be considered more or less important per se and every aspect of life could be approached in a personal way. Importance of an issue has to do with the kind of approach as well as with the way it is captured visually. In any case, visual forms are compound with the reality of our life, our experiences, our feelings our attitudes and our interests. Art is emerging from social life. Art is a person's attempt to explain the world, to explore and understand the multifaceted reality, and final, to determine his/her perspectives.

A second intervention in this first stage of preparation had to do with the visual observation. Photography as a way of doing art is based on selective gaze. It is based on the artist's ability to isolate aspects of reality in a certain time and elaborate on their importance. This is why we gave to the children paper frames and encourage them to look through them. The purpose was to understand the difference between views with naked eye and through lens. The second way of gazing allows the focus on important for them details. Through these activities children were prepared to move to the next stage, this of the visit to the burnt forest.

b) Visit to the burnt forest and taking photos (shooting)

In this stage the visit to the burnt forest took place. Children had the experience to feel the devastation, to walk around the black area, to smell and to touch the ground and the stumps. Later they had the chance to use their digital cameras and take photos of everything seemed important for them. They were suggested to focus on details. By focusing on details they had the chance to realize that in an area which seems to be uniform and even depressing there are many aspects which are less obvious, but have a special personal interest. Different persons focus on different elements. While at the first moments of the visit children roam around in the more or less ugly area, later they start to discover interesting elements, such as the textures and the shapes of the burnt stumps, the prints of fire on the stones or on the ground. But it was the small sprouts and some flowers that attract their care more than everything else.

This experience gave them the chance to realize that the art of photography starts with a careful and intensive gaze to the surrounding world. Just looking is not enough in order all our perceptual and cognitive abilities to be fully activated. Conscious observation through the lens is a creative act, which helped children to stand and observe the visual incentives and acquire a clear impression of what they were seeing around them (Daucher – Seitz, 200, Costantino, 2007). Ultimately artistic perspective is nothing else but an intensive gaze to the world and all the kind of objects (Parsons, 2002). This is why artistic lessons contribute to look the aspects of life and world in a more intensive way. This way consists the very essential presupposition for the passing over from the simple and passive observation to personal act and creativity.

c) Creation of artifacts based on photographs with the collage technique and commenting on these artifacts.

The photos children had taken during their visit to the forest were printed both black and white and colorful and they were used as the basic element of further artistic work with collage technique and painting. When children show the printed photos, especially those which were black and white, found them very depressing and they suggested adding color to them. They decided to draw flowers. This could be considered as an attempt to control in a symbolic way the catastrophic event. Children felt that with their addendums they help nature to overcome the situation and return sooner to the former situation.

In this stage the artists' intervention was limited to those cases they were invited by the

children. Every act, even the purposeless play with the materials or even the refusal of participation was considered as acceptable. Artists would like to make clear that artistic practices are human contrivances in the service of expressive intention (Gaillet, 1997). Thus, learning any kind of technique does not demand to follow a mandatory course, but it opens various perspectives and routes.

By adopting a spontaneous way of work children were allowed to move from play to artistic experience. Doing art was considered as an open activity. Of course, there were things to be learned, but on the same time this knowledge was enriched by the experience of personal investigation, initiative, communication and cooperation. Experimentation leads to habituation, extends curiosity, enhances skills and enriches with new knowledge (Epstein & Trimis, 2002).

The next act was the presentation of artifacts. This presentation gave children the chance to come across their whole work as an entity. During the whole project we did not care to bring in discussion the possible worth of the educational intervention. Our main concern was the quality of the experience and the rank of interest we could wake up to the young children. So, we did not pay any attention to the result, even though it was remarkably important. We tried to highlight the process of creativity, moving from the material we used, the photos, the final artifacts, as well as the attempts which remained unfinished or considered by the children as "failed". The target was a final discussion to be activated during which all the aspects of the process to be under observation.

This discussion for the whole procedure was an important aspect of the design of the project. It was considered important because participation in such a discussion was given the children the chance to understand, to judge and express their experiences and, secondly, to match them with the artistic forms they created. This discussion helped to attribute new and unexpected meanings to the artifacts .

Final remarks

With this educational intervention we tried to highlight that any attempt of communicating experiences or feelings not only consists the basis for the design of any artistic activity but, also, offers children the most authentic motivation for active participation. Expressive effort is the very essential element of artistic act, and it should not be underestimated in the framework of the educational setting. On the contrary, it can and has to be reclaimed as the initial point for the enhancement of a substantive and global perspective for art.

Based upon this point, we moved simultaneously in two directions: any questions had to be investigated in the field of personal experience as well as in the field of artistic creativity. Children through artistic play, as well as, through processes of commenting and narration, were supported to clarify and work their perspectives and feelings and communicate their thoughts for the ways they understood and experienced a traumatic event. The art of photography offered the possibility of a representation of the experience and the chance to investigate this experience in depth.

We put in practice an informal way of teaching with the inclusion of artists, who make possible for children to see in vivo the way they think and work. Their contribution was developed in reference to artistic act and its challenges, difficulties and satisfactions. From our perspective, the whole curriculum of artistic education could be based upon the effort to highlight the analogous in the relationship of children's processes to those of adult artists. This could be feasible when

we offer authentic artistic experiences with focus not to final result but to the whole process. We should allow various and different ways as well as perspectives, in order to lead children gradually to a whole and essential artistic experience.

The final comment refers to the ways literacy was incorporated in this visual art project. Given that literacy is connected with the processes of mastering control "*over the more elaborated forms of language*" (Halliday, 1996: 340), which typically are associated with written language (Halliday, 1996) and that oral language development is the foundation for literacy (e.g. Roskos, Tabors & Lenhart, 2009), literacy practices in kindergarten should include any communicative event that encourages decontextualized or extended talk (e.g. Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Curenton & Lucas, 2007). During the project under consideration children had remarkably many chances to use this kind of talk and produce various genres (Knapp & Watkins, 2005) in order to analyze their views, express their feelings orally or discuss possibilities or techniques. Most importantly children were given the chance to use the symbolic tools of art in order to "construct" visual texts. These texts were not just a comment upon a real life situation but they marked children's intervention and views for overcoming it. The perspective that making visual art could be considered as a possible way to construct a text and send a message (Kress, & Leeuwen, 2006) sets the foundation for cross-thematic activities, which is the general framework proposed by the Greek Curriculum for preschool education.

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