THE ARTS AS A VEHICLE TO SCHOOL LITERACY

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Abstract

The intervention described here was based on the use of the arts as a vehicle for learning (i.e., for enhancing literacy across the curriculum) and as a means of increasing school attractiveness. It was an intervention implemented in the framework of the European Union Program “Education of Roma Children in the Regions of Central Macedonia, Western Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace” (2010-2015). The intervention was designed primarily to establish collaboration, so that the class could become a learning community engaging all students, Roma and non-Roma, in quality, attractive activities that meant to build on their resources and create cross-cultural interactions for purposeful and meaningful learning. Curricular goals and thematic units were approached through drama, music, environmental education, dance and movement. Activities were created for the whole class and facilitated by the class teacher and the team of artists. These differentiated educational approaches contributed to the improvement of the learning environment. An added benefit was that through their collaboration with the artist facilitators of the activities, classroom teachers were exposed to innovative and effective teaching practices.

Keywords: Inclusion, cooperation, learning through the arts, mixed ability classes, class community.

“Solving problems to meet the needs of students begins with a concern, however slight, that something could be better” [1, p. 60].

1 INTRODUCTION

Education in the arts or education through the arts? The immediate answer is both. Beyond the indisputable significance of the arts on their own merit, this paper focuses on the benefits of the arts as a means of creating a favorable learning context. There is a difference between what can be termed education in the arts (e.g. teaching in fine arts, music, drama, crafts, etc.) and education through the arts (e.g. the use of arts as a pedagogical tool in areas, such as numeracy, literacy and technology) [2].

The choice in the intervention described here was to use the arts as a vehicle for learning (i.e., for enhancing literacy across the curriculum) and as a means of increasing school attractiveness, thus an arts rich intervention scheme was developed in the framework of the European Union Program “Education of Roma Children in the Regions of Central Macedonia, Western Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace” (2010-2015). Its field of operation included 102 schools that accepted Roma children and it involved a large number of collaborators in the field, namely psychologists, social workers, Roma mediators, teachers, and specialists in drama, dancing, music and the environment.

The educational trajectories of Roma children in Greece, quite similarly to that in other European countries, have been characterized by low attendance and high dropout rates, and a high illiteracy rate among the population [3]. Pervasive attitudes of representatives in public services (including school) are still characterized by reluctance to endorse and facilitate in practice Roma children’s successful school experience. In this context, the main target of the Program was the inclusion of Roma children in school, their uninterrupted attendance and the successful completion of their schooling. An added target was to make the presence of Roma children visible and natural at school. Equally important with their physical presence was the improvement of the representation of their public image, so the aim was dual: More Roma children at school, Roma children who progress at school. The intervention described in this paper seems to serve the fulfilment of this pursuit.

2 AN ARTS RICH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Art as a channel of learning is not a new idea. In schools where the arts are part of the core curriculum in a systematic, quality and reflective manner impacts on the child, the teaching and learning environment, and on the community have been documented [2]. The results of educational programs who have long implemented the arts in the learning process are encouraging [2], [4], [9], [6]. Learning
through the arts makes the school more attractive, by increasing the children’s interest and motivation for learning. At the same time, it cultivates skills such as multicultural understanding and entrepreneurship or it simply teaches children to learn how to learn [4]. Moreover, “learning through the arts might involve artistic and creative methods in making a range of other subject areas more attractive through, for example, a more practical approach, greater uses of visualization, enhanced motivation, increased attentiveness and improved communication and critical reflection.” [4, p. 18].

As Bamford (2006) reveals, the arts contribute to developing learning behaviors that are desirable for school learning: curiosity for learning, reflective ability, association of ideas and knowledge, imagination and vision, critical exploration and pursuit of multiple choices, results and ideas. These findings coincide with the perceptions of teachers – both those who do and those who do not use arts in their subjects – as documented in the study by Burton, Horowitz & Abeles [5]. Their study revealed that “high-art” groups performed better than “low-arts” ones in areas such as “creativity, fluency, originality, elaboration and resistance to closure – capacities central to arts learning,” but, we could also add, capacities required for general learning. Additional assets were the abilities “to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations and take risks in learning”, and be more “cooperative and willing to display their learning in public” [5, p. 36]. In fact, “pupils involved in arts learning come to know first-hand what it means to share and learn from each other” [5, p. 40]. The study furthermore revealed that these abilities were extended to other non-art disciplines when circumstances induced them; in other words the study exposed “a dialectical relationship between the different subject disciplines” and also suggested that the “arts add the kind of richness and depth to learning and instruction that is critical to healthy development”, with the condition that “the provision is rich and continuous” [5, p. 36].

An arts-rich class, Hunter [6, p. 4] reports, positively impacts on students’:

- Social and personal development
- Attitude to learning
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Arts knowledge and skills
- Generic competencies (writing, communicating, problem-solving, planning, organizing, perseverance)
- Enjoyment and value of the arts

Overall, “frequent praise in creative activity that doesn’t necessarily rely on a right and wrong way of doing things was perceived to dispel many students’ fears of failure” [6, p. 9].

3 THE ARTS IN OUR PROGRAM

For us in the Program, the use of the arts for literacy development was a requirement set by the call of proposals. We chose to formulate an arts rich intervention scheme by collaborating with colleagues who were experts in the related required fields (i.e., music, theatre, dance and movement and environmental education). These experts designed and implemented activities for enhancing the learning environment. Based on the arts, the intervention involved quality, attractive activities that built on students’ resources and thus engaging all students in purposeful and meaningful learning.

An added benefit was that through their cooperation with the “artists”, as we called them for short, classroom teachers were exposed to innovative and effective teaching practices. The artists’ team studied the curriculum of each primary school class and formulated action plans that would benefit the whole of the student population. As recorded in the journal of one of our artist cooperators:

The intervention in grade 1 will deal with the “digestive system” (based on units “Mischiefs” and “The lost key” of the language textbook of grade 1).

The philosophy informing these activities was to

- free the arts from their stereotypical entertaining character so that they are seen as a potential and potent educational tool and turn the lesson into a hands-on experience that may leave a more permanent cognitive impact on the students.
• promote collaboration and group work, so that children are able to discover their own and their classmates’ talents and thus reassess their abilities.

• build a learning community based on collaboration, which contributes to eliminating conflict among children, especially in mixed multicultural classes.

As one of our artist cooperators stressed:

*Activities aim at children turning to their peers, listening to them, interacting, communicating in verbal or non-verbal but always in purposeful ways. It was more or less a theatrical exercise simulation coupled with a cognitive target. Building on thematic units that deal with peaceful coexistence and communication is a way of evading violent behaviors in schools.*

The arts are more likely to appeal to all children than more formal teaching routines and create a “common meaning” [4, p. 6] that is addressed to the whole group and thus exceeds but at the same time addresses personal pursuits. In this framework, different languages and cultures are embedded in the learning process in a natural, instrumental way. Cooperative, experiential learning where children are encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to make sense of the new concept presented to them are at the heart of an arts rich program.

*With the 1st and 2nd grade children, we worked with the scene from Odyssey with the giants Laestrygonians. The children had to think of ways to evade the enormous rocks those giants threw at them, so they had to prove their wit and quick reflexes through the game “handkerchief with operations”. The class teacher participated by writing mathematical operations, addition and subtraction for first grade and multiplication and division for second grade children.*

The art team discussed their curriculum based suggestions with classroom teachers to create a common plan that would meet the particular needs of each class. Arts activities were addressed to the whole class, i.e., Roma and non-Roma children, as a means of creating the class community. “Change the name of your Program,” one of the main class teachers once told one of our cooperators, “since you do not work with Roma children alone.” This was the focal point of this intervention, which reflected the inclusive orientation of the Program: the inclusion of Roma children cannot be accomplished unless it becomes a matter of interest and concern of the whole class, even better, the whole school.

To create the class community, cooperative relationships had to be established among children, teachers and the artists’ team. This worked almost ideally in many of the classes but in some of the classes it proved difficult to overturn established routines and habits of the school culture. Here’s a positive moment of the cooperative venture:

*We were invited to attend the meeting in one of the rural schools. The school had just been selected to participate in a EU project on Lake Kerkini, which called for a lot of research. We offered to cooperate. At the meeting, the school teachers presented their ideas on the lake project and we presented ours. We had to come up with a common plan for every grade. We recorded and discussed all ideas and parted promising to process all ideas, reflect on them and communicate to decide the common plan.*

The artists’ team usually designed activities incorporated in a thematic unit or even a small project depending on the restrictions posed by the school or their own commitments for the Program. The topics were proposed either by the main class teacher or by the artists’ team. In either case, they were aligned with the class curriculum. For instance, mathematics and language were taught through music and movement in the project “Towers and dragons”. In another class the story of Galileo escaped from the history textbook and became the dramatization script for a play where the children made the settings and remodeled their classroom to reflect Galileo’s solar system.

As our artist cooperator reports:

*We discussed with the class teacher and agreed to work based on Brecht’s play “The life of Galileo” so that we could manage to maintain a thematic continuity between our sessions. I started by asking what the children knew about Galileo. I was really impressed by the fact that most children knew the basic facts about him. They referred to the TV show as well. We discussed his story, the persecution and the punishment he faced and the conflict to publicly renounce his beliefs.*
I asked the children to think what his work space might look like and the objects they could find in it. With their teacher’s and my assistance, the children began to visualize the place. I then asked them to draw those objects on big roll paper and justify their choices. They drew an astronomical map with the sun in the center, a telescope, a library and various planets. The whole time, we discussed the historical, scientific and ethical aspects of Galileo’s work.

Concepts (i.e., forward/backward), language structures and functions (i.e., verbs and nouns) were pursued through the preparation of the setting for the whole school performance.

Children’s creations are an intrinsic part of the intervention. We use everyday material and invite children to use their imagination to make masks, pictures, settings for their plays, costumes, puppets, musical instruments. We store everything in the classroom and they are ready to prompt our activities at all times. Children’s work is impressive.

According to research findings based on students’ views [7], school characteristics that contribute to the improvement of social behavior and school performance of all students are:

- the quality of teaching with emphasis on learning for all,
- the respect and promotion of students’ potentials,
- facilitation of learning on the part of teachers,
- the principal’s positive conduct,
- the positive, hospitable school environment
- the school resources

All these are characteristics of an arts enriched learning environment. The positive social interactions that ensue when engaging in a common assignment (i.e., making the settings, composing lyrics for a performance) greatly improves the quality of social behaviors and, according to the same research study, enhanced social behaviors contribute to promoting children’s performance and self-respect.

The study’s findings are confirmed by our artist collaborators thick reports from the field:

When we first went to the school of X. (a rural school), we found the second grade teacher in despair. She was a teacher that cared, constantly seeking solutions to her class’ problems: she daily faced a very problematic situation, the children left the class at whim, they quarreled continuously, beat each other, pure chaos! We collaborated very closely to reverse this climate. We turned to literature and activities originating from it through which we tried to engage all children. Scaffolded by the numerous read-alouds we shared, the children created their own story, based on a traditional story. We joined the class once a week to support and reinforce our joint work plan. The class climate was converted. The ex-bully leader became the class leader and the teacher’s aide in class management! The children collaborated, behavioral problems disappeared.

Similar are the responses of teachers who collaborated with the artists’ team. The advantages they report are parallel to the ones reported in the international studies presented above. The teachers reported merits, in literacy development, observational skills, imagination, growth of critical thought, and ability to engage and learn through experiential, cooperative, cross curricular activities.

Teacher 1. The children are happy, they participate gladly. The activities cultivate their creativity, they encourage them to express themselves. They are looking forward to the artists’ visit.

Teacher 2. These activities cultivate the children’s creativity and socialization. It’s an intervention that succeeds to engage all children and engage them with all their senses. Roma children, in particular, benefit from group activities.

Teacher 3. Children, all children, reflected, learnt, exercised their critical thinking.

Teacher 4. Music, the songs, contributed to faster and easier learning.

Teacher 5. They share readily colors, ideas … their hands, they become pairs/groups, a community, all of them.
4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In retrospect and based on all our evidence (the artists’ journals, their interviews, the teachers’ responses to questionnaires), the artists’ intervention seems to have worked very positively in creating a supportive and attractive learning climate and in facilitating the inclusion of Roma students in school.

After four years of intervention through a variety of methodological approaches, the action of the artists’ team has matured and has gained authority in the schools. The artists themselves have grown, they have enriched their perspectives of their role in the school. In an interview, the artists collaborators estimated that a significant percentage of the teachers exposed to their intervention had been affected to a greater or lesser degree and would continue to use the arts in their daily practice. This was also confirmed by the teachers themselves.

However, despite their unanimous agreement on the intervention’s effectiveness and their expressed intention to adopt selected practices in their teaching repertoire, teachers also unanimously set a condition: the continuation of the specific intervention scheme in their schools. This suggests that teachers might feel unprepared or unqualified to take over and continue on their own in this direction. Artists and teachers also agreed that relevant in-service seminars would help to free teachers of their “arts fright”.

The teachers’ reservations are well justified: Their education has not prepared them for using the arts in their everyday practice, so their lack of knowledge may be a source of anxiety and thus inhibition. A small number of teachers admitted that the intervention functioned “as a lesson, a mini seminar for me.” The majority, however, were not motivated enough to enrich their daily routine with the arts rich proposal. Thus, the educational goal of “vaccinating” the school with the good practices introduced by the artists’ group that would allow us to claim sustainable success of the inclusive turn has not been accomplished.

To end on an optimistic note, the intervention of the artists’ team surpassed even our expectations, who knew and believed in the power of the arts to make learning an enjoyable and fascinating experience and contribute to transforming the habits of mind of students and teachers. We are glad we were proven wrong in this case!

REFERENCES


