

Promoting Child Agency Through Art Education: Integrations Between Education and the Artistic Fields

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Abstract

Art constitutes an essential element for all human becoming and it has always been a sort of kaleidoscope of the world and a call to see things critically or differently — thus the role of art in society has always been fundamental. This paper tries to articulate how the integration between art and education makes a valuable contribution in terms of enhancing children's agency and participation in formal or informal settings. Engaging with the challenging future, requires a good education of the arts and nurturing towards the development of artistic sensitivities, which in addition contributes to an increased sense of autonomy, purpose and self-discovery. The object of study refers to the idea how arts education provides a "space for agency", where all actors involved – teachers, parents, children, art professionals or curators etc. exchange ideas and become empowered in their communities. The value of art based learning can sometimes be neglected due to the attributed importance to maths, language or other domains and on the other hand, integrating art education in the school context can be quite challenging. Therefore, digging deeper into how to better integrate the arts especially in the school context is necessary. In addition, this paper tries to give a few recommendations towards the integration of art education starting from early childhood. Furthermore, this paper discusses also the possibilities that art education presents in special regards to education in schools, as an additional tool for social and personal development.

Keywords: art education; early childhood; arts integration, art based learning, agency

Introduction

Art is an essential form of expression that has long been recognised and proven to be a powerful tool when used in society, especially when referring to education. Not only art resides at the nucleus of culture and human existence, but it can be defined itself as a fruitful form of education, which allows the flourishing of our imagination and reveals our creative spirits. Being able to produce art is not just an adult ability, children are also capable of expressing themselves idiosyncratically and artistically and share their thoughts and voices through art making. Art making is a very natural process since early ages and it contributes to children's development.

Learning through the arts and art education has been promoted by research as being beneficial in terms of advancing creativity and children's development when applied in congruence with other academic fields of studies (Eisner 2002; Gardner, 1983; Dewey, 1934). Nonetheless, the importance of the role played by the arts in educational settings has been widely neglected and ignored when it comes to considering other subjects such as maths, reading and writing, who seem to be preponderant on standard school curriculums. Even though art education has received appraisal for its educational benefits and a considerable number of teachers and parents would like to include art in children's education, when it comes to budget priorities, art usually receives less attention and promotion. In part, this reflects still a certain erroneous and misleading conception that some disciplines are more important than others.

Gardner (1983) introduces the notion of multiple intelligences and stresses the idea that not all types of intelligences are being fostered and promoted in schools. Gardner highlights the idea that usually bigger attention is paid to the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence instead of other forms of intelligence such as musical intelligence or bodily-kinaesthetic etc. which can be detrimental for children's development. Therefore, he argues that more attention should be paid to other

forms of intelligence that an individual has and education agendas should reflect all children's needs instead of prioritising only certain disciplines of study.

Art education and in particular arts integration, represents a way to communicate and address different levels of interests, capabilities and manners of learning for different children who have different intelligences. One general definition designates arts integration as "an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects art form and another subject and meets evolving objectives" (The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, 2010: 1). However, the notion of "*arts integration*" is not strictly defined and is a rather contested term. This is in part due to the lack of a standard and approved definition of what arts integration should be conceptualised, understood or practiced. The term "integration" comes from the Latin word "*integrare*", which means making something as a whole (Burnaford et al., 2007: 11). Different researchers provide different definitions for the term *arts integration*: Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983); project based learning that involves community strengthening (Wolk 1994); Marshall (2006) builds on cognitive theory for an interconnectedness between different domains and argues on the concept of substantive arts integration; art as a tool for expression and reflection of the socio-cultural world (Efland, 2002); integrated arts that represent one of the four curricular structures (Eisner, 2002); arts integration as a whole integrated system without having core subjects (Aprill, 2001); art used as a tool to increase performance and achievement for academic disciplines (Catterall and Waldorf 1999; Fiske 1999); and other definitions which make arts

integrations a complex and disputed definition (Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006:4-5; Burnaford et al., 2007: 21-23). On the other hand, there exist a variety of regimens of art education in terms of stances, procedures, historical backgrounds and value considerations for different cultures (Gardner, 1990: xi). Obviously, arts integration is a socially constructed concept and therefore, each of the constituencies regarding this concept means different things according to different dimensions. The way how art itself is perceived is different depending on the context and value attributions towards art have a significant impact in terms of how art education is implemented in schools, which has an impact on children's development.

Art as a way of learning

Art has a lot of potential benefits in different levels, but such potentials have been however somehow overlooked and haven't received the right attention. The power of art, as a tool for learning and educating, might be often underrated, misused and even misunderstood. For many educators and arts defenders there is no doubt that art instruction is valuable, but however there exists controversy in terms of how the arts might contribute to the transposition of skills acquired through the arts to other domains. Some forms of artistic practice could contribute positively in the improvement of cognitive abilities thought to be important for academics, and research evidence suggests that for example spatiotemporal reasoning could be improved by receiving musical training, and in addition this may be beneficial also with certain forms of mathematics learning (Rinne et al., 2011: 89). The connection with art and other fields such as mathematics for example go back in time and have a long history together, particularly if mentioning the times where the disciplines were not separated. Although the arts and mathematics are different fields they have a strong interaction (Senol, 2010:2) and such interaction can be used to make analogies to the real world as well as trying to create new connections and meanings. Arts integration for learning maths could provide an opportunity also for children who present difficulties or special needs, by giving them a chance to learn through different tools and express themselves through art. Deaf learners for example can access maths easily through visual art, which promotes their self-esteem and confidence (Seekola, 2011:5). As a result, they get to better interact with the material and gives them a better chance to develop their ideas and express themselves. It is important to stress that art education can bring positive outcomes not only for children with special needs or "talented" children but for all children, since it calls on so many different forms of learning.

Other researchers on the other hand suggest that while such transfer of knowledge might occur, it might remain somehow limited and that the arts might be beneficial rather on the disposition

level, like developing persistence or reflectiveness, which are obviously helpful for succeeding on different directions (Rinne et al, 2011:89). Exercising art since early childhood incorporated in different forms of learning enables children's abilities to succeed not only in academic disciplines, but also outside school walls. By the term disposition development it is meant the ability to evolve certain forms of behaviour, which are represented "in a core of attitudes for schools, intellectual virtues, and habits of the mind" (Gadsden, 2008:34). Fostering dispositions through art learning provides children with social skills that they can later use for emancipating and empowering themselves in their communities and

society in general. Engaging in critical thinking through the art process facilitates resilience since it helps in terms of enhancing capabilities.

Moreover, if art helps ameliorating children's capabilities for better succeeding also in academics, this demonstrates that art helps building better future opportunities and a positive orientation towards school. Alvord & Grados (2005) argue about enhancing resilience in children through proactive approaches, which promote agency, and they argue that a multidisciplinary of tasks enables better social connections and coping abilities. Taking part in activities that involve art, music, drama etc. gives children or young people the opportunity to participate in social groups with other young people and achieve recognition for their efforts (Alvord & Grados, 2005:241). Therefore, it would be important to underline that depriving learners of the chance to "experience a broad array of thinking, social, and emotional dispositions through art—to reorder their habits of mind—is to deny them the full experience of learning and deny teachers the full opportunity to understand the breadth of possible knowledge" (Gadsden, 2008:33). Although different conceptualisations towards the arts and its benefits towards learning exist, a variety of research evidence promotes and supports art integration as a way of learning. "Arts integration—the use of the arts as a teaching methodology throughout the curriculum—may improve long-term retention of content" (Rinne et al., 2011: 89). This means that learning through art also increases the chances for a better connection between the knowledge acquired on different levels, its better interconnected and better remembered from learners. Arts integration incorporates cognitive abilities that improve long term memory such as: elaboration, rehearsal of meaning, generation, enactment, oral production, effort after meaning, emotional arousal, pictorial representation (Rinne et al., 2011).

Postmodern theorists support a form of art education where art is integrated within different disciplines, contextualised and transformed, surpassing the boundaries of the so called fixed domains and can represent a "concrete and feasible approach to teaching art in a postmodern way" (Marshall, 2005:227). Such approach links knowledge from different domains and helps learners making more sense of what they learn, rather than learning separate phenomena or concepts and memorizing by heart without a connection in practice or reality. Learning through art facilitates a sort of interconnectedness on all levels and a faster transposition of knowledge. In other words, exploring and putting ideas together from different disciplines enables a better understanding of the connections and better engage in the process of thinking and image making.

Another important aspect of learning through art is how children learn through trial and error and develop the ability to discover and associate theory to practice and vice versa. Children learn through all their senses and making mistakes is part of the process. Art gives the opportunity to engage with different senses and learning abilities, using different intelligences. Movement and exploration for example, are very connected but schools generally do not facilitate movement as a way of learning. Learning through dance and theatre activities for example uses such dimensions and allows learners to develop their creativity while using their senses and moving around. Such activities can be a huge aid for children who feel the need to move around or lack concentration and it develops children's bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence. Movement helps the process of memorising and learning by using the body as a tool. While playing or during recreation children learn to activate knowledge, use concepts and communicate with their environments freely. Dramatherapy for example can be used for "promoting involvement and a more active type of learning" (Emunah, 1994: x). Moreno (1972) observed how drama presents therapeutic elements for children engaged in role-playing and how its potentials are related to the social development of children. For Moreno, art and therapy were inseparable. Nowadays, with the increasing of school hours the time left for free play, free movement and recreation is minimal, which leaves less space for self-exploration and learning freely. Integrating art and play is another mechanism to support group interaction and stimulate the cognitive potential for every learner. Learning physics or maths through art might sound unrealistic and difficult to be implemented for many educators but integrating the arts as a way of learning might result more resourceful in learning than any other method. As an illustration, learning about gem stones or about weather phenomena can be easily achieved through the help of visual arts. Exploring and analysing the shapes of gem stones, reviewing watercolour techniques, painting the gem stones as well as learning how they are created chemically/physically means integrating interdisciplinary knowledge and finding connections between the shapes of the minerals, gems with the chemical composition, color etc. (see Element of the Art Room Blog, Art Rocks! 4th Grade Gems and Crystals, 2018)

Efland, among other theorists argues that: "If the aim of education is to fully activate the cognitive potential of the learner, ways have to be found to integrate knowledge from many subjects to achieve a fuller understanding than would

be provided by content treated in isolation” (Marshall, 2005:228). Learning through art will be experiences differently by every learner, depending from different factors: cultural, socio-economic status, background, environment, personal etc. The environment plays an important role in stimulating children’s abilities. In the case of art learning, the adjustment of the environment is essential.

So far, a vast number of schools who have used art as a tool to learn have been successful. The Reggio Emilia schools for example are based on the idea that children need to be surrounded by an environment that supports their development and such environments need to be thoughtfully designed in order to promote multi-sensory learning (Tarr, 2001:37). Although Reggio Emilia is not arts integration, what appears as relevant is the importance accorded to the environment. The Art Class or the Art Space is fundamental in stimulating the arts integration process. In addition, learning should also implicate a cultural component, which means that teachers need to be aware of children’s cultural backgrounds in order to nurture children’s needs and help them be active and engaged in the process of learning. The connection between art and culture is fundamental for understanding how children access learning, and how they learn both formally and informally, including their participation in their communities. Since art facilitates the communication process, it provides a bridge between cultures, and different realities of childhood. “Just as we should view art not as an accumulation of so-called art objects, but as a way of approaching knowledge, we should also view knowledge not as an accumulation of data, but as a flexible mechanism for reorganising reality” (Camnitzer, 2014:6). Reorganising reality means changing existing social realities, consider new perspectives and finding solutions for existing or future issues through creative and sustainable ways.

A “space” for Agency

Art constitutes an essential element for all human becoming and it has always been a sort of kaleidoscope of the world and a call to see things critically or differently — thus the role of art in society has always been fundamental. Art intersects with all areas of life and art is itself an education for the inner and outside world. The multidimensionality of art helps individuals understand better their realities, and no other tool can be greater than art in questioning our thoughts and creating meaning, as well as increasing the ability to exercise agency.

Art education contributes to children’s development on different levels such as: cognitive development, socio-cultural and socio-emotional development, as well as it provides children tools to succeed on the academic level. Artistic experience is not only essential for developing artistic abilities and reflection but mainly it supports creativity in general, which is an indispensable aspect in succeeding in life. Fostering creativity, critical thinking and social competencies through art education might be central to enhancing children’s capabilities, as well as promoting children’s rights. Children interact socially, physically, emotionally and cognitively

with their surroundings and the environmental involvement is where agency starts (Blanchet- Cohen, 2008: 257). Under brief terms agency is illustrated as the ability of individuals to act in an independent way, under free will and make their own choices. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures, but they must be seen as active agents who take part “in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live” (James & Prout, 1990:8). The connection between agency and art education might not necessarily be evident for many teachers or policy makers, however, art undoubtedly contributes significantly in giving children an opportunity for their voices to be heard and to have access to a space to express themselves through different ways.

Research evidence shows that “children can produce and recognize educationally productive questions and can adapt them to their knowledge needs. The challenge is to design environments in which students can use such questions to guide their building of knowledge, thus assuming a higher level of agency in learning” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991:37). Using art as a medium facilitates the process of expression and allows children to express their thoughts not only through verbal or written communication. Visual art can be particularly empowering in the sense of allowing other forms of communication to flourish and other ways of learning to be accepted. Social empowerment comes as a result of achieving power in particular domains of activity. Empowerment through art can be achieved in different subjects. For example, empowerment in mathematics education as Ernest (2002) explains, concerns gaining the power to use mathematical knowledge not only for improving mathematical skills in schools but also for social betterment. In addition, epistemological empowerment “concerns the individual’s growth of confidence not only in using mathematics, but also a personal sense of power over the creation and validation of knowledge” (Ernest, 2002, 1-16).

Using art for learning maths means having access to knowledge, especially for children who find it difficult to achieve knowledge through mainstream teaching methods. A Kandinsky or Paul Klee's art piece can be used to transmit knowledge on geometry, problem solving or give multiple perspectives to look at things. Through the arts children are taught to ask questions freely without fearing for a wrong answer since there isn't just one correct answer. Eisner reiterates that the arts teach children that there is not just one single solution and that their "personal signature matters", since not all answers should be identical and there is room for more than one interpretation (2002: 197). The idea of using art as a way for learning skills in maths or problem solving somehow challenges the conception that art serves only on the aesthetical level, to become better at arts itself or as just a form of entertainment. The idea is to allow new perceptions to flourish through the arts and let children's subjectivities and creative thought contribute to learning from different angles. Performing arts on the other hand such as drama or theatre can allow children to acquire

knowledge through movement, dancing and acting. Through drama for example, children do roleplay and learn to adapt to the character's feelings and learn from the situations.

In environments where children are required to analyse or perform an activity through artistic tools, the individual voices, as well as skills or talents are recognised and supported. On another level, there is the possibility for group exchange as well as activate engagement in social issues as well as community engagement. Children's levels of agency in terms of knowledge construction is higher in learning processes where art is involved than when art is absent. Art involves playfulness and the capacity to imagine new alternatives and most of all also understand realities intersecting different cultures or contexts. Learning history through the means of art for example enables the use of different tools including visual arts, which allows a better understanding of different historical phenomena.

Global culture is nowadays being dominated by visual culture, which is omnipresent, in magazines, TVs, museums, computers, billboards, and has a tremendous impact in terms of human development (Freedman, 2003: xii). Learning about the visual culture appears as necessary to develop a critical perspective on art, but also on other matters relating to it such as social issues. Learning through art allows self-reflection and a critical lens to look at things differently. Visual culture plays a tremendous role in supporting critical reflection towards social issues. "Arts education and the experience of the arts in learning and teaching, not unlike learning and teaching science, math, reading, and writing, are inextricably tied to the identities that learners and teachers assume and imagine are possible" (Gadsden, 2008:35). 'Photovoice' is an example of how an arts-based approaches can contribute to agency, self-representation as well as giving voices to children and their communities (Desyllas, 2014:477). Desyllas argues how empowerment comes through art and how sex workers shared their experiences and used photography as a way of resisting to the stigma by expressing their creativity (p.477). According to Gell artworks can be effective mediators of social agency (1998:73), and in the case mentioned above, using the Photovoice method shows how photographs and art produced by the subjects affect their realities and ways of thinking and produce agency.

The impetus for providing support for creativity and art education appears now more necessary than ever, especially with the nowadays continuously changing and multicultural societies, where individuals need to find new solutions for different challenges that the future is bringing (Robinson, 2011). The role played by art is central to bridging ideas coming from different disciplines, socio-cultural contexts and realities, and creating an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. By assigning an equal weight to arts as other disciplines, learners become active participants in the process of learning and co-construct the dynamics of their education together

with their teachers, art curators, parents etc. and as Gee & Green argue, learners become "shapers of knowledge rather than recipients of knowledge shaped primarily by forces external to them" (Gadsden, 2008: 31). The classroom turns to a space where art becomes the way to approach knowledge and such approach is constantly negotiated between children and adults, abandoning the old ex-cathedra method of teaching and embracing a more power-balanced education.

Art based intervention and particularly arts integration can help increase confidence and self-esteem, especially for youth that encounters difficulties or that is risk-oriented. Creative arts can result to be quite beneficial in terms of engaging and redirecting harmful behaviour of youth and especially at-risk youth (Wallace-DiGarbo, 2006:119). For children experiencing difficulties and stressful circumstances, art-based activities can turn into a way of "escaping" reality and mobilize new ideas and self-exploration, as well as new desires or motivations. Art-based interventions can reduce anxiety levels and other stressors which interfere in the learning processes (Aaron et al., 2011:28).

Art contributes in deepening self-discovery and communication with others around you. Art is itself communication, which makes it more accessible and tangible. "When children are free to choose their own projects, integrating knowledge as the need arises, motivation-and success- follow naturally" (Wolk, 1994:42). Wolk also argues that such projects also support a strong sense of community since learners interact and exchange ideas with each other and they succeed together (p.42). Such perspective embraces the idea of engagement, which translates as engagement for all children, even for those who are often left behind or forgotten from teachers. The experiences that learners benefit through art education contribute in nurturing a sense of community spirit and active participation. In marginalised and disadvantaged contexts, allowing learners to take part in knowledge construction processes and engage in critical thinking enables empowerment and community agency. Community-based art education for example can benefit specific groups in the society and allow individuals to learn about art but also learn regarding other issues through the means of art (Ulbricht, 2005:7).

For at risk children, promoting resilience might be another advantage of incorporating art into children's daily lives. Many children will experience resilience or in other terms they will develop positive adaptation despite all the difficulties and adversities that they might encounter. Experiencing resilience not only is important in terms of children's development and well-being but also it contributes to the empowerment of children's voices and agency in the society.

Reflecting on Arts Integration and Education

Integrating arts education, especially in early childhood settings, requires a shift of mentality and therefore the role of the environment as well as the role of the teacher is essential in guiding the child towards social and personal development. Educators around the world are being constantly challenged to improve their teaching methods and approaches in order to facilitate the achievement of knowledge, the ability to learn and foster the right environment for proper development for every child. Teaching methods and the way how learning is conceptualised and practiced are often responsible for the future development of children's life skills and their self- fulfilment. Article (29), in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), states that "*education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*" (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This is obviously an understandable and unanimously agreed principle among educators, but everyday life reality shows that children's creativity and talents are not directed to their fullest potentials but are rather suppressed or even harmed. Ken Robinson (2006) argues why systems of mass education and schools suppress natural capacities to create and often kill creativity rather than fostering it. Critical thinking on the other hand is vital for finding solutions and in terms of development. Abrami et al. (2008:1102) describe critical thinking as "the ability to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, is widely recognised as an important, even essential, skill". Creativity and critical thinking are strongly linked together, and therefore engaging learners to apply creative critical thinking into all domains of learning is beneficial on the dispositional level, as well as the social and personal. Recognising and supporting children's voices and autonomy means respecting children as human beings and not just as becomings as Qvortrup (2009) would argue. Teachers and educators need to understand and stimulate children's active learning towards valuing their role as citizen and exercising rights and participation in the community.

Children should be given the opportunity to express their own potential and further it through the pedagogical and didactical help of teachers. Education plays an important role in motivating and extracting "*each intelligence*" and talents for every child (Gardner, 1983; 1990; 1995). However, changing from traditional styles of teaching and learning to hear children's voices demands a change in the pedagogical posture of a teacher, or educator. In this process teachers become more like mentors who guide children through their talents and give them the space to allow those talents to thrive. What differentiates art integration practices is the ability to use art to conceptualize and explore in different way. As an illustration, the "workbook" is the perfect example of how this can be achieved in the classroom/art space. The "workbook" is an efficient method of integration which focuses on drawing, writing, as well as illustrating content from different disciplines. The students try to make connections by going deeper into specific themes created in their workbook and they also share their opinions and discoveries with the other students of the art room. Marshall (2016) argues how the use of art and "workbooks" are forms of inquiry which the child uses to discover and learn across the curriculum. The author mentions how the workbook is the culmination of an extensive arts based inquiry project, such as the Muir Woods art integration project, where:

"Learners went to the woods as artist researchers using a scientific and historic lens. Prior to their investigation, they studied the ecology and history the site in the classroom and this prepared them to do their individual explorations. For this

inquiry, each learner brought a research workbook. Far from being simple sketchbooks or journals, these books were field study books, the sort of books naturalists use in the field.” (Marshall, 2016:13).

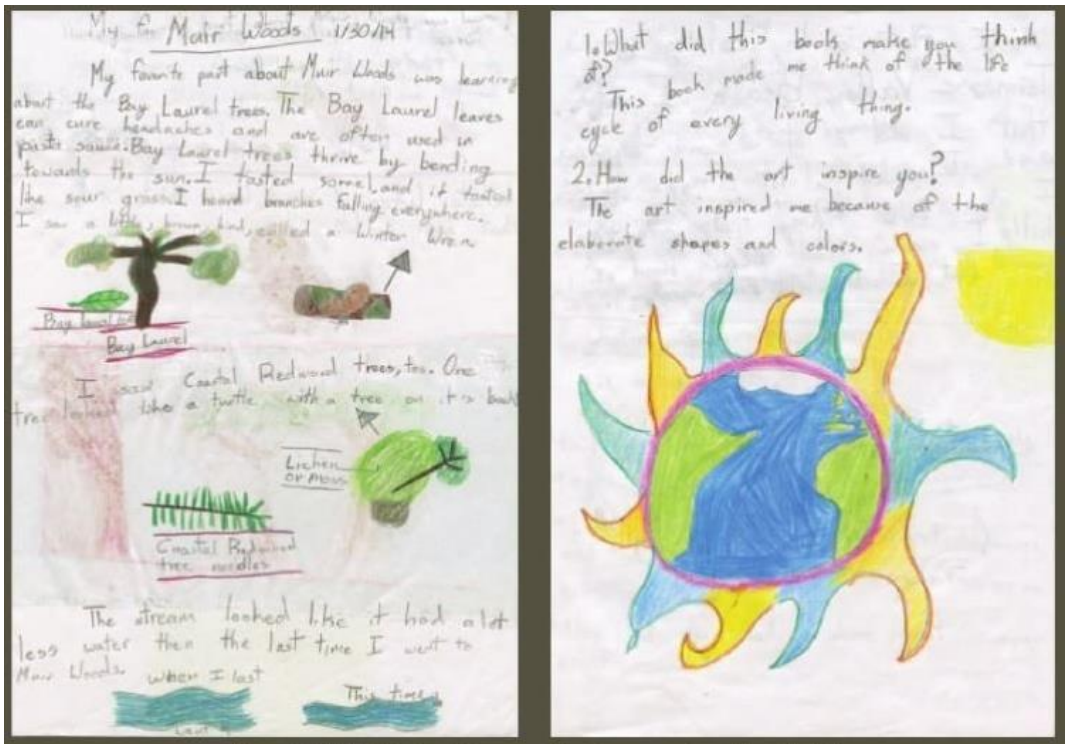


Fig. 1. Libby's Reflections. Two pages from her research workbook (2014) (Marshall, 2016: 14)

Libby's artwork/workbook is a concrete example of how each learner explores ideas through different and personal ways. In addition, Marshall argues how postmodern art images provide catalysts for development in order to teach about idea generation and creative process (2005: 240). Above all, using post-modern art is liberating, empowering and "agentic", engaging students in "thinking, learning, and image-making in substantive and integrative ways" (Marshall, 2005:240). On the other hand, the art teacher/mediator role is essential in the process of meaning making and art exploration. The teacher nurtures the process and guides throughout the curriculum.

This is indeed a complex and difficult process since teachers have to always reinvent and adjust their posture according to different situations. Teachers are in way like artists and as Freire argues the experience of "education is naturally an aesthetic exercise" (Shor & Freire, 1987:118). Even though many teachers might not realise that they are performing an aesthetic act, "we do art and politics when we help the formation of students, whether we know it or not. Knowing what we are doing will help us do it better" (p.119). Dewey (1934) believed that education should be based on aesthetic experience which for him was very valuable in the process of learning. White follows somehow the same line as Dewey by mentioning how stimulating and nurturing creative abilities and the capacity to think critically are essential for future endeavours and in life situations in general (Whyte, 1973:190-191).

Looking at the recent decades, interest in art education has experienced a sort of resurgence and there exists a growing desire to use arts integration as a way of unifying, creating and transmitting knowledge as interconnected and whole. However, even though in many schools around the world art education is part of the curriculum, and as mentioned above, despite all the positive outcomes and numerous research showing arts as crucial for learning, the place occupied by arts in the curriculum seems to be secondary or irrelevant in comparison to the importance accorded to subjects such as maths, reading, writing etc. "Core" subjects or disciplines are considered as representing more value in terms of benefits for

learning and future goals, especially nowadays due to the increased standardised and high stake testing but on the other hand this is limiting learners creativity (Berliner, 2011:291). In addition, it is often the case that educators are not able to change their mentalities or perform a shift in their pedagogical techniques in order to integrate art as a way of learning in the curriculum, which does not leave space for change. On another level, teachers who are not trained to be dealing with art and have a difficulty doing something that they were not prepared to do. Teacher quality plays an essential role in bridging knowledge within the curriculum and leading children towards creativity and holistic learning. Clark argues on the concept of integration by affirming that "a truly integrated curriculum is organised to show the connectedness of things..." (Marshall, 2005:228). Such integration allows learners to value and situate their experiences as part of a "big puzzle" and the role played by educators is essential in giving value and respecting children's work, especially in early childhood education settings. Integrating art is not such an easy task to do, it needs to be thought through and it requires planning, reconceptualization of ideas as well as an evaluation process. What should be reconsidered is how educators and teachers see art in relation to children and their experiences. "Art is not situated in between; it is the umbrella that hovers over everything and includes everything. This inclusiveness makes art a meta-discipline, with science as one of its many subcategories" (Carnitzer, 2014:7). Inclusiveness of art not only in the working environment but also expressed through the learning acquisitions, which try to support the learning process aesthetically, naturally and culturally as well as children's inner worlds (Tarr, 2001:38).

Preparing teachers for arts integration might be another challenge, since a lot of teachers experience difficulty with the arts when they are not artists themselves. Teacher training and expert support is crucial under such circumstances and teachers should be in constant collaboration with museums, art curators or other organisations. Arts integration should be seen more as a collaborative partnership, where everyone learns from one another. As a result, the hierarchy between teacher and child is diminished, making the learning process multidimensional and open to the construction of new knowledge. The Reggio Emilia Schools have somehow demonstrated how the collaborations between artist-teachers and early childhood educators can be very fruitful. For example, art educators can take on the role of the *atelierista* and work in partnership with teachers and educators of the school in order "to support children to communicate their ideas visually, help to create provocative learning experiences, and design environments to enhance children's perceptual awareness and provide places for wonder, curiosity, and the expression of ideas" (Tarr, 2001:39). This is indeed not an easy task since it requires a reconceptualization of how all actors involved are going to coordinate their roles and responsibilities in order to support the learning process. "Project Zero", an initiative founded at Harvard University in 1967, explores how learning experiences can be engaging for all learners and promote aspects such as intelligence, creativity and critical thinking through the arts.

Nevertheless, the experience of art in early childhood is affected by adults and different life circumstances and even though art might be considered as some kind of panacea and solution to all problems, the reality shows how even by having a perfect policy implemented, with the best efforts, there will always be different variations and outcomes. Understanding and digging deeper into issues relating to art learning and cultures is necessary for understanding how children learn and how this learning is connected with their environment and communities. Like this, art can be used as a contextual tool to help improve the situation in children's communities and act as mediator between culture, communities and the individual.

Shifting mentalities and changing traditional ways of approaching knowledge requires also changes in other levels such as pedagogical techniques and a change towards the nature of the discipline as well as of cooperation (Bresler, 1995:10). Moreover, the environment where these changes take place needs to be considered and art education shouldn't be just providing art as experience but rather be a strong tool to provide support for learners and the acquisition of new

knowledge. Constructing and understanding through an art form, when applied in congruence with educational settings, improves cognition, other languages such as maths, geography, history etc. and leaves room for absorbing the acquired skills. "In addition to intellectual feasibility and soundness, integration typically involves issues of human relations, communication among different groups of teachers, and the coordination of resources, schedules, and structures" (Bresler, 1995: 10). Bresler also articulates how all this involves a shift from a solo performance to a chamber work and it requires a strong cooperation between all actors involved and such challenge is definitely of great worth considering the outcomes in terms of the advancement of human capabilities.

Conclusion

Although the importance of art-based learning has widely been acknowledged for its beneficial and liberating properties, especially in early childhood education settings, there exists a considerable disproportion between the arts and other subjects considered “serious”. Art is still often treated as a leisure activity rather than a serious task to perform or either reserved as an esoteric entity that benefits only privileged individuals. Changing this mentality requires a shift of thinking towards a more open minded way of teaching and approach towards knowledge in general. Art should be viewed as a way to perform or approach knowledge and not only as a trivial component of education. Arts integration, although at times contested or equivocated and at times praised or treated as the antidote to educational concerns, presents an opportunity for learners to develop and further their potential and intelligence as well as promoting agency, social engagement and empowerment for all actors involved. Integration of the arts inside the curriculum cannot be supported without the collaboration of arts-integration experts, artists, and educators, therefore, providing professional care and assistance for teachers remains essential. Art learning should provide a medium through which children, parents and their communities engage themselves in socio-cultural participation, ameliorate their life circumstances and change their realities creatively.

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