

A photograph of children in a field of yellow dandelions. In the foreground, a large, white, fabric snowman puppet with a black hat, orange carrot nose, and black buttons is lying on the grass. To its left, a child in a green jacket and red hat is lying down. To its right, another child in a pink jacket is sitting. Further right, another child is lying down with a white fabric puppet that has colorful patterns on its back. The background is a vast field of yellow dandelions under a bright sky.

Sensitivity, Processes and Cultural Competence in the TAIKAVA - Project

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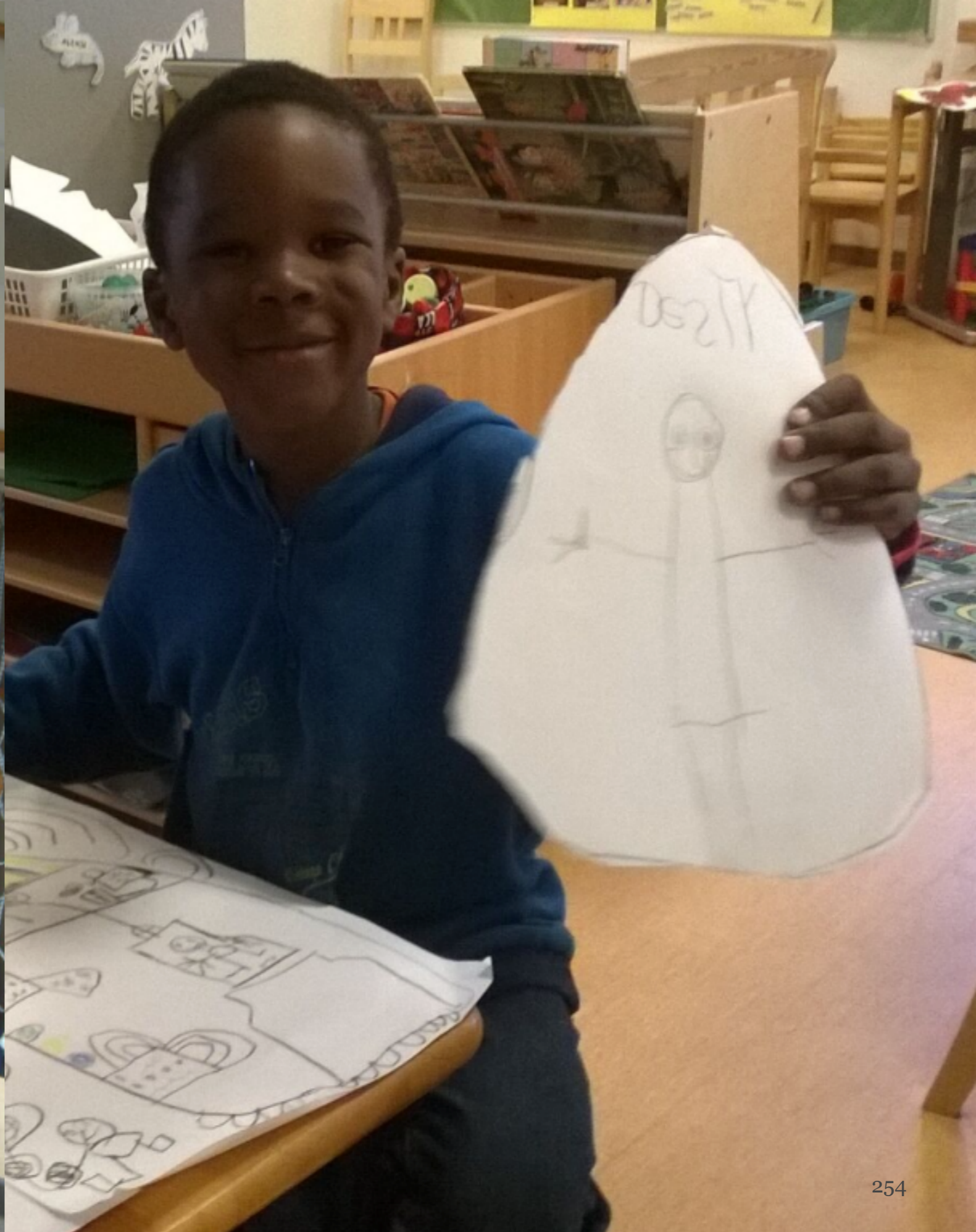
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Introduction

In this visual report I focus on the pedagogical character of the Arts Educational Development Project TAIKAVA. It is a development project carried out as a joint undertaking of both the cultural and the early childhood services of the city of Vantaa, for a period of two years from the beginning of August 2014 until the end of May 2016. During the project ten specialized art pedagogues – four specialists for visual art, four for drama, one for music and one for circus and dance pedagogy – have worked in 10 day care centers as educational staff in co-operation with the other personnel. The main aim of the TAIKAVA project was to support children with special needs through arts and culture in all daily practices of the inclusive day care groups. Secondly, the project aimed to produce new practices for administrative co-operation between the organization of early childhood education and that of children's culture.

Picture 1 (previous page). Children's group organized a trip with snow

Picture 2-4 (this and next page pictures). Mostly all children were enthusiastic when art pedagogy encountered their ideas, energy and courage.



Participatory and co-operational framework and team culture

The TAIKAVA project (see the TAIKAVA weblog in <https://taikava.wordpress.com>) got its birth from the ideas of two headmasters, one from the early childhood organization and the other from the culture organization. Additionally, two coordinators, one from both organizations worked intensely in guiding the project and my task as a researcher was to support the decision making in different phases through participatory research knowledge. In the follow up research has been used the approach of enhancement-led evaluation (Niemi & Kemmis, 2012). A facilitative framework based on the ideas of participation and co-operation was created to promote the development work of the day care teams. The project was a learning process for all participants, on the level of administration and professional team culture as well as the individual level of participating children.



Pictures 5-6. The framework was developed for individual and common practices through continuing reflections with the coordinators and team members.

Pictures 7-8 (Next page). Cross motor training through light paintings: The preschoolers imagined how the snake is saying “s-s-s-s-s”.



Countless discussions and negotiations were needed to find the best solutions for practical problems. On the administrative level the project has changed the earlier practices of acting solely on one administrative area with only restricted responsibility. The ideas of the cultural administration of how to strengthen the cultural rights of children were useful when the focus was on supporting children with special needs. Art pedagogues came from the field of art and culture and worked in the children's groups not only as assisting care keepers but as a new pedagogical resource. Paradoxically, as new team members they brought new ideas that were perceived positively. However, they also identified a need for change that could be experienced as threatening. Change required the educators in the teams to become conscious of their own views on children, education and art as a basis for finding new directions that could be shared collaboratively. The creation of the new co-operational structure of the professional team presumed active mentorship of the headmasters of each day care center and also professional knowledge of children with special needs supported by the specialist teachers. If all these issues could be resolved successfully there were possibilities to find new ways for art pedagogy.

Processual character

On the administrative level the planned change seemed to be simple. But on the level of professional culture in the day care groups, it came through slowly and with contradictions. It took half a year to get to know the children and a whole year for the professional teams to manage the changes in attitudes and to create regular structures for art pedagogy. Multiple ways of organizing parallel and differentiated peer group activities were found, and a positive atmosphere was enhanced in creating motivation and a feeling of safety by supporting constructive behaving models and clearly structured routines and boundaries. The children needed to know their special program in their timetable as a regular part of daily, weekly or monthly plans. Space resources also had an essential role when workshops and smaller peer groups were organized.

Pictures 9-11 (next pages). During one week in May there was a participatory painting project in the yard for all to join in for future Mother's day!



MAALAUSS- SEINÄ



- Maalattaa yhdessä ja osallistuu yhteismaalausprojektiin



The main instrument for the art pedagogues was their competence of producing a framework for artistic processes whether they came from the field of visual arts, drama, music or circus and dance. The first condition was that as art specialists they had an awareness of the artistic goals on an experiential level and they could use artistic experiences with pedagogical intention. Secondly they emphasized the processual character of creativity, problem solving and researching when organizing activities as a continuum of processes, learning activities and

themes. Thirdly they were conscious of how to induce flow in artistic processes. They organized conditions for motivation, improvisation, exploration, problem solving and reflection where all the children's abilities and competences could be in use: cognitive and emotional aspects as well as physical and social communication. They were also flexible in using play and cross disciplinary artistic methods (see Vygotsky, 2004). Fourthly, they were not afraid of the appearance of conflicts and contradictions in artistic processes. They accepted multiple

solutions and aimed to rely on openness. And fifthly, they shared the processes and their results with the community starting from the daycare center: children, educators or parents, then the administrators of the city and finally the wider public.

Sensitivity and well-being

The project was focused on to facilitate children with special needs. An important aspect was the arts pedagogues' view on the child, where two aspects were connected: sensitive presence and individual attention on a child. They emphasized the agency of the children: actively



Pictures 12-15. Many of the enchanted moments were created through the interdisciplinary means of the arts.

recognizing, organizing, and facilitating their individual initiatives. They also preferred to have time enough for a positive encounter with the child. Learning was seen as a reciprocal interaction in which the pedagogue was also an involved learner by the side of the child. This approach connected the idea of supporting the well-being of the child as a pre-emptive action and of enhancing the active participation of the child in order to increase social and cultural equity. (See eg. van Manen, 1991; Woodhead, 2006; Moss, 2011.)

Through art pedagogy it was possible, as

pre-emptive support, to successfully strengthen the self-image of children who had delays of development due, for example, to hearing defects or physical motor disabilities. Children with un-social and withdrawn behavior got new means to join socially and become more visible in communication and interaction. Peer group activities offered functional means for enriched interaction with children who had difficulties in perceiving and paying attention, and it was possible to support the competencies in perseverance and concentration. Useful means for involving children with socio-emotional difficulties were also found. Because the attention of the art pedagogues was focused on peer group activities children who had strong individual challenges with emotional balance and disruptive and aggressive behavior could not get enough support in bigger groups during this two year period.







Pictures 16-20 (this and next pages).

One of the projects started when a couple of snow figures were designed for a Christmas party. A preschool group had just got a tablet and each small group of four children made a photo story where the figures travelled to places the children had chosen. The children enjoyed participating in organizing the outings, and they proposed to make the last trip in May before leaving the day care center for school.







Cultural competence

Although the cultural competence of the children has not yet been researched thoroughly and lacks a coherent definition (see Liebau, 2014; Terreni, 2014; Wagner, 2014) the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education has taken it as a strategic vision for developing the cultural activities of children. Proposal for children's culture policy program (2014) gives an overview on it and defines it referring to an individual's ability to absorb, utilize and change culture, as well as comprising knowledge, skills, awareness and attitudes. According to this definition the cultural competence of the children has widened during the TAIKAVA project. The children's knowledge and skills in art have increased, they gained the courage and abilities to perform and engage in discussing art, and their cultural awareness has widened. But what is especially significant is that the children gained experiences about the processual character of artistic activities. They learned to enjoy longer processes and received training in withstanding the uncertainty of situations where they can not exactly know what will happen. This can be valued as one of the most important messages of the new art pedagogy.

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