

Exploring artistic and cultural identity through an art curriculum unit

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This paper discusses the process of exploring students' artistic and cultural identity through teaching and learning in art with the collaboration of a visual artist.

The research context

The art project was implemented in the context of the CREARTE Erasmus+ European Programme that took place during the academic years 2015-2017 in five European countries and involved seven educational organisations. CREARTE, Creative Primary School Partnerships with Visual Artists, is a programme that focused on the cooperation of visual artists with primary schools and the design and implementation of art projects, with the involvement of both students and adults.

Background information about the art project

This paper focuses on one of these art projects in Cyprus that was undertaken by me both as a teacher and researcher together with an artist. The participant school's special characteristics and background was considered prior to planning. The school is located in Limassol, a city on the southern coast of Cyprus with a long history that goes back to 2000 BC. The project involved the two classes of sixth grade students, 48 in number.

Art Curriculum Approach

The project touches upon two thematic areas of national curriculum which is "Cultural Heritage" and "Identity". The two approaches of constructivism and critical pedagogy in visual arts education are suggested by the Curriculum as pedagogies that convey the importance of students' direct experiences; active participation and connection with authentic-real situations and experiences; the multimodal visual expression and creation; the in-depth exploration of materials and ideas; the acceptance of subjectivity and multiple interpretations; and the development of critical thinking (Ministry of Education and Culture 2016). This research adopted these theories in designing, implementing and evaluating the art project that explores both artistic and cultural identity of students.

Designing the curriculum unit

Literature review

As a decision was made to focus on cultural heritage and identity a literature review was conducted to clarify these terms. Many scholars argue that arts education and cultural education are interrelated since the arts are a means of communicating, teaching, and transmitting cultural ideas and values. These arguments were central to this research as they provided the theoretical framework for the art education element of the curriculum approach, maintaining that learning about art and culture together can open the door to explore artistic and cultural identity.

Methodology

Action research was chosen as the method for designing, implementing and critically examining the art curriculum unit, aiming to enhance understanding of artistic and cultural identity. Data were collected from teacher's, students' and artist's diaries, photographic images of the art lessons, processes and students final art work in an effort to analyse the meaningful actions and interactions that took place.

Implementation of the art curriculum unit in response to the research questions

Overall the project included eight eighty-minute lessons and an educational trip. The whole art project lasted over a period of three months.

During the first two lessons students were engaged in activities that brought them together to explore, examine, question, rethink, and build new ideas, understandings, and skills about their artistic and cultural identity.



They were enthusiastic to take part in the art activities and eager to present their preferences and hobbies to their classmates. Students expressed ideas about travelling both literally and metaphorically. They ended up with the idea that a boat could symbolize travelling and therefore their journey to the world. In this way students together with the teacher co-decided to work on the theme “travelling: my own journey”.

Teacher prepared students that for the next lessons they would cooperate and create their boats alongside with the sculptor Panayiotis Pasantas. The art project adopted a multimodal approach to enhance cultural learning.

During lesson 3, students were eager to meet the sculptor, who had a surprise for them. He brought to school more than twenty of his sculptures in different sizes and materials.



Although the most of them were fragile, he gave the opportunity and trust to students to carry them to the art studio. Students were excited and enthusiastic they had this role.



Art teacher introduced the sculptor to the students who was engaged in a dialogue with them about the art of sculpture and clay. He also referred to the Cypriot long history of ceramics, and how this inspired his work. This indicated students how cultural heritage can be transmitted to contemporary art and develop the artistic identity of a person. Students seemed to appreciate the artist as well as his artwork. Students' responses to "trellovaporo" a poem by Odisseas Elitis indicated their preferences, thoughts and dreams into how they would like to make their sculptures.



During lesson 4 students had the chance to use stoneware clay to begin making their own boat. As the students noted in their visual diaries they liked using stoneware clay to make their boat while they were impressed by the potential of the material to make three dimensional things. They also acknowledge the importance of the artist's role to help them with the technique.

Lesson 5 focused on making their own figures. Artist indicated students how to make a human figure out of a piece of clay. Students paid attention to the technique and prior to making, they put a lot of thinking on how they would make this figure and what posture would have making movements with their bodies to experiment. Despite the artist's and the teacher's guidance, students faced some difficulties working with clay to make a human figure especially the details of it. Nevertheless the difficulties challenged their critical thinking and developed new skills as they had to think and act quickly about alternatives and experiment with the clay.



By lesson 6, as the teacher and artist mentioned, students worked quickly and efficiently to finalize their sculpture. They also cooperated very well, sharing ideas about the object they would like to carry with them in their boats. Both teacher and artist encouraged students to express ideas on how to finalize their works and using their own imagination.



The final sculptures were brought back to the school after been glazed two weeks later. Evaluation and reflection was the core of lesson 7. Students enjoyed the final result and they were eager to find their own sculpture and talk about it.

During lesson 8 students suggested ways and places to display their sculptures both in the school area and outside of it. They suggested their sculptures to travel with them to the Europe's cultural capital, Paphos 2017. Taking this decision, they had various conversations with their teacher to find out where and how to exhibit them. They concluded that it would be preferable, for practical purposes, to create and carry paper boats instead of the clay ones. They decided to exhibit their boats near the sculpture of Yota Ioannidou "The Little Fisherman". The students discussed with their teachers the idea of creating paper boats, how to display them making a visual intervention, but also how to stabilize them. They also discussed the role of "ephemeral art". Finally, they chose the red colour for their boats both for symbolic

reasons and to be obvious in the space. The teacher indicated the process and the children created their own boat with red paperboard. The students decided to stabilize their boats with sea stones carrying some messages for others. These messages connected to culture and the vision of a better world. As the teacher noted students were excited to get engaged in activities relating to the promotion of their own art works both to the school community and the wider social environment.

After discussing with students, teachers and headmistress what this educational trip would include, teacher arranged every detail of it. On the coastal front of the town, the artist Yiota Ioannidou was waiting for students to collaborate and create their own visual intervention close to her "Little Fisherman". After she introduced her work they discussed how they would like to do their intervention and they started placing their boats together with the sea stones. As noted by all the participants, this was a magic moment students enjoyed and felt that they made a difference to the world with their little red boats.



Having finished the visual intervention with the paper boats, students had a closer look and they became a part of this intervention.



Students expressed thoughts and feelings and then all together said some of their messages for Paphos17. The passers-by to the spectacle of the visual intervention stopped to see, ask questions and read the messages.



This helped students to take ownership of their intervention and they were very proud and ready to explain it to others. The voices of the children started to be heard.

Dissemination to the school and parents

Paphos Press was there to record the students' visual intervention and hosted in its pages a lot of photos of it and an interview of the responsible teacher. Also, the "School in Action", programme of the Cultural Capital of Europe Paphos 2017, supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, published this action on its website. Slide Video Furthermore, one of the Cypriot television channels, presented the children's action in Paphos. Apart from this act, students together with their teacher decided to present the CREARTE art project to their parents and also made an exhibition of their artworks.

Another way to disseminate the procedure and results of the art project was the Visual Arts Education Conference "The European Programme CREARTE in Cyprus Education ", May 26, 2017, at the Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol. The teacher made a PowerPoint presentation together with the artist.

Also, during the conference an exhibition of artworks of both students and artists of all projects including this one took place at the "Pegasus" Gallery.

Finally, the art project is in both the CREARTE and the school's webpage. By making and interpreting art, students studied and re-constructed their own cultural identity.

Outcomes

The three-month art project provided students the opportunity to get involved in artistic activities through the exploration of materials and ideas in a creative and experiential way that concerned the investigation of their own artistic and cultural identity. There was evidence that artists' engagement in the art project inspired students and brought new ideas and strategies in the process of teaching/learning towards the exploration of their artistic identity. Direct contact with artists and their original art works in the setting of the art classroom and outside of it was of great importance. Moreover the main material that was

used for art making, the stoneware clay was considered by all the participants the most appropriate for making sculptures and for its connections with cultural heritage. They explored the immediate and wider environment as a source of inspiration and creativity. Adopting an active role in decision making and organizing different events to disseminate their artwork was extremely fulfilling for students. Cooperating with different people to create artworks, exhibit them and make interventions gave them the notion that they could make an impact in society. They were confronted with social concerns affecting their daily lives and participated in artistic activities. They explored the local and global cultural heritage and reclaimed elements of the Cypriot cultural heritage in their artistic creation. Taking the initiative to send messages connected to culture and the vision of a better world, also helped in this direction. There was evidence that the art project helped students to explore and develop their own artistic and cultural identity.