

Talking to the Different Other: Intercultural Communication through Art

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Abstract – Kindergarten, regardless of the cultural capital that each student has, is called to offer equal learning opportunities, promoting seamless communication between both infants and toddlers with kindergarten teachers. Recent literature suggests that kindergarten teachers should help children feel emotionally secure and encouraged to express themselves even if they do not speak Greek or do not have the same experiences as their classmates. Recognize and accept every cultural element and support the active participation of all students. Therefore, the aim of this article was to explore how art education activities contribute to the promotion of intercultural communication among preschool children from different cultural and linguistic environments, enhancing their cultural and individual identity. The literature review method has been followed for the study of the role of art in intercultural communication. Digital and conventional databases were used for the data collection. The results of the research showed that artistic activities help to strengthen the self-esteem of infants, encourage children to express their emotions, and create channels of communication. In addition, the contact with the works of art creates a climate of acceptance and respect, and recognition of the cultural identity of each student individually. Finally, through art education activities, the imagination is released, the creativity and critical thinking of infants are cultivated and relationships of interaction and cooperation are created. The research also shows the important role of kindergarten teachers in the utilization of means and techniques of art education for the promotion of intercultural communication.

Keywords – Cross-cultural Communication, Preschool Children, Art Education, Art, Cultural Diversity.

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that the basic concept for understanding intercultural communication is the concept of diversity in any multicultural society (Kaga, 2014). The political, social, and financial conditions that prevail worldwide lead to the change in the composition of populations and their redistribution through immigration. According to IFLA (2016), multiculturalism is the coexistence of different cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and manifests itself in habitual behaviors, cultural assumptions, values, thought patterns, and ways of communicating. The definition offered by Collins Dictionary presents multiculturalism as a condition where different cultural or racial groups in a society have equal rights and opportunities, and no one is ignored or considered insignificant (Muntean & Vesa, 2020).

On the other hand, interculturality has been described as a dynamic concept that refers to evolving relationships between cultural groups (cultural groups). Interculturalism presupposes multiculturalism and results from intercultural exchange and dialogue at the local, regional, national or international level (UNESCO, 2006). In the context of the exchange of messages and communication, the role of intercultural communication is considered important. Seema (2013), described communication as the process that involves the transmission of information, ideas, feelings, skills, and knowledge, using symbols, words, pictures, figures, and graphs. Solomon, Olufemi, and James (2012), argued that communication is the exchange of meaning, and Pate and

Sharifa (2015), mentioned a social process that facilitates the exchange of ideas and feelings between individuals in societies. The process of communication can take place at multiple levels and in different forms, but the goal is to transfer meaning from a source to a receiver with the hope of feedback.

Communication is a basic feature of human life and plays the most vital role in shaping culture and the ways of internalizing its characteristics. Singer, approached culture from a perspective that illustrates the strong link between its characteristics and communication, emphasizing that it is a pattern of learned group-related perceptions, including verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that are accepted and expected by a group (Zou, Wildschut, Cable & Sedikides, 2018). Intercultural knowledge requires a gradually developing interaction, which is activated by familiarity with the external characteristics of each culture and continues with the understanding of the more invisible dimensions of spirituality, and ideals (Muntean & Vesa, 2020). The process of training and acquiring intercultural knowledge is long, slow, and relatively difficult to control. Intercultural communication itself involves two contradictory elements: the stability and change required to simultaneously maintain cultural identity and understand other cultures.

According to Cucoş, (2001), intercultural communication is the exchange of value, accompanied by the understanding of adjacent meanings, between individuals or groups of different cultures. Exchanges can take place at the level of ideals, verbally, or non-verbally, and may be implicit, unconscious, or intentional. From another perspective, intercultural communication can be fundamentally symbolic, interpretive, and a context-based transactional process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings (Lustig & Koester, 2007). Arasaratnam (2013), pointed out that intercultural communication is about communication that unfolds in symbolic and intercultural spaces between different cultures. According to Androulidaki (2019), the fundamental rule for achieving effective intercultural communication is to know the living conditions of other cultural groups, their lifestyle, and habits. Indeed, the values of another's culture should not simply be known, but preserved and promoted in ways that are not harmful to cultures. Intercultural communication can contribute to understanding the identity of individuals, strengthening personal and social interactions, solving misunderstandings, and communication failures, reducing mistrust, and finally, improving and enriching the quality of culture (Pate & Siraj, 2015). However, many factors can hinder effective intercultural communication. According to Pate and Siraj (2015), the most important are ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

II. ART FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Babias and Hentsch (2008), pointed out that "the understanding of art has broadened considerably in the last century. Artworks are now difficult to integrate into a specific technique, and several specific activities can no longer be recognized as art for its purely aesthetic purpose. Various gestures or objects that can be works of art can be found in everyday life. Therefore, only the artist's intention, what he wants to express, and the context in which the object or gesture is located, can be turned into art."

Art reflects the specific values of each culture. As Rusu (2014) stated, "art is one of the dimensions that define human beings, along with emotion, knowledge, and Will. Art reflects, at the level of metaphor and transcendence, all stages of anthropological evolution, moments of historical shifts, and the emergence of new social patterns. The creative relationship, with the fundamental human archetypes, can be transmitted through art, and thus projected into the perceptual space of individuals.

The practice and study of the arts open up new horizons since initially, it encourages communication without prejudices, then facilitates the acceptance and understanding of others, and finally creates a framework for the expression of cultural identity.

Moreover, according to Irwin (2013), art is the motivation for communication. Acknowledgment of feelings is pursued in a verbal or non-verbal manner and the interconnection of arts, culture, and history is achieved.

Margiotta and Del Gobbo (2018), state that the possibilities of art education for children are as follows:

- The expansion of expressive abilities through the integration of the arts, enabling communication in a visual, kinesthetic or auditory way.
- The arts allow freedom of expression for students whose national language is not their mother language. Thus, they have more freedom to work with ideas and express their understanding.
- The arts allow children with different abilities to participate in the learning process. To provide an alternative space for children who cannot communicate through the traditional methods of speaking or writing.

- They provide a means of building self-esteem. Students who may be at a disadvantage can make progress through their exposure to art.
- Encourages cooperation and teamwork, as it can offer all children another workspace with different ideas. The arts allow for greater educational equity and intercultural understanding.
- Children may begin to respect and admire the efforts of others as they communicate imaginative and original works through the arts. Such experiences can enable students to gain confidence and develop self-esteem.
- The arts can contribute to a deeper understanding of children's abilities, from the perspective of educators.
- The arts provide authentic cultural voices and experiences and introduce complexity to teaching and learning. Students engage with people's images, feelings, and ideas in a way that develops authenticity.
- Art enables the transmission of cultural values between new generations that might otherwise be lost in a globalized world. Since works of art give form to fundamental beliefs and emotions, they serve as conduits for culture and vehicles of cultivation. Works of art are important factors in the evolution of culture, as they contribute both to cultural continuity and the development of innovations and cultural changes.

III. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH VISUAL ARTS IN THE GREEK KINDERGARTEN

The coexistence of many cultures, in a dominant culture, in a specific place and time, can highlight the concept of multiculturalism. When these cultures intertwine, creating new social and cultural aspects, then interculturalism can emerge. Through educational and cultural processes, interculturalism can promote discussion, build the cultural relations of society and create a new social fabric, a cultural puzzle that can be made up of different cultural pieces. This cultural puzzle is considered to characterize a combination of cultural elements, beliefs, and achievements that occupy space in society (Eko & Putranto, 2019). Therefore, the concept of interculturality can occupy an important place at all levels of society, from the local to the national (Eko & Putranto, 2019).

Greece, as an EU member state and host country for immigrants and refugees, faces new challenges in the field of education. The presence of foreign students in all the country's schools is now evident. In Greek schools, a new educational reality has been created and has raised important issues concerning both the management of diversity and the assurance of equal opportunities for immigrant children (Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2020).

This means that teachers must take into account the needs of culturally diverse students and help them develop appropriately, to integrate into Greek society, but without abandoning their cultural traditions (Paleologu, 2011). According to research, when students from other countries enter the Greek education system for the first time, they tend to find it difficult to adapt to the new school situation (Paleologu, 2011). When children enter an environment with which they are unfamiliar, they may experience difficulties in learning, communicating, and understanding acceptable social behavior. Foreign students join an unfamiliar environment, facing a series of challenges, which may result in the creation of low self-esteem (Giavrimis, Hightower, Johnson & Sarno, 2003).

In kindergarten, communication between children, regardless of their cultural capital, can be easier, mainly due to engaging in various activities. Communication through the visual arts has been carried out since ancient times (Tsergas, 2014). Since the beginning of humanity, the arts have been a means of communication between people. Additionally, it has been considered a dialogue and not a monologue (Tsergas, 2014). It is a process of transferring messages from one person to another, and it can be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication is the use of words to create a message. In this case, the words can be written or spoken. Therefore, oral communication includes both written and spoken language. To communicate effectively, it is important to be able to use a language adequately, both in written and spoken form.

The visual arts include many effective activities that involve social and cultural knowledge, but also non-verbal communication. Visual activities are a very good opportunity for students to experience in a way, real-life situations, which are necessary for intercultural communication. The specific activities can be suitable for all levels of language proficiency and all age groups (Dimitriadou, Efstathiou, 2008). Through visual practices, toddlers can express themselves freely, communicate and exchange ideas. According to Eisner, the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking is achieved through communication with the help of

various forms of representation (Irwin, 2013). While, the various forms of representation are realized through the visual arts which are the first language of toddlers (Leung, 2020). The preschool class is, in many countries, as in Greece, a melting pot of different nationalities, languages, and cultural beliefs. A consequence of this is that children are curious to know and communicate with people who see or act differently from them. Therefore, it is argued that it is the responsibility of teachers to provide children not only with access to education, but also to prepare them to be responsible citizens (Pantazis, Sakelariou & Bakas, 2011). Teachers should encourage students' free expression and support children's ideas (Rusdinal & Afriansyah, 2017). This means that children's artwork is a free expression without oppression and suggestions.

Satisfying this curiosity in children can lead to a life where diversity is embraced and celebrated. Art activities for preschool children can be a fun way to introduce them to other cultures (Pantazis et al., 2011).

IV. THE ROLE OF THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER IN THE USE OF VISUAL ARTS TO PROMOTE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communication is determined by the different attitudes, behaviors, and skills of individuals coming from different cultural environments, in their attempt to communicate (Androulidaki, 2019). According to Papadopoulou (2008), the exact knowledge of the cultural characteristics of the person we want to communicate with is the starting point in the intercultural communication process. Regarding communication in kindergartens, the visual arts can be the means that will facilitate and strengthen communication.

Hendrick (1997), investigated teachers' attitudes toward children and the effective teaching strategies they use. According to the researcher, preschool teachers are suitable for the role they have taken on, but there are also cases where they hinder the learning development of a student with their observations. Children's learning is based on enrichment, critical thinking, real-life experiences, and personal independence. Art is considered a language of expression and communication, in graphic and visual ways, especially for toddlers, who have not learned to read and write. Children can experience visual arts education without worrying that anything might hinder their creative process. The environment of the kindergarten should be pleasant, and attractive, stimulating children's interest and rich in materials that will inspire and facilitate toddlers for enjoyable creations. McNally & Slutsky (2017), report that the peaceful and friendly atmosphere that prevails in kindergarten classrooms will favor the relationships between toddlers and teachers and will strengthen the feeling of respect for the cultural identity of each child separately.

A preschool teacher's personal experiences, beliefs, and knowledge can influence instructional practices in the visual arts. More specifically, when one trusts one's personal experience and holds strong opinions, one may tend not to be afraid of not doing the right thing, even if it is new and different. It can take a long time to gain confidence and a lot of personal belief is required (Leung, 2020). Therefore, for teachers to feel safe, be able to maintain self-control, and demonstrate confidence in their classrooms, they must develop autonomy and initiative during their early years. Just like children, if teachers have not acquired competence and confidence in the visual arts, they are likely to lack the skills to develop creatively in their classroom environment (Mooney, 2006).

The beliefs, experiences, and practices of teachers have been argued to have an impact on the teaching of visual arts in the classroom (Oreck, 2004). Through training, most preschool teachers can be knowledgeable about the importance of the visual arts and how they help with expression, creativity, aesthetic awareness, and curiosity. A study by Gibson (2003), investigated pre-service teachers' attitudes toward art and its education. More specifically, the research dealt with (a) teachers' past experiences, (b) their existing knowledge, (c) their beliefs, (d) their attitudes, and (e) their perceptions and interests. At the beginning of the study, the majority of pre-service teachers felt quite confident about teaching visual arts in a school. Two years later, the majority of them said they felt more confident about teaching visual arts to their future students. Although participants increased their confidence level, some still had reservations about their ability to teach art comfortably.

V. CONCLUSIONS

A review of the recent literature suggests that if a school wants to enhance students' intercultural communication, and develop their intercultural competence and awareness, attention must be paid to student-centered, parent- and cultural-centered political and social pursuits. The teacher can become a mediator between different students from different cultures and students can act as catalysts of intercultural communication in the classroom. Students' intercultural competence, curiosity, freedom, openness, and willingness are prerequisites for intercultural communication.

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