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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Contribution of Applied Arts in Child-art Education: A Practice of Creativity for Educators

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**ABSTRACT**

This research applied the "Communal Graphic play" approach to child-art education in a specific area of Iran where children have different religious orientations and backgrounds. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how an improvisational "Communal Graphic Play" can be applied in a society where children have different backgrounds. At the first step of research, it was understood that due to significant different backgrounds, children were not able to accept each other as a team. It requires some other activities such as performance art as a solution to prepare children for working on visual art education. Data was collected through focus group interviews, participant observations, and literature review. Describing, classifying, and interpreting data were the central core of data analysis. The findings of the research indicate that one cannot attempt to simply import the Communal Graphic Play method. Rather it needs to be redefined and redesigned based on the culture, environment, and children's issues. Thus, redesigning the method of performance art plays a significant role in this case study.

**KEYWORDS**

Child-Art Education, Creativity in Education, Visual Art, Performance Art, Communal Graphic Play.

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### 1. Introduction

Art education has captured increasing attention in various areas, especially in children-related studies. In the last 3 decades, researchers have shown more emphasis on visual arts and cultural issues in the presence of art education compared to traditional fine arts disciplines (Ballengee Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Barbosa, 1991; Blandy, 1994; Congdon, 1991; Duncum, 1990; Freedman, 1994, 2000; Garber, 1995; Garoian, 1999; Hernandez, 2000; Hicks, 1990; Jagodzinski, 1997; Neperud, 1995; Smith-Shank, 1996; Tavin, 2000). In recent art education studies, children have become a key element, so art educators' interests have eventually shifted from children as an artist to children as producers and consumers of visual culture [43]. One of the most significant aspects of art education for children is its implication for the future. In fact, art education is to educationally prepare children for the unpredictable future. This unpredictability is deeply rooted in the inherent creativity of human beings, which is as important in education as literacy. Art education for children might significantly differ from other types of art education since children have an extraordinary capacity for innovation and creativity. Therefore, one may not be able to simply apply the existing methods of art education to children-related studies. One important question is how art educators would adjust the existing methods for addressing unpredictable issues in various situations that children would face in the future?

To answer such questions and address potential issues that children may face in the future, it is highly important to understand the culture to which one wishes to apply specific methods because each culture is tied to certain beliefs, values, and structural patterns. Such understanding is prior to art education and enables individuals to function in social and cultural environments effectively. Education, as the next step, is part of cultural experience and cannot be reduced to disciplinary parameters but should include issues of power, history, and self-identity (Bromley & Apple, 1998; Dewey, 1916; Freedman, 1995; Friere, 1978; Neperud, 1995). In this paper, we show that a given method is not simply applicable, in the same way, to various groups of children with different cultures or children in different situations. Therefore, to address children-related issues, the existing approaches and

methods are required to be re-designed based on the culture and particular issues that each group of children is facing. Most importantly, creativity itself plays an important role in such adjustments to develop new methods and should be considered in art education studies. As the main contributions of this study, we propose a framework in which creativity is used to help educators adjust and then apply the existing method to art education for children. Particularly, we carry out an experiment on a group of children that initially have some conflicts, such as not accepting each other as a team, and elaborate on the steps of applying a visual approach called "Communal Graphic play" in such a group to resolve the identified issue. In this study, we empirically show how art education for children can play an important role in helping children first identify and then resolve the potential issues that they may face not only in small groups but also in bigger communications and society.

## **2. Literature Review**

Traditional research approaches in art education aim to focus on similar events in the future and then predict or control the outcomes of such events. Therefore, the findings of traditional approaches are mainly based on truthfulness and trustworthiness. On the other hand, more recent art-based educational research approaches aim to enhance the perspectives and encourage researchers or educators to see educational phenomena in new ways. Such recent approaches in art education provide the opportunity to (i) transform the education through a novel method of thinking and (ii) answer questions that might have otherwise been left unmasked (Barone & Eisner, 2006).

One of the functional visual approaches in education art is "Communal Graphic Play," which helps the audience collaboratively learn democracy while making a comic. Brent Wilson, the inventor of this method, introduced this approach as a spur-of-the-moment and non-obligatory play that happens in public atmospheres such as a school class (Brent Wilson, 2005). In order to apply the Communal Graphic Play in conflicting situations, for example, a situation where children do not accept each other as a team, we redesign this method to prepare and help children learn democracy and collaboration while making a comic. To this end, we use other types of art, such as performance art. In this context, the visual approach does not simply refer to the unconventional image made by a child; however, it is about creating the class of visual culture innovated by some arts for pedagogy (Viola, 1936).

## **3. Methodology**

This study research is constructed based on the concepts of Piaget's theory on interaction and making knowledge at the moment rather than considering knowledge as a passive object (Merriam, 1998). From Piaget's theory, it is concluded that children experience the same continuous period of intellectual growth that involves sensory motor, solid operations, preoperational, and official operational periods (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Piaget, 1930, 1950, 1953, 1969; Piaget & Inhelder, 1948, 1956, 1969; Piaget & Szeminska, 1941, 1952). Data was collected through focus group interviews, participant observations, and literature review.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

In what follows, we study a group of children and apply our proposed framework in 4 stages to explain the continuous period of intellectual growth of such children in the group.

### **4.1 Stage I: Identifying the Main Issue by designing "Question Games."**

The core of the Communal Graphic Play method is social interaction. Therefore, the first important role of educators is to identify possible issues that prevent people from such interactions. Potential ways to identify such issues include (i) paying attention to the pupils exactly the way we ask them to pay attention to one another, (ii) making ourselves accessible to children and being fully in readiness for them, and (iii) listening to everything they express. Among these potential ways, listening seems to be more effective because it is usually interpreted as lending importance to others and thus listening allows the other person's viewpoint to be attended to (Rinaldi, 1998).

At the beginning of our experiment, group members barely initiated conversations with each other due to unknown reasons. Therefore, we planned on identifying the possible issues that prevented group members from having a conversation and consequently having collaboration in the group, which is the main focus of this stage of the proposed framework in general. For this purpose, we designed a question game that is sufficiently engaging to create a situation for children to speak out and possibly reveal the issues that prevent them from initiating conversations.

The designed question game was based on improvisation and spontaneous thinking. We asked children to sit on the floor in a circular pattern. Then, they were told to ask each other any questions that they spontaneously came up with. We explicitly mentioned since it is a question game, the questions themselves matter, not the answers, and thus there is no wrong question. This was to ensure the children do not have concerns about asking unusual or fictional questions. After we took an initiative step, children immediately started asking questions about nature, the city, and other topics. From time to time, we also asked some questions, mostly focusing on the children themselves, to indirectly draw their attention to the group rather than other topics.

Ultimately, they started asking questions about the group that helped us identify the problem. It turned out that the main issue among the children was their different religious orientations. Most children became conservative once they realized there was a difference, no matter what it was, between themselves and others. This led to a conflict, and thus they were not able to accept each other. Also, we observed that during the first half of the question game, children tended to ask questions from others with similar religious orientations and interests. Not only do the children deal with such conflicts, but also adults of the same society, which have been studied as well, have similar religious conflicts and often fail to accept one another's differences, especially when people are more conservative, and there is no potential for the acceptance of other religious beliefs. In this stage of the proposed framework, listening along with a question game eventually becomes an efficient technique to observe and identify a critical issue among children that caused the conflict preventing them from further interactions. Listening to each other's questions helped the children to first relate to others and then share their common points of interest and identify their differences.

#### **4.2 Stage II: Detailed-Oriented Group Games**

As discussed in the previous stage, listening is an essential and effective tool for identifying potential issues among a group since it helps group members to relate to one another and find common viewpoints and differences. However, listening itself is not sufficient for finding a potential way of resolving the issues. As a result of our experiment, it turns out that the more group members listen to each other, the more likely it is to identify the issue. Nevertheless, after an issue is discovered, it is required to proactively draw their attention to other topics rather than the identified issue so that the group members do not take a defensive position regarding the process and the identified issue itself. In other words, the identified issue needs to be gradually resolved through interacting and effective games or social activities rather than directly discussing it with group members.

To do so, games that are designed based on interesting and accessible objects can benefit the experiment and other similar experiments. Particularly, we have collected several stones and asked the children of the group to look at the stones and express the visual details, patterns, or findings that are easily observable, as well as their visualizations of the details of each stone. At this stage again, we explicitly mentioned that we collect all their findings as a group, and each person should add details to the ones discovered by others. This was to ensure that children tend to start collaborating as a group. When expressing their findings, everyone was asked to carefully listen to others and possibly add to others' observations. This practice was designed to help children feel they are going towards the same goal and everyone is working for the group, even though they still might not feel they all belong to a team.

As expected, children curiously listened to each other to learn about their findings. They also eagerly observed the stones to find out what was missing from one another's observations. Although we have found more interactions between children, we think children still do not see themselves as a team at this stage. It is because it seems children still have not developed a common sense of belonging to the group, which can potentially help them interact more and enhance their group achievements in the designed games. Therefore, it turns out that art educator is required to add more creativity in designing games so that the games are more effective and interactive. As a result, through such games, it is more likely that group members tend to perceive more similarities in themselves despite the initial conflicts of interest. Given the strong potential of performance art, for this purpose, we have used performance art in the rest of this experiment to make the designed games more interactive.

#### **4.3 Stage III: Application of Performance for Facing Yourself and Each Other**

How could performance art possibly unify members as a team? This is an important question that researchers frequently face for various purposes (Denzin, 2003). Performance art consists of the principles of various fields such as juxtaposition, incongruence, simultaneity, collage, assemblage, film, drawing, poetry, autobiographic material, dance, architecture, and music all at once. While these principles seem to be different, they result in an aesthetically unified art known as performance art. In fact, performance art inherently has unifying properties as it is the composition of several related and unrelated pieces. In addition, the theory of the hundred languages indicates that children have a hundred ways of thinking and expressing themselves in numerous communicative languages, including music, drawing, cinematography, dance, performance art, and drama. This shows the ability of children to simultaneously deal with several ways of thinking and unify them all in one form to express a message (Dahlberg et al., 2007, Rinaldi, 2006, Malaguzzi, 1998).

To use the performance art in our experiment for unifying the children as a team, we first explored children's individual behavior in a designed environment. Particularly, we placed a mirror in front of the children and told them that their task was to stand in front of the mirror while looking at their own bodies, face, and eyes for a few minutes. While completing the task, we added music to the experiment to observe the children's immediate reactions. Their first reaction was laughing while waiting for instructions from us to know what the music was for. However, after a few minutes, they started adapting themselves to the new environment, where the music as an unexpected element was added to the experiment. The form of this adaptation varied from one person to

another. Nevertheless, the common point among all children's adaptations was that they all tended to make their own solo performances eagerly, mainly by waving at the mirror, talking to themselves in the mirror, making funny faces, and dancing.

Arguably, the use of the mirror as the platform for interactive performance art created a transformative 'liminal space' for the children. Turner (1977) describes the liminal as a state, process, or threshold between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states. Liminal time is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen and clearly is not controlled by the clock. Nonetheless, designing efficient and interacting games can provide a situation to reach the liminal space faster and extend the liminal time. Therefore, in our experiment, our simple but interacting designed performance had significant effects such that it metaphorically and literally immersed the children in their performances. Participants have shown increasingly more enthusiasm to become a part of each other's performance and form a group performance. However, it is highly important to gradually establish a group and develop a strong sense of belonging to the group among children with different beliefs, as such differences are highlighted by their parents, teachers, and society in children's everyday lives. Therefore, forming a unified group, given all the advertised differences, requires more patience and practice. In the next stage, we form two-person groups rather than multi-person groups to gradually prepare children for collaboration.

#### ***4.4 Stage IV: Application of Performance for Cooperation***

In any gathering, a strong connection among people is required prior to referring to that gathering as a group. According to Piaget's theory, the connection between the knowledgeable and the knowledge develops in space and time. Our experiment observed that such strong connections among children did not develop immediately; nevertheless, children tended to develop a strong connection and sense of belonging to the group after they were given enough time and space.

Given the children's readiness to accept each other, in the last stage of our experiment, we changed the structure of the game to explore the children's behavior. In this stage, we removed the mirror and randomly picked two children to stand in front of each other so that one was the subject and the other person was to imitate what the first person did. This part of the experiment was designed to make an imaginary mirror, where one is the other person's reflection in the mirror, to see how children would bond with the other person, performing their image. The children, who were chosen as subjects, empathized with the children who were chosen as images and found out that they need to be more careful in choosing their performance so that the other person, as their image, can also imitate and replicate their moves. Since children are put in teams, they start showing a sense of responsibility with respect to their teammates so that they both can perfectly perform and complete the task. We observed that children started communicating more with their groupmates to carefully choose their performance. It was clear that each group established a goal to ensure the actions of the subject and the image are well-synchronized while producing performance art. Our experiment shows that children have made a variety of movements full of emotion and often accompanied by dance. In fact, children created a sensuous, emotional, and evocative range of unifying performances by representing their bodies in and through a piece of performance art (Bagley, 2008).

### **5. Conclusion**

This study was mainly designed to monitor the behavior of a group of children with noticeable differences and help them perceive the similarities in their bodies, thoughts, and emotions regardless of the radical differences in their religious backgrounds. This experiment was mainly designed based on the process of action, reaction, and interaction using additional elements such as music, performance art, and structured movements. As an outcome of this study, we have seen how art education for children can play an important role in helping children to first identify and then resolve their issues not only in their small groups but also on larger scales such as the society. In particular, children who did not initially accept each other as a team eventually developed a strong sense of belonging to the team through several designed games using music and performance art. Performance art, in particular, led children to express their true emotions and show empathy to others aside from their different backgrounds. Such games, which were designed based on performance art as improvisational art, create an atmosphere in which the body plays a key role. As a result, we believe that creatively designing such games can ultimately lead to developing a sensuous feeling in the participants, which consequently can result in forming a team. For example, in our experiment, children have discovered an analogy between their different beliefs and the visual differences that they found in some ordinary objects like the stones so that they realized each colour, shape, or pattern in the stones signifies a constructing part of what we call "stone". Therefore, no matter how different people are in thinking and beliefs, they are all parts of a society that is dependent on belief systems and differences to move forward.

To sum up, art education is significantly essential in children's education to help children identify and resolve the potential issues they might have in a group. In the bigger picture, such art-based education not only helps children in the early stages of their lives but also prepares them for critical conflicts that exist in society. As in each culture, the issues and obstacles that children deal with are different; art educators are required to critically design creative and interacting activities or games for children of a group

before applying Communal Graphic Play. This study shows creativity in redesigning the existing techniques provides art educators with an opportunity to realign the existing radical norms, which are usually arisen from the cultural and social beliefs and are advertised among children. This is the role of educators to use their creativity, design interacting games, and ultimately help children think outside of the box with no boundaries. Since, in this study, the data has been merely collected from one place, researchers suggested applying such creative art-based education in other different places with different cultures in order to engage with such a prompt. It is possible to widen the opportunity of having new cultural perspectives by investing more in creative art-based projects.

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