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ART AS A TOOL TO REFLECT ON EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

In the school and educational institutions often art is used to create projects dedicated to children. Many authors have reflected on this aspect (Dewey, 1995; Munari, 1981; Ricci, 2007; ...), identifying what can be the most meaningful content for these proposals. Materiality, experimentation, research, production, communication and sharing with others are fundamental (Pugliese, 2006; Bordini, 2007). In this proposal, however, the artistic proposal, while retaining the features previously mentioned, is intended for adults: educators, teachers, future teachers, as a way to deepen research (Schön, 1993, 2006). An instrument of investigation, which deepens further aspects, different from the more objective ones, but they are not abandoned. Observation protocols, seedlings, discussion and discussion protocols, tables, checklists, and observational videos can provide an important breakdown in school life needed to better understand what is happening and to design new educational actions (Mantovani, 1998; Liamputtong, 2013). But as Sullivan observes (2009), the current reality is so complex that another way to accommodate reflections, anxieties, fears and change wills that would otherwise be lost should be used. That's when this research begins, proposing the use of tools freely chosen by future teachers art-inspired to reflect on their didactic paths and their classroom and section proposals. The question asked by this research is to understand whether a different form of documentation, inspired by the modes of contemporary art research, can be significant within the educational world.

Keywords: Art research, educational practices, teacher, student, thoughtful teacher, reflexive practitioner

1 ART FROM NURSERY THROUGH PRIMARY SCHOOL

Educational contexts, whether early childhood education facilities (infant-toddler centres for 0-3 year olds) or educational institutions for older children (kindergarten, primary and lower secondary schools), have long seen a focus on art-related themes that is reflected in a diverse range of approaches and procedures. In this paper, we briefly examine two of the ways in which this interest in art is expressed during the period spanning early childhood education and primary school. First, art is an integral part of the educational setting itself. The preparation of educational spaces requires aesthetic forethought, and is usually the prerogative of the adult, who chooses colour schemes, natural and artificial décor, the layout of purpose-specific areas, and educational materials, sometimes incorporating the children's own work in his or her scheme. In some educational contexts, this aesthetic planning can become very sophisticated indeed, thanks to an awareness that

setting and materials represent - as Loris Malaguzzi has argued - "the third teacher" (after adults and other children), with a key role to play in supporting intentionally imagined and designed educational actions [1]. In such cases, it is nevertheless of value to ask what concept of decoration has underpinned the design of educational space, and what it is intended to offer at the educational level. This immediately requires, as this paper sets out to make explicit, that adults with responsibility for educating children become more consciously aware of their own educational action and their current relationship with the notion of art and design. What action by the children is prompted or enabled by a given material or by a given type of layout/furnishing/décor? Is it independent action or does it require constant intervention on the part of the adult in charge? Does it enable just one type of action or does it offer multiple opportunities for experimentation? Let us turn now to a second key way in which art may be present in schools, in addition to the presentation of educational space, which as we have seen characterizes educational settings up to the primary school level. This further presence of art is found at all levels of schooling and consists of art education programmes for children and teenagers. Art education is implemented through the organization of a set of activities spanning: drawing [2,3,4,5], painting, use of expressive codes and languages [6], reworking of visual signs, collage, handling of soft materials [7], assembly of objects, design of artefacts, experimentation with the body, spatial installations, use of new technologies, and engagement with cultural heritage [8,9], as well as many other opportunities for direct experience that are often delivered by means of laboratory methods. In relation to this aspect of art education in schools, further insight is provided in the Italian national curricular guidelines published in 2012, which regarding nursery school, state that: "Children express their thoughts and emotions in imaginative and creative ways: art fosters this propensity, educating them take pleasure in beauty and aesthetic experience. Their exploration of the available materials constitutes initial artistic experience that stimulates creativity and carries over to other learning. [...] Children's encounter with art offers them the opportunity to look at the world around them from another perspective. Exploring materials through their senses, experimenting with and sharing techniques in the art workshop at school, and observing places (squares, gardens and landscapes) and works of art (paintings, museums, architecture) will enhance their perceptual abilities, their enjoyment of consuming, producing and inventing art, and their appreciation of culture and artistic heritage." [10, p.20] In relation to primary education, the national guidelines provide further food for thought, for example in relation to the definition of art as a school subject: "The aim of the subject entitled 'art and visual education' is to foster and reinforce students' ability to express themselves and communicate in a creative and personal way, observe images and other artistic creations with a view to interpreting and understanding them, and develop a personal aesthetic sensibility and an informed interest in artistic heritage. [...] Education in art and image, delivered using a workshop-based approach, develops student' capacity to observe and describe, critically read and understand works of art. The development of these skills is a necessary condition for creating an attitude of curiosity towards and positive interaction with the artistic world." [10, p.73] In sum, the national curricular guideline focus on: materiality, experimentation, enquiry, production, communication, and sharing with peers and adults, as the key elements of teaching-learning paths in the domain of art.

2 A REFLECTION ON TEACHERS' THINKING ABOUT ART

In light of this brief summary of the legislative guidelines, let us return to the first question posed in this paper. Namely, what idea of art and art education, we might say of the epistemology of this subject, is held by teachers and educators, and how does this inform the teaching-learning activities

offered to students? [11,12]. This is a crucial point because different ideas about art education and art itself on the part of the teacher can lead to different types of educational activities. We have frequently observed, over many years' involvement in initial and in-service teacher education at the nursery school and primary school levels, a failure on the part of teachers to reflect on their own attitude to art in the broad sense and a tendency to focus instead on specific art education activities to be implemented in the classroom. When, during the visual education module offered as part of the Degree Course in Primary Education, student teachers are asked when they last visited a museum, the majority cite a high school field trip, with only a small proportion, XX%, reporting having attended a museum on their own initiative or having taken part in (not necessarily high-profile) art events, which would reflect personal cultural engagement. Given this initial state of affairs, the module is designed to activate student teachers' artistic sensibilities by offering guided visits to contemporary art or design museums, as well as lectures by curators of exhibitions/museums and contemporary artists. This programme invariably elicits a strong level of engagement and enthusiasm on the part of the students. Similarly, in-service training modules for teachers (from nursery through upper secondary school) have been conducted in contemporary art museums (see for example the training course "School and contemporary art: new forms of shared design" which was run three times in 2015-2016 at Pirelli Hangar-Bicocca, during the exhibitions: "Hypothesis" by Philippe Parreno (October-November 2015), "Doubt" Carsten Höller (March/April 2016), "GDM - Grand Dad's Visitor Center" of Laure Prouvost (October 2016-April 2017), as well as at the Triennale Design Museum. For the first of these courses, 70 applications were received although only 25 places were available, and despite the fact that the module was not recognized by the Regional Education Office. Again, 90% of the teachers in attendance had never previously visited the HangarBicocca Pirelli, despite its status as a renowned contemporary art museum[13]. These findings about students and in-service teachers suggest a reluctance on their part to spontaneously engage with contemporary art or art heritage, as though permission or assistance were required to access this form of culture. This is even more strongly the case in relation to contemporary art, which is often perceived as alien or incomprehensible. Another key finding concerns the common perception on the part of teachers that art and education are separate areas following different or even diametrically opposed paths.

3 THE PERSPECTIVE OF JOHN DEWEY

Our reflection on this last-mentioned point may be enriched by some citations from John Dewey, an author who displayed a consistent concern with the theme of art throughout his work. In "Art as Experience and other writings", Dewey had this to say about painting: "Is the art of painting so foreign to education and the education so foreign to art that they should be kept distinct and separate, or is art intrinsically educational, due to the very fact that it exists and not by virtue of any educational purpose to which it may be put?" [14, p.440]. He thus posited a powerful connection between education and art, going on to clarify that he understood art as a form of everyday experience, and to criticize those who wished to relegate it to an ivory tower reserved for a small elite of connoisseurs. Many were his arguments against the position of those who wanted to: "Put art on a pedestal, making it into something esoteric, separate from the values inherent in all experiences of things in their full integrity: and also something separate from the everyday needs of man." [14, p.441]. For example, he claimed that: "We might conclude that, after all, what we call aesthetic experience, if only we could live it often enough, and in the normal way, would not need to be defined as aesthetics. It would be recognized for what is truly is - simply experience - that is to say

having experiences of great value in the fullness of their meaning." [14, p.460]. In other words, Dewey saw art as inextricably bound up with experience and the act of putting into practice. He placed major emphasis on a key concept, to which we will return in the second part of the paper, which is the crucial role of aesthetics and art in helping us to gain a deeper understanding of reality: "While understanding all about the sun, the atmosphere and the rotation of the earth, we can nevertheless fail to notice the splendour of the sunset. Nothing can substitute the direct perception of an object in its current actual mode of occurring and manifesting itself. We need concrete fact whose quality and value are illuminated by a bright and elevated light. [...] Aesthetic appreciation and art thus conceived are not added on to the real world, still less are they precious ornaments. They are the only means by which we may perceive individualized elements of the natural and human world. [...] In the absence of aesthetic appreciation, we miss out on what is most characteristic and most precious in the real world." [14, pp.438-439]. This insight of Dewey's informs the second research question addressed in this paper. Broadly stated: can art, with its power to capture experience in the educational sphere, as in any other, represent an alternative and supplementary means of narrating, documenting, and fostering meaningful reflection on children's educational experience?

4 FROM THE QUESTION ABOUT ART TO THE SEARCH FOR A NEW FORM OF DOCUMENTATION

To further develop our line of reflection let us initially return to our first question concerning educators' and teachers' idea of art education and art itself and the direct impact of these ideas on the art education they offer to their students. In exploring this issue, we may turn to Piero Bertolini, who defined art education as follows: "In the not so distant past, this term was understood to mean the union of two elements: the study of the history of art, and learning to draw or play an instrument in an exclusively reproductive manner, that is to say, copying previously recognized masters or artistic products. Today this pattern is challenged by a redefining of the very concept of art. As the philosopher and art critic Dino Formaggio has written, 'Art is everything that human beings call Art'. [...] It should further be emphasized [...] that the mental phase of the educational process can never be divorced from the manual and productive phase. Finally, we also need to forcefully affirm that education (artistic and non) should not consist of an exercise in talent-scouting aimed at identifying a painter or pianist among the student body; in other words, for an educator, it is preferable to discover that all the students are capable of 'entering' and 'culturally participating' in processes of artistic production and communication, than to discover that one of them is able to produce a perfect copy of the Mona Lisa." [15, pp.29-30]. This definition explicitly frames art as bound up with individual societies' approach to and tastes in production. It thus removes the risk of theoretically distancing art and viewing it as the prerogative of a select few, before going on to situate art education at the intersection of theory and practice, and to advocate an emphasis on culturally engaging all students rather than exclusively valuing those who are particularly talented. Another point to be made concerns the specific features of the contemporary art scene [16, 17], which is vastly different to the more classical art of other periods, offering infinite modes of action that may also be incorporated into school art education programmes to good effect. Indeed, as Angela Vettese reminds us: "Persons, things, animals, places, and emotions: since the twentieth century, visual art can be done with anything. Thus, the language of contemporary visual art offers a spectrum of expressive possibilities that encompass every imaginable means. These novel experimental modes of executing works of art have placed new emphasis on inventiveness, yet they are not meaningless games but a natural reflection of the way in which people currently live, produce, consume, and

exchange information. In the space of a hundred years, an entire new tradition has been built up." [18] On the basis of the two perspectives just outlined – which view art as productive and reflective for children, and contemporary art in particular as facilitating open-ended exploration – we set out to use expressive art methods not only with children, but also with adults, as part of broader documentation and reflection processes. We introduced these methods with student teachers taking the Visual Education Module as well as final year students taking Art and General Teaching Methods modules, with a view to investigating whether such an alternative form of documentation, used together with traditional methods already familiar to the students including: observational protocols, plans, protocols for conversation and discussion, tables, checklists, video observation [19, 20] etc., would help them to gain insight into aspects of reality that are sometimes overlooked, as well as giving them an opportunity to develop a more personal relationship with the world of art. Indeed, as Graeme Sullivan puts it, current reality is so complex that need to find other ways of capturing the reflections, anxieties, fears and desire for change that would otherwise be lost. "[I realize] that in an uncertain world there is a need to develop more widespread means of exploring human comprehension and that visual arts can play a key role." [21, p.XXIII] This experimental introduction of art-based documentation methods with trainee nursery school and primary school teachers, which is still at the preliminary stage, has involved inviting the students to freely choose their preferred artistic tools as a means of reflecting on their learning paths, their teaching practice, and their own study of art. The key research question here is whether an alternative form of documentation that is informed by contemporary artistic enquiry can be of value in education. We are currently collecting preliminary data comprising the materials produced from the students and their responses to interview questions and questionnaire items. Tentative preliminary analysis of this data suggests that the use of art-based documentation helps student teachers to become more at home with artistic methods in general, as well as inspiring novel perspectives and a more enquiring approach to certain aspects of education.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have outlined the rationale for, and the early stages of, a line of enquiry which, in light of the difficulty traditionally displayed by student and in-service teachers in engaging with art and art education, is designed to explore the potential benefits of introducing broadly defined expressive-art-based documentation into teacher education. The aim is to reactivate students' capacity to engage in a different kind of communication to that conventionally used. It appears that inviting student teachers to freely record their observations, reflections, or learning using a different method, allows them to rediscover languages that they might otherwise use for personal purposes only, and to activate a completely novel approach to analysing educational situations. As Loretta Fabbri has argued, these different languages may also help to: "gradually turn [teacher] education into a "place" and a "time" for reflecting on and redesigning one's action in view of one's new professional mission [and] help teachers to recognize their own professional expertise, as the bearers of unique and valuable knowledge, as a prerequisite to acquiring new professional scripts"[22]. Indeed, to borrow the words of Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor, "[...] the arts have much to offer educational researchers - challenging us to think creatively about what constitutes research; to explore even more varied and creative ways to engage in empirical processes; and to share our questions and findings in more penetrating and widely accessible ways." [24]

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