

Interculturalism in art education: presenting latin american culture through music and visual art

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Abstract

Interculturalism in art education refers to pedagogic strategies that support positive attitudes regarding the specific aspects of cultural plurality of our societies. Cultural plurality and diversity refer to the variety of cultural identities and are understood as sources of knowledge. The question that inevitably opens is how to insert contents about interculturalism in the pedagogical process not transforming them in an exotic product and how to discourage a “decontextuated cultural tourism” that does not fit any educational aims. Trying to solve this question, we developed a general pedagogic strategy based on the comparison of theoretical concepts from the worlds of music and visual arts. The task that students were engaged in was to listen to music and to try to transform it in visual signs which should be later shaped in a visual composition. With this exercise, cultural characteristics became known through an individual engagement in universal expressive languages that

do not share the eventual obstacles imposed by verbal communication. In the conclusion we reflected on how to develop a teaching-learning process sensitive to the differences and commonalities of different cultures living in our space.

Key words: Identity. Diversity of cultures. Interculturalism in visual art education. Music and visual art.

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Introduction

Interculturalism in art education refers to pedagogic strategies that support positive attitudes regarding the specific aspects of cultural plurality of our societies. Cultural plurality and diversity refer to the variety of cultural identities and are understood as sources of knowledge.

In fact, each individual's cultural identity is made up of a number of elements, and these are clearly not restricted to the particulars set down in official records. For the great majority these factors include allegiance to a religious tradition; to a nationality – sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, or a particular social milieu. But the list is much longer than that; it is virtually unlimited. A person may feel a more or less strong attachment to a province, a village, a neighbourhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with the same passions, the same sexual preferences, the same physical handicaps, or who have to deal with the same kind of pollution or other nuisance. Not all these allegiances are equally strong, at least at any given moment. But none is entirely insignificant, either. All are components of personality – we might almost call them “genes of the soul” so long as we remember that most of them are not innate (MAALOUF, 2000, p. 10-11).

Student identities can never be treated as self-evident: they are saturated with the experiences of local cultural diversity, and political complexity, on the one hand, and with contemporary homogenizing experiences of “global media spaces” on the other. Identities are always rooted in part in ideals and moral aspirations that cannot fully realize. There is a tension within us which can be both the locus of personal struggle and the source of an identity politics that aims not simply at the legitimation of falsely essential categorical identities but at living up to deeper and moral values. While each of the elements of identity may be found separately in many individuals, the same combination of them is never encountered in different people, and it's this that gives every individual richness and value and makes him/her unique and irreplaceable.

Cultural identity as the background of intercultural encounters is not a stable category. What it means, how it is used, by whom it is used, how it is mobilized in social discourse, its role in educational and more general social policy are all in fact contingent and historical. It is not “a thing” that can be tracked and measured; it is instead a set of social relations, a kind of performance. Our concerns about interculturalism are focused on the different modes in which it is included in art education, departing from the

consideration that using the (artistic) products of another culture means a specific experience that enhances individuation as far as it is almost impossible to formulate a stable definition neither of each individuals' cultural identity nor of the limits of its components' diversity.

Defining the elements of intercultural encounters

Each person's individual encounters with the products of another culture are part of the individual's personal development. The intercultural encounter is a unidirectional, nonreciprocal experience: an individual encountering using the products of another culture and in so doing having an experience which can not be exactly replicated from the perspective of the other culture. The optimal intercultural encounter facilitates individuation – in other words, through the use of other's symbols one can become more fully one's self. The course of an intercultural encounter begins with the individual, as yet unaware of the "Other". In brief, the experience of an "Other" always begins with and returns to the Self. Cases of apparent "mutual" exchange are thus two separate encounters focused on a (at least apparently) shared set of symbols.

Exchanges deal with "the ideal/virtual" word of images and ideas promoted by media and "the social/individual" position considering the unac-

cepted, repressed issues of (social) ego resulting in a subject projected on Others. Repressions are often culturally-driven. For instance, western cultures have long perpetuated masculinist, rationalist, empiricist biases, which not only led to repression of much opposing material but also exacerbated the problem by an extreme valorization of the ego. Those parts of the Self which are deemed unacceptable to the ego, for reasons of culture, personal history, religion etc. are repressed into the unconscious and as a result are subject to being projected on others: the external Other becomes a substitute for an unacknowledged internal Other (HARBECK, 2001, p. 13).

To be fully oneself is to be fully situated in the context of humanity as a whole; any insistence on separation from the whole is an act against fullness of identity. The implications for intercultural awareness are fairly clear: "Since there is only one earth and one mankind, east and west cannot rend humanity into two different halves. Psychic reality exists in its original oneness, and awaits man's advance to a level of consciousness where s/he no longer believes in the one part and denies the other, but recognizes both as constituent elements of one psyche" (HARBECK, 2001, p. 23). So, we cannot know or understand the "Other" until we understand ourselves, for it is always on the basis of oneself, that one understands anything.

Without acknowledgement of the role of the self in this process, the result may be disillusionment and the intercultural material may be devaluated. Another possibility, and an increasingly common one, is that the “Other” may be “allowed to remain” “Other”. This is the problem of post-modernity. Instead of recognizing the status of the “other” as an equal, there is the undermining of the “other” by a declared indifference to distinction, while attempting to maintain the same balance of power. On a personal level this could mean a reaction of fear of Other’s power. Abetting this response is a cultural admonition against appropriation, which originates with “others” reacting to their fears of subsumption (HARBECK, 2001, p. 24).

The very awareness that the intercultural material is potentially a tool for learning about oneself can also lead to an egocentric use of it, which is the opposite of what should occur. Any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language, culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer (SAID, 1995, p. 332). Following these ideas, it is obvious that “intercultural attitudes” are mostly unconscious, the moment they become conscious, they can fall into a “decontextuated cultural tourism” that does not fit educational aims.

Educational ideology and interculturalism

The educational and cultural system is an important element in the maintenance of existing relations of domination in many societies in which such systems of domination persist and reproduce themselves without being consciously recognized by the people involved (APPLE, 1995, p. 12).

School is a part of a larger framework of social relations that are structurally selective and express carefully designed sets of values. The traditions that dominate the field assist in the reproduction of inequality while at the same time serving to legitimate both the institutions that recreate it and our own actions within them. School in fact teaches “necessary abilities” but in forms that are a guarantee of subordination under the dominant ideology or an expression of the acquaintance with their practices (ALTHUSSER, 1980, p. 43).

While there is a formal right for everyone to be represented in the debates over whose cultural capital, whose knowledge “that”, “how” and “to”, will be declared legitimate for transmission to future generations of students, it is still the case that a selective tradition operates in which only specific groups’ knowledge becomes official knowledge. Thus, the freedom to help select the formal corpus of knowledge is bound by power relations that have very real effects.

However, concerns about ideology as a set of ideas proposed by the dominant educational system and the teacher as its “realizator” make it necessary to be engaged in critical interrogations of the conceptual, empirical and social assumptions of the historical reasons behind the “circulation” of certain objectives. In the case of intercultural encounters in school context, it is necessary to seek for “a space in between” in which (educational) ideology should not be ruled by the same compulsory programs for all students and should function as an (invisible) instrument of (spiral) “reproduction of society” engaged with interculturalism in a more organic way. This means that the teacher should be critical, conscious of his/her position as a “reproductive instrument”, engaged with the individuality of every single student. Students and parents should be able to choose programs, to think of and define the kind of education that fits their expectatives.

Interculturalism and art education

Actually, interculturalism in visual art education deals mainly with the effects of western art canons’ dominance in the majority of the world’s formal art education systems (MASON, 1999, p. 5-7) as evidenced in the predominance of Western instructional approaches to drawing, the emphasis on “creativity” in syllabuses, text-

books, examination systems etc. This approach is problematic for all sorts of reasons: because it is Eurocentric, it instructs students to believe that fine art produced according to European values in the “right” kind of art and is always the product of individual (male) “genius”. It produces a kind of cultural alienation where dominant groups are responsible for designing and managing art education systems limiting the possibilities of developing appropriate forms of art education.

The avant-garde as an “individual” expression separates Western (modernist) art from the Other which is marked by such signifiers as “craft, folk, mass and tribal” (JAZGOZDINSKI, 1999, p. 308). Art. intercultural curriculum many times presents a taxonomy of cultures ranked ordered with the color; “white” repeatedly missing from its representation. Such curriculum is clearly racist but appears anti-racist at the same time. This good-will gesture of desiring to “know” the “Other” becomes a pedagogical strategy for many art teachers of an inadvertent and unintentional containment in which “difference” is interpreted as benign and diversity as simple “acknowledgement”.

In this context a relevant question is, should interculturalism be imposed as learning content by the curriculum? The strategy of “adding on” the art of cultures has been variously characterized by many authors

as the implementation of new forms of racism or ethnic determinism.¹ This solution is also questionable from the point of view of the plurality of situations in the “actual class”.

Intercultural understanding through arts

The extended modernist will to “create a new world” had important consequences in the field of visual art and visual art education. It resulted in what could be designated as “visually conditioned dependence” from an invisible central power that designed the “visual modern common path” forgetting that every cultural tradition rules itself with its own definition of space and the position of human being in it. In order to build significant backgrounds for intercultural encounters, it is necessary to redefine the limits of identity, widening definitions of the human being and the values that are meaningful for each individual student.

However, it is not easy to shape a formula that would concentrate all the elements that should be taken into account when dealing with other cultures’ products. In fact, our own culture always functions as a filter that reshapes notions and perceptions of others.

In this context, we sustain that interculturalism at school and particular in art education should stand in the realm of competencies not of le-

arning contents. This means considering the affective aspect of education as the one that can synthesize pupils’ experiences, leaving contents of motifs and media of expression to be chosen freely, not imposing questionable ways of expression (e.g. drawing models by observation because of their links to contradictory methods that lead to “westernization” of expression) encouraging other functions as memory and imagination instead. Actual freedom aiming to develop the holistic aspects of pupil’s personality (affective/social/moral, cognitive, psychomotor) should mean a turn from a narrow structuralist to a phenomenological/experiential approach. In this way we would educate to perform specific competences as tools to promote creative individualities, with self-respect, positive self-image, improving self-expression, encouraging a meaningful (positive) concept of the self and discouraging negative projections.

An experimental example: approaching South America through visual arts and music

As it has been stated, expressions as multiculturalism, interculturalism, transculturalism and similar have become frequent in the European pedagogical discourse during the last decades. Having started in countries where immigration increased after 2nd World War as Great Britain, France and Germany, it has widely extended

in the last years. It is obvious that their meanings are shaped by the representations, the language, culture, institutions and political ambience of the “representers” as a wide contextual discursive background. Probably these kinds of often contrasting discourses look strange from the Latin American experience and perspective. Interculturalism does not mean the same in Latin America, with vast centennial experiences of immigration, emigration, internal migration, relative “comprehensibility” of languages and societies that were “naturally” formed within multiculturalism, as it does in Europe, where nationalities and identities are mostly understood and conceptualized in quite a different way.

The question that inevitably opens is how to insert contents about interculturalism in the pedagogical process not transforming them or ourselves – in the case that we have the possibility to “present” our culture to others – in an exotic “exported” product and how to discourage a “decontextualized cultural tourism”, that does not fit any educational aims. At this point, Said’s statement that there is nothing especially reprehensible about certain domestications of the exotic, the point is only to acknowledge its occurrence and understanding them as reelaborations of materials within a new frame (1995, p. 64) is really appropriate. The question now becomes, how to make the new frame conscious to enhance

vivid and sincere representations of the “Other” in question, not to produce mere exchanges of information but a certain kind of identification that should let students penetrate the cultural identity of “Others”.

Because it is obviously necessary to build new cultural paradigms that should foster the development of every pupil and student, regardless of his/her cultural background, we reflected on the possibilities to do so through art education.

The proposed activities took place in a secondary school specialized in music education, “Srednja glasbena in baletna opla Ljubljana” in Slovenia. Its curriculum comprises so called general educational subjects, among which visual art education is included; the core of the curriculum is devoted to subjects related to music (practice on instruments, theory and composition, history of music, etc.). The subject Visual Art Education is developed in 3rd year with 17 and 18 years old students that have a wide range of experiences in the “musical artistic world”, practically very little with the “visual artistic world”. Our main didactic question was how to construct an educational strategy that would contemplate an intercultural approach and still remain within the frame of interest of the students that are highly motivated by their vocational election linked to music.

A general strategy was based on the comparison of theoretical concepts from the worlds of music and visual arts. Chromatic values, tonal values, *ciarscuro*, intensity, temperature, saturation of colours, concepts as dot, line, surface, space and structural compositional elements as contrasts, ritem, domination, proportion, harmony, equilibrium, unity, symmetry and asymmetry can find their equivalents in the world of musical theory: harmony, intensity, ritem, domination, proportion, mayor or minor key, high and low pitch, melody... Yet Paul Klee frequently made notes on the relationship between painting and music and was particularly interested in the element of time in both forms of art (DÜCHTING, 2005, p. 9). Wasily Kandinsky was interested in the meshing sensations caused by synaesthetic experiences, Johannes Itten worked on abstract compositions based on mathematical proportions and rhythmical divisions, August Macke and Franz Marc discussed a theory of correspondance between musical notes and colour, only to mention extremely briefly a wide range of very interesting experiences that have connected different artistic languages along Art History.

The task that students were engaged in was to listen to music and to try to transform it in visual signs

which should be later shaped in a visual composition. Students had to visualize music and “translate” it into concrete visual signs. Departing from the elements of musical language, which they are familiar with, they tried to understand them in a different context, through different sensible channels, reshaping them in an artistic product including the new concepts they had to “learn” from Visual Arts Theory. The musical themes chosen for the exercise were from the Brazilian composers Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso as well as from the Argentinian Astor Piazzola. Two exercises were planned for every theme: starting with Piazzola, students had to detect the elements of the musical composition and express them with simple drawing elements (Fig. 1-7). In the second exercise they had to include one more colour, to be able to make more significative differences (Fig. 8-12). In the case of Gil they had to elaborate a collage trying to pay attention to the compositional elements, reflecting on the temporality of music and the way that should be expressed in a visual art work (Fig. 13-16); in the last exercise they added the problem of colour and harmony in the composition trying to evoke the symbolic function of colour linked to the characteristics of the music that was the basical theme (Fig. 17-24).

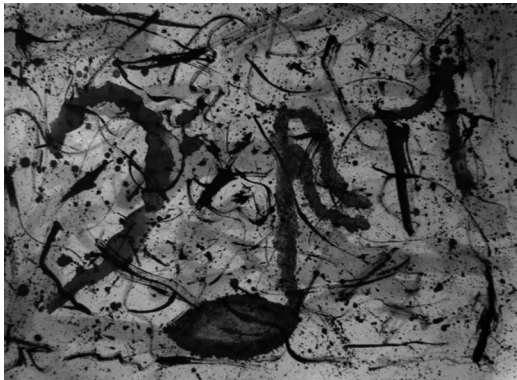


Fig. 1



Fig. 4



Fig. 2



Fig. 5

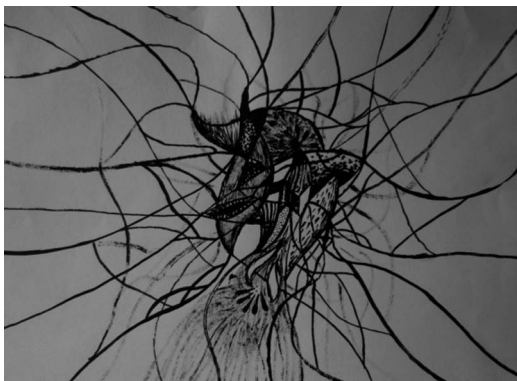


Fig. 3



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

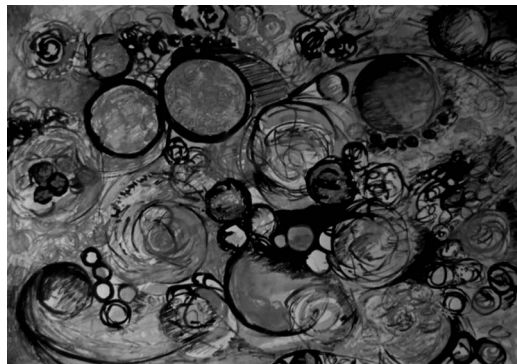


Fig. 10

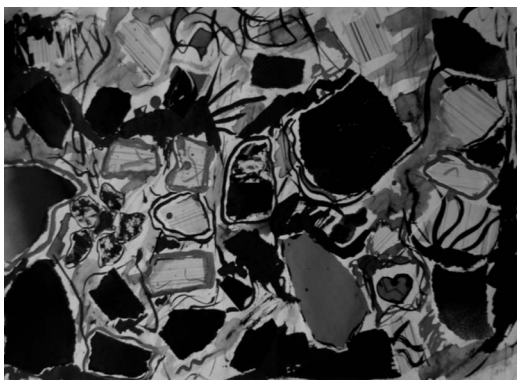


Fig. 8

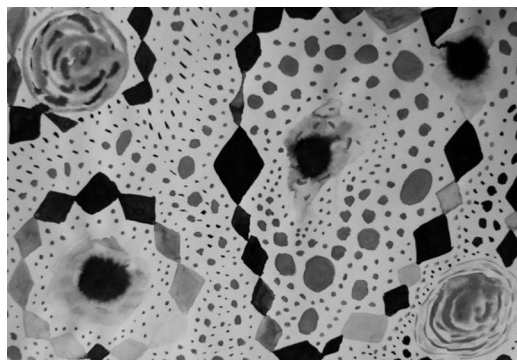


Fig. 11

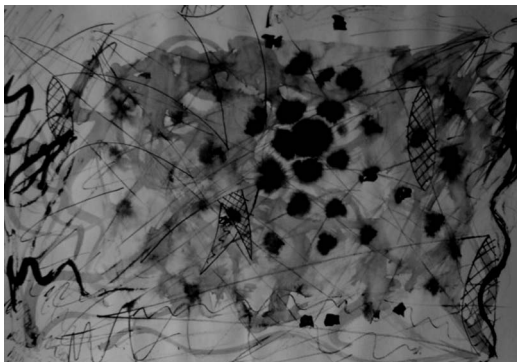


Fig. 9



Fig. 12

Figuras 1-12 - Exemplos from the first and second exercises based on Piazzola's musical theme

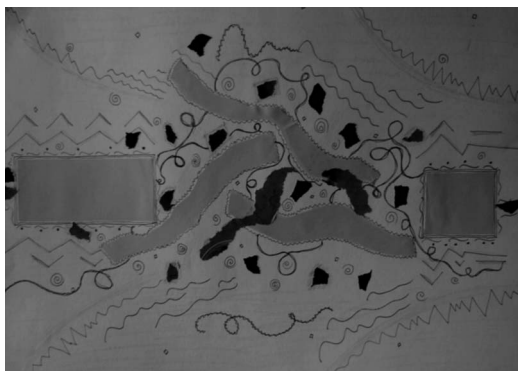


Fig. 13



Fig. 16

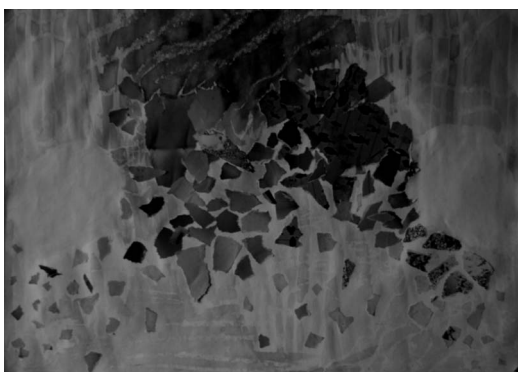


Fig. 14

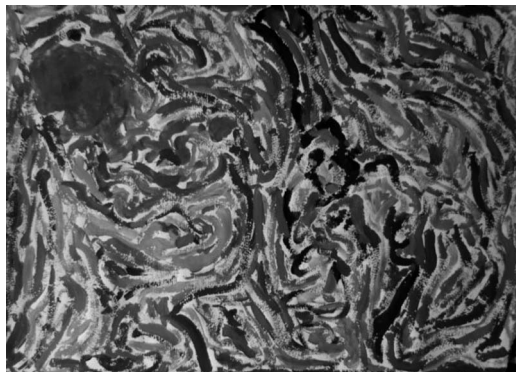


Fig. 17

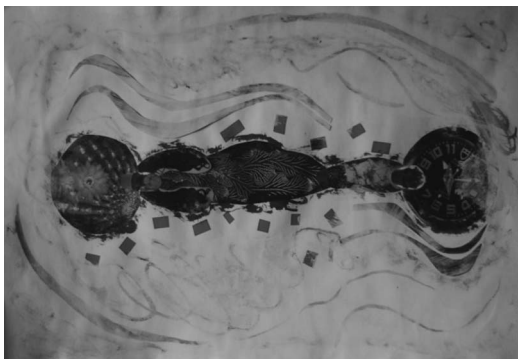


Fig. 15



Fig. 18

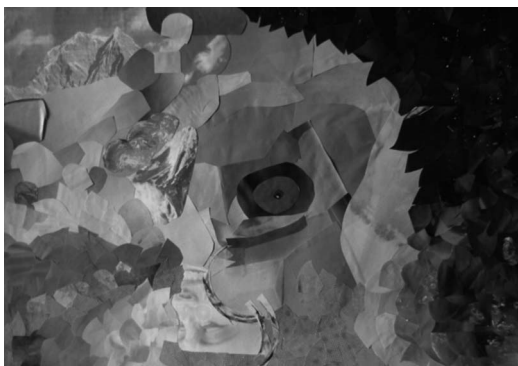


Fig. 19



Fig. 22



Fig. 20



Fig. 23

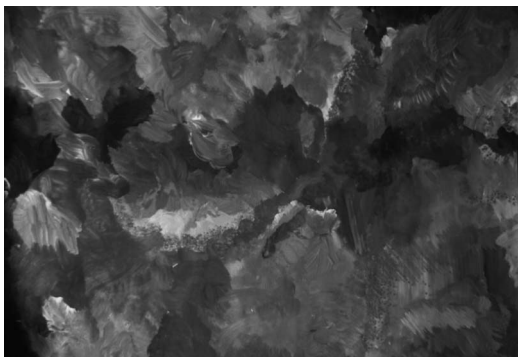


Fig. 21



Fig. 24

Figuras 13-24 - Examples of the third and fourth exercises based on Gil's and Veloso's musical theme

It is important to state, that when planning the lessons with the aim of “building bridges” between different cultures, we consciously avoided choosing the art motif or the title of the musical compositions as the starting point. Stressing on the motif can be effective as well as very controversial as it can be the most superficial or evident aspect of the artistic work. With this exercise, cultural characteristics became known through an individual engagement in universal expressive languages that do not share the eventual obstacles imposed by verbal communication. Nevertheless, there are still many open questions regarding important aspects of the process of planning lessons of Visual Art Education within interculturality, especially those connected to pedagogy, didactic approaches and contents.

In Slovenia a new school reform (at all levels of education) is taking place. The main goals within the subjects linked to visual art education include the development of observation, space representation, creativity, imagination, evaluation of artistic and natural objects, the knowledge of contents from artistic theory and history, artistic techniques, processes and materials, and the rendering of a direct relationship between practice and theory on the basis of the problem-solving approach. In this way, the instructional process follows three indivisible stages: presentation

of the problem, expression – proposal of a resolution – and evaluation of the results. Concrete decisions on matters as the possibilities to establish links with other cultures analyzed in this paper, are formally left to the teacher. This experiment means a new step in the reflection on the proper approaches regarding the problem in the context of the new school reform.

Conclusion

In the curious world created by global capitalism, identity is in flux. The nation-state seems weaker as a result of transnational bodies as it is in our case the European Union or the Mercosur in Latin America. In this context, transculture – the violent collision of an existent with a new or different culture that reshapes both into a hybrid transculture that is itself then the subject to transculturation – highlights those places where the carefully defined borders of identity become confused and overlapping, a task that requires new histories, new ideas and new means of representation (MIRZOEFF, 2002, p. 477).

As a conclusion, an important question is which are the approaches to visual art education that respond to universal values and are not influenced by historical, ideological and other conditions. Actually, this determines new approaches to learning and understanding the differences as well as the commonalities of cultures through

art: the function of the representation necessarily becomes the primordial element. Function implies decisions at different levels and points of view: on one side for the author himself/herself on the other for the receivers of his/her message through art expression. In this way will those that think that they should learn about space drawing nudes – as it is common in the most academic approaches – be able to do so; those who do not agree will be able to work departing from a definition of space that “is theirs” and not “learned” as a product of limiting school programs. The combination of theory and practice promoted by art education therefore must serve to develop a sense of enquiry, an ability to take practical and intellectual risks, to be aware of decision making in a reflexive manner, to evaluate creative responses, to be able to articulate reasons for preference, qualitative judgements, or comparative aesthetic values. This is so for the teacher as well as for the students.

It is important to approach art education from critical perspectives regarding the complexity of “visuality” deeply integrated in nowadays everyday life. To develop a teaching-learning process sensitive to differences in our space means that we are able to detect the aspects in which “visuality” and “space as a source of expression” are present in school subjects. Art education gives the student an idea of

how to observe and analyze things in a new way. If the majority of people are not familiar with art education it is because the programs are not made relevant to people’s daily lives. Such programs are frequently neglected in the sense that they are not critical to important questions as for example, the exclusive influence of western conditions of validity in the selection of (“academic”) goals and contents in culturally diverse contexts.

Another interesting element is what Ross argues:

Any consideration of the nature and effectiveness of learning must include an analysis of who provides the teaching. In particular, the transmission of culture cannot be considered as something that is defined in formal curriculum terms: it is not composed only of what is taught but is also crucially affected by who does the teaching. The hidden curriculum of the staffing of our schools conveys important messages about the culture that we wish to transmit. In an age when the notion of culture is becoming increasingly plural and diverse, we need to ensure that the teaching force reflects the composition of our society (2003, p. 217).

Art education has strong reasons to exist in education and particularly it might be a way to promote learning experiences, creating representations of the world, creative and critical thinking through aesthetic dimensions. In fact, a global understanding of contemporary world demands a complex of elements and experiences, which

should be one of the principal objectives of school education at all levels.

Resumo

Interculturalismo na educação artística: apresentando a cultura latino-americana através de música e artes visuais

Interculturalismo em educação artística refere-se às estratégias pedagógicas que sustentam atitudes positivas em relação aos aspectos específicos da pluralidade cultural das nossas sociedades. Diversidade e pluralidade cultural referem-se à variedade de identidades culturais e são compreendidas como fontes de conhecimento. A questão que inevitavelmente surge é como inserir conteúdos sobre interculturalismo no processo pedagógico sem transformá-los num produto exótico e como desencorajar um “turismo cultural descontextualizado”, que não se encaixa em nenhum objetivo educacional. Buscando resolver essa questão, desenvolvemos uma estratégia pedagógica geral baseada na comparação de conceitos teóricos dos mundos da música e das artes visuais. A atividade na qual os alunos se envolveram foi ouvir música e tentar transformá-la em sinais visuais, que deveriam,

posteriormente, receber forma numa composição visual. Com esse exercício, as características culturais tornam-se conhecidas através de um envolvimento individual em linguagens expressivas universais que não compartilham os eventuais obstáculos impostos pela comunicação verbal. Na conclusão, refletimos sobre como desenvolver um processo ensino-aprendizagem sensível às diferenças e pontos em comum de diferentes culturas convivendo em nosso espaço.

Palavras-chave: Identidade. Diversidade de culturas. Interculturalismo na educação de artes visuais. Música e artes visuais.

Note

- ¹ For further reading on this theme we suggest: BALIBAR, Etienne. World borders, political borders. PMLA 117, 2002, p. 71-78. Internet source: At the Borders of Europe, <http://www.makeworlds.org>, retrieved: 09.09.2004; ARAEEN, Rasheed. New Internationalism or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans. In: DAWTREY, Liz; JACKSON, Toby; MASTER-TON, Mary; MEECHAM, Pam (Org.). Critical studies in modern art. London: Yale University Press, 1996. p. 60-66; JAZGOZDINSKI, Jan. Thinking through difference in art education contexts working the third space and beyond. In: BOUGHTON, Dough; MASON, Rachel (Org.). Beyond multicultural art education: international perspectives. München, Berlin, New York: Waxmann Münster, 1999. p. 3-20.

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