Multiculturality as a Point of Union

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Abstract

Multiculturality as a point of union is part of an international project entitled CREARTE, which aims to foster contemporary art in primary schools.

The project was carried out by an artist, a class teacher, and a teacher of Arts along with children aged nine and ten from different multicultural backgrounds living in a poor deprived area of Lisbon, Portugal. To discover and create collective learning by using artistic strategies with the body, sounds, traditions and rituals were the springboard to art education generating experiences in group and thus integrating multiculturalism in education. Children responded to the paradigms of contemporary art developing skills to enable them to achieve success and connectedness in diverse contexts.

The generated interactions, experiences and learning were the foundation basis to gradually break social barriers and so understand the different cultural backgrounds of those around us. Thence, multiculturalism as a bridge to open-mindedness by discovering the Self, the Other and building the Collective Self.

Keywords

Interculturalism, art, expression, integration.

Context

The project was carried out at Prista Monteiro Primary School with a group of 22 children, 12 girls and 10 boys, aged nine and ten years old.

The school is located in Padre Cruz neighborhood in Lisbon, Portugal, where people from diverse ethnic origins live (Africans, Latin Americans and Gypsies). The neighborhood itself mirrors different social classes along with economic, social and cultural contrasts, which lead to conflicts and resentfulness in the community.

Based on the Social Development Theory (Vygotsky, 2014) of and the empowering cultural diversity we found in this community it was fundamental to understand the structure and the social dynamics of these children's daily life and thus work with themes and activities to scaffold their own experiences.

Our main goal was to socially integrate these children by targeting their active participation in art based education activities by means of dynamics focusing the expression and communication of these children through art. Our aim was not to reach specific results but rather to pay particular attention to the process generated by experiencing and producing collective learning.

Lack of Interculturality

The first necessary step was to promote a healthy environment of acceptance and integration of cultural differences. At the present globalization, the large migratory flows and the lack of integration programs or strategies of the countries, create social, cultural and educational exclusion. Joan Subirats (2004, cited by Sánchez, A., & Jiménez, M., 2013) defines exclusion: "the im-

possibility or intense difficulty of accessing both the cultural mechanisms of personal development and socio-community insertion, as well as the pre-established systems of social protection "(p.143).

With these exclusions and global socio cultural problems, in some sectors are generated bigger differences between the people. "The term multicultural describes the culturally diverse nature of human society. It not only refers to elements of ethnic or national culture, but also includes linguistic, religious and socio-economic diversity" (UNESCO, 2016, p.17)
The multicultural environment of a city does not always means that there is an integration of its diverse populations; it is here that many of the conflicts of acceptance of the other are born, whether by religion, culture, nationality, sexual orientation or physical appearance.

> The major challenge when discussing the issue of education and multiculturalism is dealing with some of the inherent tensions that arise in reconciling competing world views with each other. Such tensions reflect the diversity of values which co-exist in a multicultural world. Often, they cannot be resolved in a single 'either/or' solution. However, the dynamic interchange between competing aspects is what lends richness to the debate on education and multiculturalism. (UNESCO, 2012, p.10)

These tensions create separation and barriers between people. We grew up with the social prejudices and with that the discrimination.

> Discrimination affects people's opportunities, their well-being, and their sense of agency. Persistent exposure to discrimination can lead individuals to internalize the prejudice or stigma that is directed against them, manifesting in shame, low self-esteem, fear and stress, as well as poor health (...) Prejudice and discrimination are

often deeply entrenched and can limit the impact of laws, services and income for those groups that experience discrimination. (UN DESA, 2008)

With all this background, "How can I communicate and live with other people? or How can we reconcile our differences with the unity of the collective life?" (Touraine, p.16. 2000). From this question that makes Touraine in relation to the multicultural current, makes us question if can we really be integrated in this conflict world.

We think it is important to start working in these problems step by step; first changing the prejudices as people and thus work with the children who is the present and will be the future of the society. Working from an early age, the child can acquire good tools of coexistence, which work on the issues of multiculturality or the concerns that they have in relation in the lack of acceptance, are strong basis for generate social integration.

Like we mention before, multiculturalism in general terms is the cultural diversity that exists in a given environment. In that way the interculturality is the interaction that is generated from this multiculturalism. Interculturality is to involve relationships between cultural differences, to create an exchange and a dialogue with respect.

This is one of the main today's needs in the lack of interculturality, so it is essential to have activities that are focused on this action lines, and if art can work as a strategy, we must to implement it more in various sectors.

Our work consisted mainly in socially integrate this group of children and so aim to foster connetedness through crossculturalism and intercultural skills. We strongly believe it is essential to have activities that are focused on this action lines, and art can work as a way to do better in our communities.

UNESCO (2006) states that education should be broadly based on the pillars of: Learning to Know, Learning to do, Learning to live together and Learning to be. It has been shown that Intercultural Education promotes skills that are necessary to endeavor greater participation at

local and global levels to boost tolerance, empathy and social cohesion.

Art seems to us the "path" to support the development of the 21st Century Skills and so we believe it is a priority to understand the Self and the Other by learning, experiencing and engaging through dialogue and working multiculturally if we want to reach interculturality.

Activities

As soon as we were familiar with the context, the dynamics of relationships, the concerns and problems lived inside and outside the classroom, activities were designed collaboratively by the artist and the art teacher, having the child as the chore both as an individual but also as part of a collective group.

The activities focused on:

- Dynamics of teamwork for group integration;

- Work on Me, the Other and the Collective to understand ethnic diversity;

- The body and sound as contemporary art expression;

- New spaces of sharing: theater, music and gastronomy;

New multidisciplinary rituals as a way of social action.

The first activity consisted of the children drawing the school map in groups and highlighting one or several important events experienced in the different spaces of the school. The children then reported their school vision to both the artist and the teacher of Arts. After that they walked around the school together and the children told the teachers what they had experienced in those different spaces. All the places taken as meaningful for them were open spaces where struggles or conflicts had taken place.

Figure 1: Performance- Rituals conceived by the children and performed to the community

At this stage we focused on the children's interactions, absence of connectedness, prejudice and other problems. This was how we realized how urgent it was to conceive activities to understand and accept " the difference" to promote a peaceful, healthy, safe school environment and so reach integration. The team work dynamics implied changeable teams aiming to get to know each other and to learn how to work and live together.

Rituals and Traditions were the first approach to the Self and the Other. We wanted the children to be exposed to both familiar and unknown contexts.

Figure 2: *Interaction*- Body and Language expression

By researching and working in groups about rituals and traditions of African and Latin

America countries, in Portugal and in the gypsy community, students created a story on multi-culturalism.

From this initial story, they designed several activities:

- A short play (with themselves as actors/actresses);

- Building puppets;

- Creating stage sets;

- Organizing a new group ritual with sounds, movements and masks made by them.

In order to perform the ritual they always used recycled materials to tailor the costumes and masks, and through the body they created new movements, sounds and dances with themes like Sun, Rain, and Hunting.

Figure 3: Masks and Costumes – using recycled materials and the exhibition at school

Learning to understand the body as a form of expression was important to raise awareness about different types of language /communication/interaction. The new Ritual created by the children was also to activate unfamiliar ways of communication and interaction among them.

To generate the concept of sharing and group cohesion building the project also covered traditional gastronomy, which incorporated cooking in group.

The final presentation of the Rituals performed for the school community was followed up by a picnic during which the children baked a cake with various ingredients.

Figure 4: *Cooking in group and* Picnic preparing

These activities around the Rituals were like a metaphor of the project itself. Neither the cake nor the Ritual could be created without the participation of all. The ingredients of the cake represented the children, the fact of eating and sharing the cake represented the process of creation. More than the Ritual or the picnic, left in the collective memory is the journey – what was experienced - and not really the destination, the product.

Towards integration

Artistic strategies and dynamics showed to be very empowering in boosting the Self and the Other among culturally diverse groups and thus not only to help create collective learning but also to shift from multiculturality to interculturality. The universal language of Arts proves to

be an excellent means to break down intercultural barriers as we have evidenced throughout our project implementation.

As Victor Davis Hanson says: "Multiculturalism is a good reminder that when standards are relative, there are no standards at all". The children learnt how to be a team, how to solve conflicts and how to face and respect differences in a multicultural diverse community.

They built strong bonds among themselves, with the teacher, the school and within their families. They developed skills which enabled them to overcome the fear of failing, the fear of being judged by others and the fear of being themselves. They were supported and allowed to be free to create, to experience by themselves, and to make their own decisions with autonomy and self-confidence.

Figure 5: The end of the project

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