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Art, agency and environment – the perspectives of youth culture and the culture of children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to discuss experiences which were based on the practices of art education in two age groups. The study aims to connect the research domains of art education, early childhood education and youth studies. We ask how is it possible through art education 1) to contribute to the wellbeing and holistic development of children and to produce activities which make the culture of children visible, and 2) to contribute to the identity development of young people and give space to self-oriented art which is based on their own interests and orientation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Our aim is to examine art education in the context of the continuum of early childhood education and upper secondary education. We open the discussion by presenting the experiences based on our earlier practices and projects (Malinen, 2011; Rintakorpi, 2010; Rusanen, Rifà-Valls, Alexandre, Bozzi and Häikiö, 2011). We focus on agency and the culture of children and young people. We are interested in examining how is it possible to contribute to the wellbeing and holistic development of children through
art education and produce activities which make the culture of children visible. We also focus on how it is possible to contribute to the identity development of young people and provide space for self-oriented art, i.e. that which is based on their own interests and orientation.

Our starting point is that the concepts ‘agency’ and ‘ participation’ are strongly connected to each other. By agency we mean children’s rights to participate and make choices in matters concerning their lives. By participation we refer to a broader understanding which includes joining in and belonging to a community and influencing it in ways that make it possible for members to co-operate and receive attention (see e.g. Oranen, 2007). The core idea in such a participation is that children and young people feel respected as individuals and appreciated in what they do. They should also be valued members in their own communities. All this is essential to the construction of their identity. We believe that through art education it is possible to become conscious of these basic experiences and also to support their realization. In our study the concept of participatory art education means that the dimensions of social and cultural wellbeing are given serious consideration (see e.g. The Seoul Agenda of UNESCO, 2010).

1.2. The practical applications

Participation as a goal is based on article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCROC, 1989) which recognizes children’s rights to express their views. These views should be taken into account according to the children’s level of maturity. UNCROC defines a ‘child’ as a person below the age of 18. Defined in this way, childhood is a rather long period. In Finland the view on childhood and youth is of two overlapping phases: childhood policy concerns the age period of 0-17 and youth policy focuses on the period beginning at 12 years and ending at 29 years (Bardy, 2012). In our study we analyse the kinds of similarities and differences evident in the continuum of early childhood education and upper secondary education when focusing on agency and on the culture of children and young people.

One of the basic components of participatory art education is that it should be connected to the culture produced by the participants. When focusing on children’s culture, a traditional way of understanding it is to divide it into three parts: culture for children, culture of children and culture with children (Danbolt & Enerstvedt, 1995; Corsaro, 1997). In Finland, culture for children often refers to the high cultural activities produced by the community as well as to the activities of popular and media culture. The culture of children is seen as children’s peer culture in which children produce and share their own ideas and artefacts in interaction with each other. Culture with children means activities in which children and adults are equal partners. The culture of children is not created without the influence of adults but it emphasizes the children as producers and interpreters of knowledge and culture (see e.g. Karlsson, 2006; Pääjoki, 2007).

In youth culture the impact of media and commercial culture is strong, and in the formal art education of young people the aim has been to build bridges between high and popular culture. Nevertheless, the interests of young people have not been considered well enough. The visual forms of diverse subcultures and countercultures have not been in the centre of attention (Räsänen, 2008; Malinen, 2011). A good opening in this discussion is the concept of ‘self-oriented art’ (Malinen, 2011) which focuses on visual and cultural artefacts produced by young people themselves. The starting point is their own interests in their actual lives and the principles of the visual world they find useful. Self-oriented art can be a mutable process by its very nature: it is affected by the media, peer groups, formal art education, popular culture as well as high culture. The term was developed to describe a particular phenomenon among young people who have certain orientations in their art, for example the manga or anime style, heavy stylish picture-making, fantasy, graffiti, and so on. For example graffiti painters describe that belonging to the graffiti culture is very important in the process of constructing their identity, and that it also strongly influences their picture-making. (Malinen, 2011.)
1.3. The nature and purpose of the study

Our study is based on practical observations and theoretical reflections which connect the research domains of art education, early childhood education and youth studies. We discuss two cases that are based on our earlier art education projects and work practices. In analysing and contextualizing the data we focus on the components that construct agency. We are also interested in finding out which components construct youth culture and the culture of children. The first case concentrates on early childhood art education and the second on art education for young people in upper secondary education.

2. Participatory art education

2.1. Participation in an art education project in early childhood education

The first case highlights art education practices that aim to take into consideration the educational objectives in Finnish early childhood education. These are presented in the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (CCPSE, 2000, updated in Finnish 2010) and in the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (NCGECEC, 2004). These documents present early childhood education from a socially constructive perspective, which includes the idea of the participation of children, families and the community. Emphasized is that early childhood education should carry individual meaning for children and integrate different orientations and subjects within a lively, playful and relaxed atmosphere. Integrated themes and learning processes are more important than individual content. The case in our study was documented in Ilmaisupäiväkoti Illusia, a private day-care centre in Vantaa, in October 2011.

Case 1: Art education project "The Furious Witch"

On a national Storytelling Day, during the first phase of the project, two early childhood educators assembled a group of 14 four-years-old children to compose a new fairy tale. One educator communicated with the children by asking questions and drawing on a board, trying to organize the was ready the children suggested producing a book on their story.

In the fairytale the Furious Witch wants to poison Troll Matti and his family with a potion. Troll Matti is kind, and is known to the local children as is his home forest, where the children often visit. The animals in the forest hear of the evil plans of the Witch and want to help Troll Matti. The animals and the troll together set a trap for the Furious Witch and trick her with crumbs to fall in it. When the Witch groans in the trap, Troll Matti himself throws the potion on her. When the Witch promises to become nice and brush her teeth every evening Troll Matti and the animals build a ladder for her and she escapes from the trap.

In the second phase, immediately after writing the fairytale the children wanted to act out the story. Everyone chose a role. The two educators guided the story by acting together with the children and carrying the main roles. The play, the set and the roles were created simultaneously. The next day the educators suggested continuing with the play in the forest nearby, a perfect environment for the story. The children assumed their roles and took costumes for their characters. This time the educators facilitated the play while remaining in the background and documenting it with cameras. Some days later, in the third phase of the process, the children drew and painted their favourite parts of the fairytale. The falling of the Witch into the trap and surviving by climbing out fascinated many of the children. Blueberries and frogs, the ingredients of the potion also interested them.
In the fourth phase the educators designed a book using the photos, drawings and written story. The book, printed in a web photo store, was ordered by the children, parents and grandparents. It was also sent to collaborators at the day-care centre, as well as the library nearby where the work was placed among the ‘real’ books. A larger book was designed for the children’s daily use in the day-care centre, and a large storyboard of the tale was hung in the classroom for the children to reflect on. A process portfolio for rehearsing the constructivist evaluating process was also made for the educators and parents. After some weeks the educators assessed the entire Furious Witch process with the children by looking at the documents. Most of the children were no longer interested in the project, but two thought it was the best project of the whole autumn.

The participation of the children was actualized in many ways (see Shier, 2001). This means that the children were listened to. They were helped to express their views and their views were taken in account. Nevertheless, participation means more than a single project. If children have the possibility to influence their daily lives in a project lasting one hour this does not encourage them to genuinely participate. Agency lives in everyday life and in the social interaction between children and educators. It should be included in children’s daily routines. It is important that educators choose participatory working methods and carry them on as a community (Shier, 2001, 112). When the participation of children is examined the criteria for the evaluation must be decided. We can ask, for example, from whose perspective did the process give opportunities to participate, or how did the quiet, shy or less engaged children experience their agency. Educators should also be aware that any documentation is produced and manipulated from their subjective perspectives.

A number of Finnish research and professional development projects that have aimed to develop the agency of children show that agency and participation are strongly interpretative phenomena (see e.g. Leinonen, Venninen & Ojala, 2011; Venninen, Leinonen, Rautavaara-Hämäläinen & Purola, 2012). The results of previous Finnish projects concerning children’s agency also show that children are not heard enough in the field of public services (Kallio, 2009; Anttila & Rensujeff, 2009). The same phenomenon has also been noted in other European reports; for example, The Draft Strategy on the Rights of the Child (Council of EU 2011, 10–11) demonstrates that children’s participatory rights are not respected, and that adults’ prejudices and lack of listening skills are some of the major obstacles to the meaningful participation of children.

2.2. Participation in Upper Secondary School

The conception of learning in the Finnish upper secondary school curriculum is strongly based on constructionist thinking and the idea that the cultural as well as situational context should be taken into account and be understood by the students as well. A person should assess and treasure their cultural heritage and identity in a reflective process, learn to understand the meaning of the choices he/she makes and have an ability to critically observe the power relations in society (National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools, 2003.) In art education, examining and reflecting on the cultural background is rather often linked to understanding local and historical roots as well as geographically distanced cultures. The significance of youth subcultures in the self-identity construction process is given less attention and even neglected. Feelings of participation are an important part of social growth, and acknowledging the right to belong to a subculture can therefore be very meaningful.

As a second case we present an ongoing music project in Lammi Upper Secondary School, in Hämeenlinna. The students participating in the project are in their second year and approximately 17–18-years of age.
Case 2: Yearly musicals

Each year a new group of students stages a large musical that affects the whole school and community. Some students choose their school simply because of it. The purpose of the project is to link artistic subjects in a creative and interdisciplinary process that combines drama, media, visual arts, music and entrepreneurship education so that everyone can use their abilities, interests and skills in a productive way. The visual appearance, such as the sets and lighting, is worked out in the visual arts class. The media class designs the posters and flyers. The marketing and economic aspects are a part of entrepreneurship learning. The essential idea of the project is cooperation between many specialists that supports the artistic process of the young people. A key aspect of the project is the selecting of an executive group from among the students. This group holds the power and responsibility. Its members also write the script and the lyrics.

Participation in the project occurs on many levels (see Shier, 2001): the students plan, design, as well as give their opinions and are heard; their views are an essential part of the process. But since it takes place in a group situation the project also raises up many group-dynamic issues as well as some negative aspects of participation and agency. The students find the project quite laborious and the responsibility heavy. The issues and problems with group dynamics seem to be even more personal when the ideas arise from the students themselves. The intensiveness of the process can be emotionally difficult.

In many upper secondary schools it is rather typical to use participation in some kind of interdisciplinary or multi-media projects. As well, the events organized by the secondary school students each year when graduating are also in most schools planned by the students. The technology available and the imagination of the students make the happenings very visual. Often their own communities and society in general are presented critically and sarcastically.

Somewhat problematic is the fact that agency in these projects does not sufficiently reach the students who are less active. Teaching in upper secondary school and being a leader in voluntary happenings as well as in interdisciplinary and multi-media projects have shown that agency and participation appear to be cumulative, in terms of the school life of students as a process lasting years. The question remains of how to make students who are less active feel that their ideas are respected and their creativity can be productive. Valuing the cultural background of students should therefore include respecting the subcultural orientation and acknowledging the meaning of self-oriented art. It does not necessarily require big projects, but it should be a part of every day school culture.

2.3. Discussion

These two cases point to controversial issues concerning the responsibility and power position of educators and teachers when the focus is on the culture of children and youth. The Furious Witch project is an example of how important it is that educators have an attitude that is supportive and accepting when listening to project participants. Educators also play a significant role in making visible the choices and decisions of the children.

The Furious Witch project might be considered rather exceptional, because the cultural products of children themselves are not so highly valued. Here the institutions supporting the children’s cultural endeavours also gave positive support: the library was willing to take the book they produced. It is problematic that the position of children is mostly subordinate to that of adults. The strong asymmetry related to the powerful position of adults means that adults are those who determine which forms and
which activity will be integrated into children’s cultural efforts and which will be left out (Anttila and Rensujeff, 2009, 56; see also Pääjoki, 2007).

Further, when working with teenagers it is possible that the ideas and values that emerge among them represent values that are contradictory to a teacher’s thoughts and wishes. This presents a risk: the purpose is to act according to the principles of participation but what may happen is that some ideas are collected from the students without later using them. In this case these activities are just quasi-participatory and the agency is specious as well. Kallio (2009) refers to the same kind of a problem: often a sort of censorship is exerted by the adults, and under discussion are only those issues considered to be appropriate for children, not those they find interesting themselves or even of crucial importance.

Quasi-participatory can also be an outcome in situations where educators and teachers have certain aesthetical expectations for art-educational activities. If a child or a young person is acting on the goals that are arranged from the outside and at the same time feels that his values, feelings, and for instance self-oriented art-making are not appreciated and valued, he might experience a feeling of social exclusion as well as disconnectedness from himself. In relation to society, such a feeling might be even more devastating to the individual than structured social exclusion (Sava, 2004, 36-39). Even though a teacher recognizes the significance of self-oriented art, understanding its meaning and including it in teaching is not easy. Self-oriented art can have aspects that the teacher may not tolerate. One quite obvious example of self-oriented art is graffiti. According to Malinen (2011), graffiti can be a very important part of the identity and self construction process of a young individual, and is a form of visual culture with many aspects and goals similar to those of art education. Yet graffiti intrudes on the urban environment in a way that is difficult for institutional art education to accept.

Growing into an experience of participation is a cumulative process. Educators and teachers must respect the learners’ right to have their own values that can also be visualized in art class. Participatory art education includes the idea of a shared experience that also helps students to consider and examine the surrounding culture critically and to help visualize and describe the ideas that are important to them (Sava, 2007, 193-195).

It is also important to acknowledge that children’s own culture does not exist for the purpose of being ‘useful’ or of preparing young people for adulthood and therefore socializing them. In all societies children’s culture also exists simply for fun. For children and particularly adolescents, the peer groups, the friends and siblings offer a normative model for their own culture. This model, rather than teachers and adults, forms the most important environment that defines their relationship to culture (Anttila & Rensujeff, 2009). Subcultural orientation is naturally a part of this peer group dynamics.

3. Conclusions

The roots of a child’s dignity are created in early childhood education: as we respect the child and his capacity, he learns to respect other people and cultures. The idea of respect carries through childhood up to upper secondary education, where the goal is to help fashion a responsible and critical citizen. We believe that agency in early childhood helps the child to engage in action, learning and the community. Agency also produces welfare: a child enabled to participate in his own life can grow to be a teenager who sees his life as meaningful and who wants to have an affect on his environment – or even the whole world.

Life-long learning is a comprehensive and continuous process, one which creates and builds knowledge, capacity and opinions. The premise for this kind of continuity is that the education system provides a continuum starting from early childhood education as a valuable and meaningful foundation for the next stages of learning (Kankaanranta, 1998, 2). Although a bridge exists between early childhood education and upper secondary education, it is not at all clear how the ideas of agency and participation
are actualized in practice. The economic choices of society, such as increasing the amount of learners in a
group or per classroom, can easily lead to more structured and teacher-oriented educational practices.
Then formal, authoritarian education becomes more important than taking into account the individual
characteristics of the learners. Nevertheless, we think that it is possible to regenerate pedagogy which
contributes to the agency of children and youth. Educators need support in developing their attitudes
towards more participatory education. Positive achievements have been reported, for example in the
Phantasy Design project the aim of which was to produce a new method for investigating how children
and young people can be involved in the designing of our shared environment (Kapanen & Svinhufvud,
2011; see also Leinonen et al., 2011).

It is also important, that youth culture and the culture of children will be further developed by seeing
agency as not something occasional but rather something that is an integral part of everyday life. Agency
and participation can be reached, at least on some level, while working in various projects with society,
community and parents. In art education it is obvious to have projects that involve a lot of students’ own
ideas. A crucial part of the idea of agency and participation is how children and adolescents can get
visibility and significance to their ideas among other members of their society: they can create a play
which reflects their own feelings and attitudes; they can draw, distribute, even sell cartoons or posters
concerning the problems they have noticed in society or they can make a multicultural calendar that
contains the important dates of every one in the class room, just some examples to be mentioned.
Pedagogical documentation is one of the pedagogical means that can make these kinds of processes
visible. The smaller the children are the harder for them it is to remember, piece together, process and
pass on their feelings, thoughts and experiences. The question is to think the role of the teacher and the
learner as well as the practices of teaching in a fresh way.

At the heart of participatory art education is valuing one’s own vision and respecting the thoughts of
others. When successful, participatory art education helps children and adolescents to encounter otherness
and diversity. The experience of being encountered as a valued member of their own valued culture is the
basic foundation for their experience of agency. This cultural and social dimension of participatory art
education is strongly connected with the ethical dimension of education.

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