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Art-based Education for Inclusive Learning Environments

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Abstract

This paper is based on the research outcomes of “META - Minority Education Through Art” project, carried out under EU Erasmus Plus KA3 framework. The hypothesis is that arts can foster intercultural inclusion in school contexts with children with migrant background and/or belonging to minority groups. META has been implemented by a multi-method approach, in terms of object and context of research: analytical-comparative methods (case studies), methods based on data matrices (surveys, questionnaires) and interpretative research methods (interviews, focus groups, experiential observation). Main outcomes are an innovative methodology and a competence framework. In META, an evidence-based educational approach entails innovation in teaching in Europe, pointing to genuine valuing the richness and potentiality of different cultures, through artistic experience. Hereby, we present elements of reflection indicating toward a transition from “schooling” to open learning environments where arts become an important methodological tool to foster integration of formal, non-formal and informal education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, arts, cultural heritage, migrations;

1. Introduction

In recent years, international organizations and researchers expressed an increasing interest in arts education (EACEA, 2009; CE, 2015) and studies on application of arts in education, especially as regards to children from disadvantaged or migratory backgrounds or with learning difficulties, have increased (Penketh, 2017). At the same time the theme of inclusion has become more relevant. All children are recognised as bearer of immense potentialities and opportunities while migrant and minorities groups represent a considerable number of young citizens and young learners in education system (OECD, 2015). European Union (2015) defines common objectives and supportive actions for tolerance and non-discrimination through education. Schools have been recognized as key partner in fostering inclusion also as core parts of communities that can work closely with parents and local associations, to deal with and to prevent drifting of young people to the margins of society. Teachers and educators, nevertheless, should be better equipped to deal with diversity in the classroom and to construct common values with pupils (OECD, 2015b). This paper presents a reflection based upon research and educational practices within the Erasmus Plus KA3 project META - Minority Groups Education Through Arts (<http://www.meta-project.eu/>) and other previous projects to which META is connected. The META project aims to contribute to eliminating barriers that cause inequity in education systems and to reduce disparities in learning in particular of primary school students from minority groups and with a migrant background. The hypothesis is that introducing arts in the classroom involves children into concrete, innovative and entertaining educational paths so as to facilitate their integration into the school, which may otherwise present obstacles. In other words, arts can contribute to construct inclusive learning environments (Dumont et al., 2010) and to improve intercultural competences in students, teachers and artists.

2. Methodology of Research

Research activities have been developed in three main integrated axes.

a. *Collection and analysis of case studies on education through arts for inclusion of children belonging to minority groups in Europe (and beyond)*

Consistent with a grounded theory and evidence-based education approaches (Vivanet, Calvani, 2014), the first step was literature and documents review as well as other consistent practices. Specific input have also been collected through advocacy round tables involving relevant stakeholders as policy makers, experts, members of minorities and migrant communities, representatives of national and international Institutions. The process guaranteed different perspectives of interpretation of the problem at stake (inclusion) and hypothesis of answer (art-based education) and also

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consistence with participatory approach referenced by grounded theory. The output was a data matrix of criteria and indicators to define tools for collection and comparison of practices (a questionnaire to collect the information according to agreed indicators). The 44 case studies selected through a comparative analysis have been the basis to develop META pedagogical approach and a META competence framework.

b. *Training teachers and artist and piloting in classrooms on education through arts for inclusion of minority groups in order to build capacities for an inclusive learning environment*

A second phase of research was to adapt and apply META pedagogical approach and a META competence framework as educational tools and procedures for training of trainers (with a specific focus on artists), training of young representatives of migrant and minorities groups on advocacy and for piloting in primary schools.

c. *Evaluation as action research to accompany implementation of project, to monitor and to assess effectiveness, sustainability and transferability of outcomes.*

Effectiveness and potentialities of META methodology have been under systematic monitoring through META evaluation design and assessment toolkit built in the framework of Theory of Change (Cathy 2011; Vogel, 2012; Clark, Anderson, 2006). The scope was taking into account the causal chain linking resources to tasks, activities to the achievements (output), achievements (outcomes) to change (impact). Along this line, assessment is the result of processes involving researchers and stakeholders, with the aim to obtain their feedback and evaluation on outcomes and to assure their full involvement as essential success factor (Galeotti, 2016).

The META evaluation design aimed to identify *if and which* factors, identified through the first phase of research and formalized in a methodology, made of arts educational devices for inclusion. Considering that implementation of META methodologies in training and piloting is expression of a causal package in combination with other 'helping or disturbing factors' - such as stakeholders' behaviour and interests, related programmes and policies, institutional capacities, cultural factors or socio-economic trends, just to mention a few - the evaluation design includes mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative, that lead to more sensitive analysis of the different components. Focus groups and interview texts were treated using content analysis tools (Boyatzis, 1998 Gläser, Laudel, 2013), while quantitative data about learning outcomes were analysed via SPSS Software.

3. Principal outcomes

META Case Studies Report showed (META, 2015) the richness and diffusion of projects designed all over Europe to foster innovative pedagogical models involving all types of arts, especially in primary schools. The case study assured the holistic vision of the topic and demonstrated an analytical/theoretical generalizability: results confirmed and enriched the first step of research aimed at the construction of a theoretical-methodological framework, presenting interesting levels of compatibility with the theoretical knowledge acquired through the analysis of scientific literature, strategic/politic documents and stakeholder opinions detected by advocacy round tables.

Principal critical elements detected by case study are confirmed, in terms of training needs, by evaluation of META Training of Trainers, with particular reference to capability to implement:

- Inclusive learning environments oriented to the development of soft skills
- Designing, managing, monitoring, evaluating activities according to identified learning objectives
- Integration of art education with ordinary curriculum
- Effective collaboration between teachers and artists
- Connection with stakeholders for planning, implementation and evaluation of activities also in term of impact in dealing with problem of inclusion.

The interpretative and heuristic phase of the research, conducted through case studies, document analysis, interviews, questionnaires and focus groups confirmed that implementation of art-based education contributes to improve and strengthen in children:

- Communication skills using different channels and expressive forms (oral expression, body expression, etc.)
- Creativity, understood as the ability to find personal solutions to the proposed stimuli, trying to overcome the stereotyped solution and by imitation
- Self-esteem, trust and emotional intelligence, perception, awareness of oneself and others.

On the basis of these results, META developed an innovative methodology and a competence framework (Margiotta, 2015; Margiotta, Del Gobbo, 2017), based on correlations among UE key competences 5 (Learning to learn), 6 (Social and civic competences) and 8 (Cultural awareness and

expression) and focusing on intentional and formalized educational protocol to enhance potential benefits of art in intercultural education.

META piloting involved:

- 517 primary school pupils in Berlin, Madrid, Liege, Florence (250 of which non-European)
- 62 Teachers and 6 Head masters
- 35 Artists.

Data collected with questionnaires before and after META Piloting on main learning outcomes achieved by pupils demonstrate an improvement of three principal competences:

- Leadership
- Self-awareness & Self-Empowerment
- Creativity.

Data collected with focus group and interviews with teachers and artists draw attention to these main qualitative outcomes:

- Active involvement in the classroom of all children, no matter their background or learning difficulties;
- Relationships among children and team work;
- Holistic approach to learning objectives (beyond disciplines);
- Open-mindedness and problem solving;
- Opportunities of free cultural expression;
- Awareness of cultural background.

4. Conclusion

Although the research is still ongoing, main results already demonstrate the possibility to develop inclusive learning environment through art education, based on cultural awareness and expression (Margiotta, 2015). Crossing data collected through various activities and plurality of methods, some recommendations for teachers, educators and school system are already available:

- Educational experts and practitioners should recognize that all children have talents and potentialities that can be elicited valuing their cultural background
- Each educational Institution should develop a diversity management plan as part of an organizational change in order to foster inclusion and find the most suitable methodological devices, among these in particular art and cultural heritage-based didactic
- Teachers and experts should explore and assess more potentialities of art-based education for inclusion of children with special educational needs, different abilities, learning styles and cultural backgrounds, supported by diverse and innovative assessment methods
- Teachers should be trained during initial, early career induction and in-service training on innovative methodologies based on art and cultural heritage-based education
- School system should mainstream art-based education to develop and strengthen soft skills of children, as well as of teachers'
- School system should increase involvement of parents and extended families through valuing their cultural heritage and their own forms of arts and cultural expression
- Evidence-based research and impact evaluation need to be strengthened and financed.

By restoring confidence in the worth of own cultural background, META highlights that art education may be a way to shift the risks of a choice between two identities, that of the impoverished minority and that of the mainstream society. It is possible when education systems are equitable and context of learning are inclusive (Deardorff, 2013, 2009), when they support students to reach their learning potential without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations. In other words, it allows individuals to take full advantage of education and training irrespective of their background (Faubert, 2012). Art-based education can represent an innovative field for intercultural dialogue if school will be supported to value arts not as "another content to learn" but as a method to build competences for life.

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