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Art, Creativity and Spaces of Participation: Looking for decolonial positionings for an active pedagogy

Abstract

The intertwining of art, creativity and education is evident in research, educational design and workshop experimentation. A pedagogist and an artist engage in a discourse on workshop experiences conducted in pre-schools and primary schools. The reflections that ensue give rise to positions and active strategies for decolonising participation.

Key words

Art Workshops, Creativity, Active Pedagogy, Decolonial Postures, Participatory Research

Abstract

Arte, creatività ed educazione si intrecciano nella ricerca, nella progettazione didattica e nella sperimentazione laboratoriale. Una pedagogista e un'artista dialogano su esperienze di workshop condotti in scuole dell'infanzia e primarie. Dalle riflessioni emergono posizionamenti e strategie attive per decolonizzare la partecipazione.

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ROSITA Deluigi, ANNE Mwiti

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Parole chiave

Workshop artistici, creatività, pedagogia attiva, posture decoloniali, ricerca partecipata

Introduction

The design of educational and artistic practices in the context of participatory research and the development of transdisciplinary synergies that are open to dialogue with the territory requires a critical examination of the socio-educational reality with diverse modes and categories of analysis (Capous-Desylla & Morgaine, 2018; Khupe, 2024; Leavy, 2020). This is a complex process that requires attention and care from a theoretical and methodological point of view, as the plurality of subjects involved in the creative dialogue is extensive. The genesis of the collaboration between active pedagogy, oriented towards the promotion of participation and conscious co-construction of practices, and the artistic-expressive dimension, aimed at supporting plural narratives and identity sharing, originated within transnational cooperation projects designed to promote and support mobility between researchers¹. The present research has been developing since 2020 in a continuous exchange between Italy and Kenya, along research lines between art, art education, community actions, and participatory activations. In this context, a researcher in the pedagogical field and a professional artist have found several themes of common interest, starting from the encounter between different theoretical-practical backgrounds.

The initial dialogues concerning potential collaborative initiatives focused on the convergence of our research interests and working methodologies, ranging from reflexivity to praxis. The discourse commenced with an examination of ink drawings (created by Anne Mwiti), which subsequently led to the conceptualisation of collaborative workshops aimed at fostering engagement and creativity. The impetus for our collaboration stemmed from our shared interest in exploring research paths and practical experimentation that could hybridise our respective fields of work. We were also motivated by our aspiration to engage with educational and school contexts to cultivate a collaborative dialogue. The ope-

¹ The article is the result of the shared reflection of the two authors. Rosita Deluigi's contribution focuses on active pedagogy and the educational approach, while Anne Mwiti's analysis encompasses the artistic and creative dimensions. Both authors are affiliated with international research teams working on the TPAAE (Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education) project (<https://tpaae.eu>) and the ERASMUS*KA171/Art educational Actions between Italy and Kenya.

ning conversation, conducted over a cup of chai and a chapati, revealed a shared enthusiasm (still active) for action-research and the co-creation of knowledge connected to artistic and educational practices.

This paper will principally draw upon the findings of two workshops conducted in Italy in 2021 and 2024, respectively, and will highlight the reflections and outcomes that emerged among the researchers, teachers, and children who participated. The focus on the processes of learning, discovery, analysis, and restitution necessitated adequate time for reflection. The collaborative writing process, which this article is an initial outcome of, functioned as a creative space for the sharing of ideas, necessitating a pause in the temporal and spatial context of practices as “in-between researcher”. This approach, utilising qualitative and transdisciplinary methods, enabled the “formulation of authentic participative knowledge, the co-construction and construction of meaningful relationships in the field” (Milligan, 2014, p. 235). For this reason, we have chosen to dedicate a co-residency to focus on the ideas, suggestions, interpretations, and specific trajectories that have characterised our work over these years and that have left their mark on our way of doing research, cooperating, teaching, operating in the territories and communicating experiences.

Once again, the need to slow down, not to carve out scraps of time from hectic days, but to devote the right amount of time for reflective processes, was a milestone of our meeting. In the background, the inevitable chai and a pumpkin soup with coconut cream warmed our bodies into motion. It is important to share these research steps, as they describe the style of work and impact on people in action and do not only refer to the outcomes achieved, especially when the research position is engaged with the field action (Yip, 2023).

As can be glimpsed from this premise, the relation between art and education is evident in the interaction between professionals, their interpretation and recounting of practices, and the cultural and formative elements they value and interrogate. The research process is marked by the aspiration to explore and understand identities through experience, rather than rigid codes or disciplinary boundaries, with an openness to new projects. Conventional research environments are not conducive to this approach. Instead, a non-comfort zone is established where experiences are collectively lived, learning is reciprocated, especially in relation to the unexpected, and immobile paradigms of thought and action are challenged. The fundamental question guiding our collaborative endeavours pertained to the generation and facilitation of participants’ ideas, experiences, and values to the designated theme and the artistic languages, operating as an open reference platform (Ewing, 2022). Consequently, critical, non-homogeneous, divergent, and “impertinent” thoughts emerge that “disrupt” existing lines of research and generate novel ideas, practices, and ways of sharing.

It has been understood that this kind of collaboration has the potential to create spaces and experiences of decolonisation by moving in dynamics of recognition and genuine mutual curiosity, orienting collective research and intervention postures that are open to transformation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). There is a strong call for the construction of a transcultural horizon that requires times, spaces, and intersubjectivities interested in reciprocal encounters, the acquisition of transformative awareness, and the regeneration of spaces of meaning for the sharing of a thought in motion and practices open to innovation and community emancipation.

1. Interweaving research between subjectivity, languages, and community interactions

The workshops in two Italian schools were developed from existing alliances between the researcher who initiated activities in the local context in 2010 and our team, who have been active since 2020. New experiences were initiated during the mobility in Italy on both occasions thanks to existing networks. This has led to renewed understandings between the institutions, strengthened the university's third mission strategies, and enriched transnational reference projects with practices. The broadening of the educational, training, and research alliance has recognised the relevance of these activities for classroom learning from the perspective of researchers, professional artists, and educational agencies. These experiences activated subjects and groups, using multiple languages and diverse forms of expression.

1.1. Context of shareholders

There are several elements that connoted the experiences, which we will shortly contextualise and which involve all the actors engaged: the school (teachers and children), the researcher, and the professional artist. The importance of noting and sharing these aspects lies in the ability to describe critical and design approaches and methodologies that distinguish similar lines of intervention (Blaisdell & al., 2019; Hickey-Moody & al., 2021). The following common grounds have been identified in the implemented practices:

- *Creativity* is a form of multiple expression, a logic of shared work, a way of proposing fields of experience and experiential learning, a place of experimentation of oneself and with others, a way of amplifying and communicating imagination and giving it form.
- The *participatory learning approach* is a didactic dimension in

which all subjects actively shape their knowledge. This approach is defined as a way of *declining research and teaching*, and of expressing oneself among peers and learning from each other. The co-education values can be understood as a logic of discovery and valorisation of identities and otherness in teaching and learning. It can also establish consistent educational alliances between adults who can decentralise and be co-responsible for educational processes, attentive to emerging challenges.

– *The presence of professionals, such as artists*, facilitates dialogue, creativity and art education. This interaction is a significant resource for pedagogical reflection and facilitating exchange on creative processes and artistic techniques. *The involvement of a visual artist within the educational environment is congruent with the curriculum*. This collaboration is vital to ensure the experience is not an isolated occurrence or event of little significance.

– *The development of artistic and expressive skills* is a fundamental component of the Italian education system, starting as early as kindergarten. The collaboration with a professional artist is therefore a highly relevant resource and incentive for teachers and children who are approaching expert knowledge. *Collaboration activates a mediation process* involving learning and interpreting images, offering multiple and creative perspectives in education with more critique possibilities of storytelling. The children gaze at the artist, who reciprocates by interacting with them. Teachers observe each other as they witness the children's varied responses. The researcher intercepts the class's curious glances, the artist's shining eyes, and the teachers' care. The amazement in the environment unites and stimulates everyone.

– *Educators must adopt an observational stance, diverging from their conventional roles*. This entails observing the transformation in the perceptions of all subjects, as presented by the researcher and artist to the learners. Consequently, new spaces of reciprocity and relational proximity are created, in which community learning guides practices.

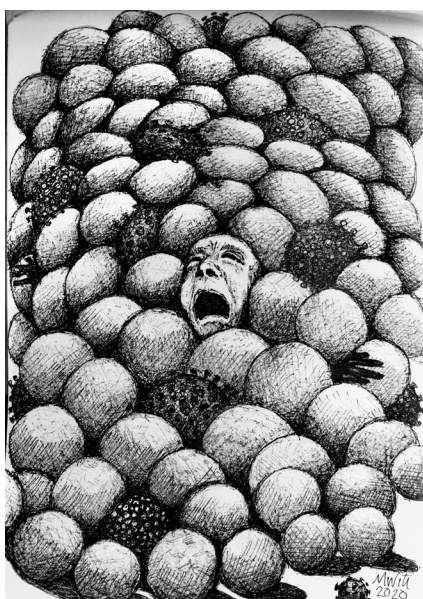
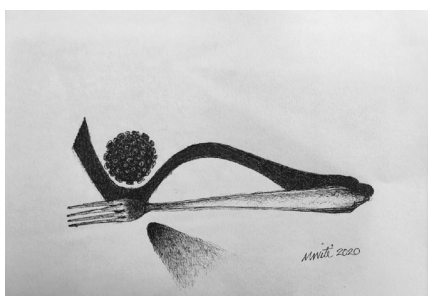
– *By breaking with traditional ways of thinking, creativity in learning can flourish*. This happens in many different ways (between teacher and pupil) and creates a cycle of discussion where everyone takes part. The space for participation and personal interpretation is expanded, leading to discoveries, connections, and understanding. In situations where time is limited, the learning environment must be meticulously prepared in advance and learners familiarised with the setting. This facilitates seamless transitions between adult suggestions and the spaces allocated for their active engagement, fostering new forms of self-expression and opportunities for the exchange of discoveries.

1.2 Experiences in the field: educational and artistic analyses

Starting from the paradigms delineated in the preceding discourse, this study proposes an analysis of two workshops implemented in Macerata. The analysis will encompass planning and methodologies, accompanied by educational and artistic reflections and observations concerning the experiences. The proposals were both aimed at enhancing the use of art to promote skills and plural languages to express new ideas visually and storytelling for pre-primary and primary learners. The realisation of these workshops was conducted within the Istituto Comprensivo Mestica of Macerata, a collaboration with which the University has an agreement to undertake joint activities.

The initial workshop was conducted at the Mameli Primary School in October 2021, following the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic. Upon resumption of the regular school term, the utilisation of artistic illustrations enabled students in grades IV and V to articulate their distinctive perspectives, apprehensions, and aspirations. This facilitated the conceptualisation of alternative renditions of their narratives, employing creativity in a collaborative manner. The exercise commenced with a series of artistic creations by Anne Mwiti, which were brought to the school in their original state. The children, organised into small groups, were then invited to select the images that resonated most profoundly with their personal experiences. Thereafter, the children were tasked with composing a fictional narrative that would best convey their experiences and impressions using the visual vocabulary that portrayed certain aspects of a global experience lived introspectively. The act of liberating personal ideas and recomposing stories in small groups enabled the children to explicate certain themes, such as death, fear, distance, salvation, hope, and trigger interconnections and similarities with the original meanings conveyed by the artworks. The act of redrawing alternative scenarios, whilst simultaneously encountering narratives with shared elements, fostered a sense of human solidarity, thereby mitigating the perception of spatial and temporal distance. This experience can be considered a genuine decolonisation of knowledge, as well as the recognition of the limitations of a single narrative.

The second workshop was held at the Montessori Pre-primary school in October 2024. The experience engaged all children in the two mixed sections of 3-5 years old, providing them with the opportunity to interact with a professional artist through an open space visual dialogue. The artist represented her self-portrait with life-sized watercolours illustration on the wall within the classroom. The live drawing session was followed by the children drawing their self-portraits, working independently in



Pictures 1-4 (attachment)

groups of four to five children, using the same materials as the artist. This initial encounter with watercolours offered a multifaceted learning experience, engaging children in: the exploration of artistic materials (e.g., brush, colour selection, water manipulation, colour mixing); the creation of their portraits (allowing for experimentation beyond establi-



Pictures 5-8 (attachment)

shed boundaries, without a predetermined scheme, with references to the artist's portrait, and with complete freedom in colour selection and modes of representation); the sharing of a time during which each child could complete their representation, request, and receive, feedback from the adults. It is interesting to note that the subjects' focus shifted from their usual teachers to the artist, who they sought approval and praise for their creations.

From an artistic and creative perspective, the significance of utilising imagery without providing technical explanations or interpretations of the imagery (to avoid pre-conditioning or directing the children) is evident in both experiences. From an educational perspective, it is noteworthy that the absence of subjective storytelling from the artist’s perspective enabled the learners to create their narratives (without defining a right or wrong version of the story or representation, valuing subjective and intersubjective points of view). The participatory and creative discovery processes enabled the potential of each child and the learning community to be realised, as the working group established an inclusive context that enhanced the children’s expressiveness, thereby creating an authentic and multilingual sharing space (Cawelti & al., 2024; Lee & al., 2020).

It is interesting to analyse the workshops in a dual-perspective way now (Tab. 1). The pedagogical perspective considers education through creativity and active participation. The artistic approach looks at how art can help imagination and storytelling.

Pedagogical perspective	Artistic perspective
Participatory workshops using creative languages have been shown to facilitate communication across linguistic boundaries, fostering a sense of self-discovery and peer sharing.	The premise of art as a universal language with vocabulary based on elements and principles of design.
The act of listening to children enables adults to embrace identities in their entirety, contemplating novel elements that arise in the course of shared experiences.	Artistic expression allows for emergence of unique identities within a learning environment.
The promotion of creative pathways by setting up a reference framework, without arranging each step too meticulously, leads to new ideas and the exploration of subjective and collective reflections and outcomes.	Engaging artistic professionals draws on their informed and referenced experiences leading to shared personalities, subjective expressions as well as cultural nuances.
Decolonising education means establishing transdisciplinary dialogues, considering diverse backgrounds and navigating a new trajectory. This process involves negotiating perspectives and creating a space for deconstructing and reconstructing creolised paradigms.	Art as a tool of communication of the unspoken, and not even immediate thoughts that dwell in the subconscious and then supersede the conscious mind through active expression.

Tab. 1 – Reflexive elements between pedagogy and art in action

2. Pedagogical-artistic reflections

The study's findings provide a foundation for methodological guidelines, intended to facilitate the design of workshops and creative experimentation spaces. These spaces encourage pre-school and primary school children to function as active producers of ideas, representations, images, and narratives. Pedagogical-artistic reflections advocate a change in the methodology of content delivery by pre-school and primary school teachers. The co-design of experiences has been shown to facilitate the emergence of "enlivened" identities, thereby obviating the necessity for performance assessment. Collaborative workshop-style activities allow for the exploration of new ideas and the creation of experimental pathways, potentially helping adults to shift away from overly rigid attitudes that can hinder the development of new approaches (Sikkema et al., 2021; Travis, 2021).

Our experience suggests that certain basic ideas and requirements may be useful in regularly running art workshops in schools, transforming these spaces into places for exchange, human development, relationship growth, learning, and professional advancement.

In terms of artistic achievements, it is important to emphasise the assumed premises such as:

1. Availability of the researcher, the professional artist and the schools that are participating in the workshops;
2. An active practising artist that is knowledgeable of the art practise, childrens' behaviour in a classroom set up as well as their spontaneous artistic expression.
3. The researcher and the artist should be in a teaching position within a university or institution of higher education. This is important for the familiarization with pedagogies of education and research.
4. The institutions conducting the workshops must be in a collaborative MOU, for the purpose of logistics.
5. Open to transcultural participation and engagements within active inter-university projects and mobilities.

As far as the pedagogical perspective is concerned, we focus on:

1. The concept of replicable experience is predicated on the notion that the possibility of making the activity replicable allows all participants to activate themselves (at various levels of autonomy) to create creative contexts, starting from the needs and resources present in the specific situation. If the goals of emancipation and freedom of expression are clear and shared, then it will be easier to initiate cooperative experiences.
2. Collaborative process: A commitment to collaboration necessitates a

willingness to decentralise from individual and personalistic viewpoints, thereby initiating participatory processes in which the creation of new expressive possibilities becomes a catalyst for the growth of new artistic communities, where effective communication methods are found by all participants.

3. The establishment of a consensus among teachers, researchers, artists, school administration, learners, and parents involved is paramount. The consolidation of educational and training alliances, directed towards the promotion of children's holistic development, serves as a pivotal method of boosting educational communities in which adults engage in collective reflection on the significance of proposals, fostering a sense of shared experience.

The premises discussed so far highlight two essential ways of approaching creative proposals for children using a transdisciplinary and decolonial approach.

Firstly, we argue against the concepts of “tabula rasa” and “depository education” (Freire, 1996). Knowledge acquisition is individual, involving introspection and external influences. Community affects learning, so pre-school and primary school learners do not simply receive input; they also influence each other through interaction and activities.

Creativity, as the purposive use of imagination and invention, is constantly being formed and transformed. It demands a ready and elastic intelligence, a mind free of preconceptions of any kind, ready to learn what it needs at every opportunity and to change its views when a more just one presents itself. The creative individual is therefore constantly evolving and his creative possibilities arise from the continuous updating and broadening of knowledge in every field. [...] A creative person continuously takes and gives culture to the community, grows with the community (Munari, 1977, p. 121).

As educators, there is an expectation that we will design learning environments that are both explorable and conducive to the development of curiosity, questions and relationships with others. In addition to nurturing the relational space between adults and children, a concept that has been extensively elaborated upon in this article, it becomes necessary to recognise the physical space as a “third educator”. The creation of stimulating, welcoming and rich in opportunities for exploration environments is relevant to foster the growth and well-being of young children. It is therefore vital to emphasise the significance of the design of educational spaces, as this can transform the learning experience into a journey rich in discoveries and meanings, where the context itself becomes a valuable ally in the growth and learning process (Malaguzzi, 2010).

If the objective of the workshop is to facilitate the exploration of art by learners, it is important to reconfigure it according to the particular

context. This includes availing tools and equipment such as worktables, chairs, art materials, a sink with water, and cleaning materials within a classroom set up. This is of paramount importance for a number of reasons such as broadening learners' thinking by introducing visual language, a mode of communication that goes beyond reading and writing. The workshop fosters collaboration, leading to new narratives, an approach that empowers individuals, encourages resource sharing, support a democratic leadership and facilitates finding materials locally at low cost. It promotes a relationship with the environment, and encourages innovation in the use of resources. Knowledge is shared through experiential learning and peer interactions. Engaging with artistic experiences fosters learning through observation, facilitating novel concepts, innovations, and perspectives. This process introduces novelty, and contributes to the development of knowledge. The learning process can help teachers develop a more inclusive understanding of their pre-school learners by using art as a tool for new ways to educate young learners.

Conclusion

Art should not be marginalised in the context of learning; indeed, it has become a pivotal tool in preschool and primary school. Consequently, it is urgent to cultivate highly creative pedagogies and methodologies of teaching and learning.

The investment in the design of workshop dynamics, in which community creativity assumes ecosystemic forms and engenders the potential for the opening up of new directions for research-action and artistic experimentation, represents a transdisciplinary and collective challenge (Deluigi, 2022; Deluigi & al., 2023). The collaborative endeavours undertaken thus far have facilitated the decolonisation of education, starting from the discourse that has consistently characterised our linguistic and methodological practices. The effort to grow a systematic collegiality within the university and school environments, to expand horizons and further work paths of socio-educational impact, is a priority we have undertaken with utmost significance. To facilitate this longitudinal journey, we have allocated dedicated time for reflection, implementation and evaluation of experiences, ensuring meticulous documentation. The learning space was also vast for us, as it required us to move into areas of co-creation, and our experimenting together opened up new ideas in listening to what was emerging from the contexts we encountered. The value of wonder and discovery with children was rediscovered through the encounter between subjectivities. Through close observation and engagement, we were able to gain insight into their unique perspectives on the world,

which in turn enriched our understanding and expanded our vision. We are indebted to these occasions, which instilled a profound sense of purpose in the relational and human interweaving of knowledge, skills, and experience, and we are now poised to explore new routes and bridges of investigation.

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