

Vplivi neformalnih umetniških in ustvarjalnih dejavnosti v večkulturnih vzgojno-izobraževalnih okoljih

FERNANDO PÉREZ-MARTIN

Povzetek Naše šole iz leta v leto postajajo vse bolj večkulturne. Nič nenavadnega ni več, če imamo v razredu tudi več kot deset učencev različnih narodnosti, prepričanj in načinov videnja sveta. Članek je povabilo k razmisleku o vlogi, ki jo imajo lahko neformalne umetniške in ustvarjalne dejavnosti v večkulturnih vzgojno-izobraževalnih okoljih. V ta namen predstavljamo izvleček iz študije primera, izvedene v eni najbolj večkulturnih šol v Kanadi, ki kot primer prikazuje nekatere od tam razvitih dejavnosti in analizira pozitivne vplive le-teh v njihovi vzgojno-izobraževalni skupnosti.

Ključne besede: • neformalna umetnost • glasbena vzgoja • študija primera • ustvarjalne dejavnosti • vzgojno-izobraževalna okolja •

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DOI 10.18690/2463-8005.10.2-3.221-234(2017), UDC: 37.015.31

ISSN 1855-4431 tiskana izdaja / 2350-4803 spletna izdaja © Revija za elementarno izobraževanje
Dostopno na: <http://journals.um.si> in <http://rei.pef.um.si>

The Influence of Non-formal Artistic and Creative Activities in Multicultural Educational Contexts

FERNANDO PÉREZ-MARTIN

Abstract Our schools are becoming more and more multicultural every year. It is no longer uncommon to have in the same classroom students from over a dozen nationalities, with diverse backgrounds, beliefs and ways of seeing the world.

This article is an invitation to reflect on the role that non-formal artistic and creative activities can play in multicultural educational settings. To this end, an excerpt from a Case Study carried out in one of Canada's most multicultural schools is presented, showcasing some of the activities developed there and analysing the positive influences they have in its educational community.

Keywords: • non-formal art • creativity • multicultural education • Case Study research • Educational context •

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DOI 10.18690/2463-8005.10.2-3.221-234(2017), UDC: 37.015.31

ISSN 1855-4431 Print / 2350-4803 On-line © 2017 The Journal of Elementary Education
Available at: <http://journals.um.si> and <http://rei.pef.um.si>

Introduction

A good proportion of the history of humankind (as is evident from a glimpse at a history book) is full of war and abuse between nations, groups and individuals (De Sousa Santos, 2010). One could think that many of us adults still need to learn to live together in peace and take care of our planet/home, which sustains us all, along with all forms of life. Luckily, our history is also the history of many men and women from all walks of life who believed that the world could be more just and peaceful, and worked towards it in very different and creative ways. Many of them saw education as a key element in achieving this type of world (Perez-Martin, 2013).

One such person was German educator Kurt Hahn (1886-1974), who was born a Jew in Germany. His strong belief in the power of education led him to found several schools and pedagogical projects between the 1920s and 1960s. One of these was the foundation of Atlantic College in Wales in 1962, which later became the first centre of the United World College educational movement. Nowadays, there are 17 United World Colleges (UWC) around the globe, with the mission of “making education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future” (UWC Mission and values, 2017).

The research presented here is a small part of a wider investigation carried out at the United World College in Canada over one month in 2014. This centre was founded in 1974 and named *Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific* (better known as *Pearson College*) in honour of the Canadian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lester B. Pearson for his relentless efforts in laying the foundations for this project before his death in 1972. This is the only UWC in Canada and is located in a beautiful natural setting on Vancouver Island. There, 160 students from 80 different countries and backgrounds live and learn together as a community on the same campus. They are between 16 and 19 years old, and they are selected in their countries of origin and given scholarships to study at the college for the last two years of high school.

Methods

In order to carry out this research at Pearson College on the influence of artistic and creative activities in this multicultural community, I chose a mixed research methodology (Creswell, 2009; Sandín, 2010) that combined “Case Study” and “Visual Arts based Educational Research”. Both methodologies belong to the Qualitative paradigm, which in comparison with the Quantitative, is focused on the human experience, the “quality” of the topic researched (instead of placing the focus on mathematical data, more closely related with “quantity”). These Qualitative methods are interested in the vital aspects of human beings, such as how they live and behave, what relations, interests and opinions they have, etc. Such investigations therefore study, interpret and try to comprehend people’s behaviour in a particular context. The object of the study is subjective and dynamic, as is the research process, which is flexible in nature (Stake, 1995).

On the one hand, the “Case Study” methodology allowed me to become fully immersed in this educational context and have direct contact with the reality I was investigating

(Eisendhardt, 1989). Becoming part of the community for a month, with all the observation and interaction opportunities this entails, also allowed me to take a holistic view of this particular case (Gutiérrez Pérez, 2014). On the other hand, through the “Visual Arts based Educational Research” methodology, I was able to use the qualities and potential of artistic knowledge, specifically language based on visual images, throughout the investigation (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Perez-Martin & Marín-Viadel, 2017).

During the study I was able to use several research instruments belonging to both methodologies (here I mention only those directly related to the data presented, which forms part of a larger investigation). I used “active observation” (Taylor & Bogdam, 1986) and recorded the data on the spot, through field notes in a small notebook. At the same time I recorded such events through photography to gain a visual dimension to the study. Every evening I compiled a visual diary (Miles & Howes, 2015), with the relevant written notes and photographs of the day in order to maintain a rigorous record of the activities that took place, as well as the information and ideas that emerged. This enabled me to start analyzing the data as it was being generated and to begin uncovering patterns. I also collected textual and visual information related to the art topic from the school administration, which helped me to better understand this college’s situation. In order to hear the opinions of the participants (students, teachers and staff), I had many opportunities for informal conversation with them during my month’s stay. I also carried out 23 semi-structured, anonymous, individual and group interviews (around 30 minutes each), with the objective of hearing the participant’s points of view, and therefore achieving greater objectivity in the study (Hartley, 1994).

After all the information was collected, I did a triangulation with all the data coming from my own sources (notes, visual diary and photographs) with those coming from the participants (interview transcripts) in order to reinforce the veracity and credibility of the data. In so doing, I began the process of creating initial categories with the common findings. After further analysis through triangulation, I ended up with the final categories. The most relevant are presented in the Discussion section.

As is common in “Case Study” research, I use a narrative structure and style in order to provide the reader with a vicarious experience of my investigation (Stake, 1995). To this end, I also present some photographs to allow the reader a clearer visual idea of the context, especially since art and creativity constitute the topic. As Ying (2009) argues, one of the main objectives of these types of investigations is to generate knowledge from the researcher’s experience that could help others in understanding distinct cases in different places.

The appropriate theory that I found for this research was the “Contact Hypothesis” (also known as “Intergroup Contact Theory”), since it states that contact between different people reduces prejudice. According to the psychologist Gordon Allport, who coined this term in his book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), the best way to reduce tension and hostility between groups is by putting them in touch. Allport believed that if four conditions were met, the theory would work: Equality among members, common

objectives for cooperation, personal informal interaction and institutional support. Since then, other psychologists have carried forward Allport's work. In 2000, Dr. Thomas F. Pettigrew and Dr. Linda R. Tropp from the University of California, Santa Cruz proved on a macro study (involving 90,000 participants in 25 countries) that 94% of cases supported the "Contact Hypothesis". One of the most revolutionary findings was that, according to them, the only necessary condition was that there be sheer contact. If the rest of the conditions were met, that would yield positive effects, but there are no compulsory requirements in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Results

Here we can see a small representative sample of data collected through photographs, observation and conversation with the participants during my stay at the college, in order to showcase some of the activities that took place weekly. In the Discussion I reflect on the influence of these activities in the college by joining my observations with the most common answers given during the interviews with students, teachers and staff from the centre.

These activities are just an example of what takes places there and are by no means limited to this school. I have studied these activities and their influence in other centres (both within the UWC movement and beyond it) at different educational levels and in diverse contexts, finding very similar results. In my experience, these outcomes can be largely generalized.

I focus on the non-formal arts here because these reach the whole community (not just students taking the Visual Arts or Theatre courses) and because I have found that they have a clear and strongly positive influence in the school. I firmly believe in the importance and the positive effects of a good formal art education programme. In my opinion, both formal and non-formal art education and artistic activities of any kind should be actively promoted if we want to have a coherent system of education.

Creativity as part of the CAS programme

Figure 1. Perez-Martin, F. (2014). *Student showing another student pottery*. Independent digital photograph.

In Pearson College, the official academic programme is the *International Baccalaureate* (IB). Within this programme, there is a requirement that all students should do several activities beyond their six chosen subjects, in what is called the *CAS programme* (*Creativity, Action, Service*). In this centre all students do at least two activities weekly. From the “Creativity” section, they can choose art explorations; pottery and ceramics; music for beginners; ukulele; chamber orchestra; choir; creative writing; dance; textile art and costumes; or culinary arts, etc. These activities take place in the afternoons and evenings and are led by teachers, staff and, most commonly, by students who are themselves knowledgeable about the particular activity.

Within the “Service” section they also use the arts in several projects to work with youngsters with special needs, as well as with youngsters at risk of social exclusion. Participation in the *CAS programme*, whether by taking part in creativity, action/sport or a service, aims to develop organizational and leadership skills, meet physical and emotional challenges, develop creative expression, practice teamwork and cooperation etc. (Pearson College - CAS: Creativity, Action, Service, 2017). This programme from the IB is an example of how artistic and creative “extra-curricular” activities can be part of school life, even though the students don’t take an art subject as such. School blossoms with these activities, bringing life to the centre and uncovering student talents.

Regional Days



Figure 2. Pérez-Martin, F. (2014). *Bracelet workshop*. Independent digital photograph.

Figure 3. Pérez-Martin, F. (2014). *Piñata workshop*. Independent digital photograph.

Regional Days are cultural events that take place six times during their two-year academic programme. There, students, teachers and staff from a particular region have an excellent chance to fully share their culture with the rest of the school. Throughout the week, a variety of events take place: presentations on country-related themes, workshops, film and documentaries from their nations, etc. Those responsible for organizing and carrying out the activities are the students from the specific region celebrated (African, European, Latin American, etc.), but any student, even those not from the region, can be part of the organization and, above all, can participate in the many activities that happen on those days.

During my stay in 2014, I was able to participate in the *Latin American Regional Day*. The activities on the Saturday (the main day) began early in the morning with a serenade going through all the residences, waking students up to the sound of music. Over the course of the day, there were many workshops and activities involving the arts and creativity: a dance workshop, face and body painting, learning to make traditional bracelets with wool, constructing a “piñata”, making Mayan signs in clay, playing traditional musical instruments, or painting a mural. Both lunch and dinner offered food from several Latin American countries as a way of sharing their culture. The day ended up with a very special show in the college auditorium where various dances (both traditional and modern) were presented, as well as music (choir and bands), spoken word performances and short dramatic pieces. This day provided clear evidence that artistic and creative activities were chosen by students naturally as the best means of sharing their cultures. It also showed the warm, positive atmosphere that they created, generating the joy of learning from each other’s backgrounds and traditions.

Dance Recital

Figure 4. Pérez-Martin, F. (2014). *Dancing the Sixties*. Independent digital photograph.

Twice a year, they have *Dance recitals*. These are shows where anybody can perform a dance of any type. Some are products of the dance activities from the *CAS programme*, but many are prepared just for the occasion.

I was lucky that my stay at the college coincided with one of these recitals. For the whole week, the students had been rehearsing their performances, and on the Friday evening the event took place. For almost two hours, we were delighted with many different dances: hip hop, rock and roll, belly dance, traditional dances from Canada and other countries and contemporary dance. The most notable feature was the vibrant atmosphere of friendship and brotherhood that was created. The community feeling was rendered tangible in the jokes and expressions of affection between the dancers and their friends in public. There was also plenty of humour and imagination in the acts. Several educators also took part in some of them, showing the importance of informal interaction in this type of education. Just by being there it was very patent that they were united in a simple yet profound way through these creative dance performances. Students from distant shores performed together as one. In Figure 4 we can see two students from New Zealand and Chile perform an American song from the 1960s.

Christmas Concert



Figure 5. Perez-Martin, F. (2014). *Christmas Concert 7*. Independent digital photograph

Just before the Christmas holiday, students perform every year at the “Metchosin Community Hall”. This is a meaningful way of contributing to the local community where the school is situated. I also had the opportunity to assist with this concert during my visit.

The big hall was completely packed with people eager to hear and see this annual concert (around 200 or so). The show lasted two hours (with a pause in between) and had many and varied live acts: choir, orchestra, jazz, gospel, instrumental pieces and traditional songs from different parts of Canada and other countries. Naturally, this included the classics: “Silent Night”, “Jingle Bells”, “We wish you a merry Christmas” etc., which sparked the community to sing along with the students from such diverse backgrounds.

It was inspiring to see the appreciation that the community had for Pearson College students and educators for coming to share their talent and cultures with their local community. There is no doubt that this annual show has become a tradition in Metchosin and a highlight in their calendar. It offers a good example of how the arts can generate positive connections between schools and their surrounding communities.

Art and creativity in everyday life



Figure 6. Perez-Martin, F. (2014). *Being together*. Independent digital photograph.

Apart from the activities I have briefly presented here in the form of the *CAS programme*, *Regional Day*, *Dance Recital* and *Christmas Concert*, there are many other things happening at the college that involve the arts and creative expression in one way or another (even though Pearson College is not an “arts school” as such). Some of these are big events like *One World*, which is an annual show that the whole school assembles and presents at the main theatre in Victoria every spring, as a way of celebrating and presenting their diversity and culture to the general public through a variety of music, stories and dance performances. Many others are smaller episodes that happen almost spontaneously every day.

As an example of these, one evening I was walking to the auditorium to see the rehearsals for the Latin American show; on the way, near the forest, I saw a group of students gathered together playing the guitar and singing by the fire. Figure 6 speaks for itself. In the same line there are many things occurring: *henna* painting, improvised dancing, ukuleles playing on the lawn, music jams, exhibitions and pumpkin carving for *Halloween*.

Discussion

After doing this research, I can clearly see that non-formal artistic and creative activities have a considerable positive influence in this multicultural educational community. On the one hand, I was able to observe this personally, and on the other, I could hear the opinions of the members of the community themselves through many conversations and interviews during my stay.

Here I summarize some of the findings that highlight these positive influences, which in my experience, can be extrapolated to other educational contexts.

The most common answer in the interviews when talking about art and creativity (as well as the most common finding from my observations) was that these create union between all members of the school community. It is important to remember that the students come from 80 different countries and backgrounds. If this situation were not managed properly, it could potentially be a source of prejudice and dispute, since there are students from many different countries, some of them even at war between themselves. Fortunately, this college aims to promote tolerance and international understanding through the whole programme. In this context, the arts become one of the most important resources for bringing people together and allowing them to get to know each other, reducing prejudice and increasing tolerance. According to one of the educators of the community, “It is absolutely, 100%, a huge factor of unity. It is the rehearsals, that is, the 8 times they gather for the show that will last 3 minutes; but the 8 hours they have gathered before, even in the simplest shows, is where... in those “interstices”, in the “unofficial” moments, that the pedagogy of Pearson is happening”. In line with the opinion of DeAngelis (2001) when commenting on the work of Pettigrew and Tropp (2000), I believe that this unity generated through personal contact happens mainly because there are emotions involved. In contexts like Pearson College, artistic activities such as musical and dance performances definitely spark positive emotions.

These artistic activities also lead to multiple opportunities for collaboration and learning outside the classroom. Students learn from each other and learn to take responsibility through these types of artistic and creative endeavour. As a member of staff stated, “It brings different cultures together, sharing their forms of expression with each other as you can’t share with academics as easily... Let’s say for *One World* or *Regional Days*, it might be a dance from South Africa, but there could be 20 nationalities dancing, so it forces them to work together”. The educational and social potential of these activities could clearly open many opportunities in our schools.

Another common answer was that these activities generate equality in the school and increase student self-esteem. In a context like this, where educational backgrounds and educational level vary quite considerably between students, the arts help to balance the situation, since they provide a means for everybody to share their different talents, as we see in this answer: “It is very good for people’s self-esteem. There is a pride, particularly in dance and music events. There is that kind of self-confidence and the confidence that comes from sharing your origins, the art of your culture with others. It really helps a lot to people who may feel that their academic side is not so strong”. It has been well documented that better quality learning occurs when students feel valued and in an environment that makes them feel confident (Ibarrola, 2013).

On a personal level, artistic and creative activities also provide a safe space where students feel free to be themselves, as well as creating spaces for calm. As a student pointed out, “I believe that art here is freedom. And more than physical freedom I think it’s an emotional freedom, it’s a way out of the stress that other things give you”. In the hectic and intense intercultural experience at Pearson, these spaces of safety/calm and the freedom to be oneself become crucial for a healthy community. This could be applicable to any other setting, as it will have direct impact on the quality of the education developed.

Some members of the community also stated that these artistic and creative activities promoted critical thinking. As one of the participants expressed, “Artistic activities help people expand their preconceived *mental boxes*. They can find creative solutions to the problems that are limiting. And I think since part of the UWC’s mission is to create a peaceful world, then you have to be creative to do it. We have already tried the old ways, and we know they do not work. The only way forward would be creativity. In this way, art is like a training zone to practice new ways of doing things”. In the complex society we live in, critical thinking becomes more and more important if we are to help educating free and responsible citizens.

This research is an example of how non-formal artistic and creative activities of any type can become a useful way of sharing and celebrating cultures as well as student talents. They create spaces for encounters with “different others” (Parks Daloz, 2000), creating moments and spaces of transformative learning through deeper contact among them. This type of sharing is not just a means to a more meaningful education, but equally important, a means of increasing multicultural understanding and tolerance among so many different students in a world that surely needs it.

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