

An intersection between the fields of education and art

A reflection on the situation of refugees

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Abstract

This paper proposes the design of an educational project for primary school teachers that are related to the theme of migration. The process of designing teaching material can be facilitated by becoming familiar with current works of art inspired by the subject of refugees. This knowledge is also important for initiating undergraduate education students to the process of analyzing and creating art projects for children. On the other hand, current art trends have the ability to highlight the situation of uprooted children living in conflict areas. This project is carried out with primary school children in the Faculty of Education of the University of La Laguna. In addition, the undergraduate students present activities at schools during their work placements. The theme of puppets has been selected for the youngest children following analysis of an activity carried out in refugee camps with Lebanese children. The conceptual framework focuses on the arts-based educational research method to study artists and performing arts from the perspective of social integration to foster communication through the universal codes of art.

Keywords: Elementary education, arts-based educational research, contemporary art, educational art practices, education

Bio

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Introduction

The effect of the current social situation on the fields of education and art is complex. This is because the areas of knowledge in which art education intervenes with a social approach are influenced by what is known as liquid modernity.

It requires having comprehensive knowledge of what is occurring in different parts of the world. According to Leong (2016), intercultural art practices enrich and propose new forms of representation.

In today's globalized world, intercultural arts are characterized by catalytic coalescence between culturally diverse arts practices that integrate elements of each. This usually results in new artistic outcomes with multiple identities that cross cultural borders and involve exploration of the plethora of cultural modes of representation comprising the auditory, linguistic, visual, gestural, and the spatial.
(p. 345)

The concepts of interculturality and integration are fundamental to establishing and structuring educational artistic practices. Furthermore, this global concept must be developed through ideas related to the local environments of specific communities.

The aim of this study is to analyze the investigative methods of arts-based research and arts-based educational research. The first type connects the concepts of “science” and “art,” whereas the latter encompasses “science,” “art” and “education”. These types of research present different areas of study that are complex, broad, diverse and respond to specific approaches. However, arts-based educational research has been selected for this project since it aims to understand and analyze education by means of concepts related to the refugees, by designing different artistic practices and specific arts-based techniques appropriate to their context.

Currently art can be used to highlight the sociopolitical situation of communities at risk of exclusion. It can also help to raise awareness within the art and education communities about the need to include the theme of people living in areas of conflict. This sociocultural approach has been adopted in this project because future elementary teachers need to be prepared to accept and manage new realities in the classroom.

The objective of this plan is to create an art project to be conducted with undergraduate elementary education students in the Art Workshop of the Faculty of Education at the University of La Laguna. The idea is for the students, during their teaching internships, to present the current realities of certain countries to elementary schoolchildren from an artistic perspective. Initially, there is an analysis of the work of Ai Weiwei and the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation, the latter of which was conducted with Syrian and Lebanese children in refugee camps. Then, the future teachers present their group creations based on this social theme.

The project design proposes a qualitative assessment of an arts-based educational research methodology based on data collection, interviews, sociopolitical context, descriptions of personal experience, drawings, and photos depicting children’s emotions and expressions before and during the theatrical performance. The purpose is to help children from diverse backgrounds to integrate into the classroom and to discover a new reality. Authors such as Cahnmann and Siegesmund (2008), who are involved in different areas of education, have studied the field of arts-based educational research focusing on how to document the diversity and complexity of these issues.

Background

This pedagogical art project was conceived after reading Samham (2015) who described the activities carried out in Lebanese refugee camps by a group of puppeteers from the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation.

The significance of migration caused by war has an influence on how we can help refugees to overcome the trauma. It also demonstrates the importance of developing programs in schools so that they are prepared to facilitate cultural integration and awareness.

These migrant children will possibly become students in schools of their host countries. It is important to highlight that the planning of this educational art project is not only useful to help children integrate in the classroom. It can also be implemented in other informal settings outside of a school, where its function is equally important for the integration of the children and to foster their creativity. The children have to be the protagonists of the teaching–learning process, as this enables them to better integrate in their new educational environments, as demonstrated in research studies in Finland. At this point, it may be useful to highlight how these educational spaces have been designed in several research projects, such as *PLAYCE¹: Architecture Education for Children and Young People*, organized by the Alvar Aalto Museum. The work of this institution emphasizes the integration of children, in addition to care for the environment, play spaces, and open architecture.

Specifically, the elementary education curriculum defines a set of topics aimed at helping children integrate harmoniously through educational and human aspects.

Basic education at primary, secondary and upper secondary schools is based on seven different themes². The objectives and contents of them are connected to all school subjects and thus giving possibility for integration, looking

1 PLAYCE, is an international association for architecture education composed of professionals who participate in the design of activities for children in the public domain and built environments. The association was founded in Jyväskylä, Finland, by members of the Soundings 4 and Soundings 5 workshops, organised by the Alvar Aalto Academy and Museum.

2 Architecture in school curricula specifies the topics of integration for primary school education: 1. Growing up as a human being, 2. cultural identity and internationality, 3. communication and media, 4. participating in citizenship and enterprise, 5. responsibility for environment, well-being and sustainable future, 6. safety and traffic, and 7. man and technology.

at phenomena from various points of view, constructing integrated and meaningful wholes. (Räsänen, 2006, p. 15)

Artistic Research Methodologies in Art and Education: Arts-Based Research and Arts-Based Educational Research.

Artistic research methodologies in the fields of art and education are divided into two main groups: arts-based research and arts-based educational research. The research methodologies in art education are the same as those applied in the fields of social and human sciences. Arts-based educational research examines education from an artistic perspective.

Barone and Eisner (1997) define the criteria that must be fulfilled for a research approach to be considered as arts based:

... Arts-based research is engaged in for a purpose often associated with artistic activity: art-based research is meant to enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities. For ABER [arts-based education research], those activities are educational in character. Second, art-based research is defined by the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry process and the research “text”. Although these elements are, to some degree, evident in all educational research activity, the more pronounced they are, the more the research may be characterized as arts-based. (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 95)

Specifically, Barone (1995) highlights the arts- and education-based research approaches that have been adopted in the practical part of this project in relation to certain genres:

These genres include educational biography and autobiography, life histories, literary case studies, literary journalism, teacher lore and student lore. (Barone, 1995, p. 172)

Social Experiences Connected with Art Education

This approach examines the cases of specific artists and organizations whose artwork is related to the themes of conflict and social integration, such as Ai Weiwei and the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation³.

Due to his broad media coverage, global diffusion, and activism in social causes, Ai Weiwei has been selected to highlight conflict situations through art installations about such themes as imprisonment, capital punishment, and human rights in China. Ai Weiwei is a figure of contemporary art whose work is closely related to the meaningful relationship that can be generated between art and certain social contexts, such as the situation of refugees. This is the reason for introducing children to concepts of contemporary art.

The newspaper *El País* published an article in its arts section about an installation by the artist and activist. The material used to create this piece was sourced from hundreds of lifejackets worn by refugees and immigrants while crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece, attached to the columns of the Berlin *Konzerthaus*. The idea of this piece was to raise awareness of the refugee crisis.



Figure 1. *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, 2011. Pulitzer Fountain, New York. Copyright Ai Weiwei. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. *Safe Passage*, 2016. Konzerthaus Berlin. Copyright Ai Weiwei. Courtesy of the artist.

3 The reproduction rights of all artworks therein belong to their creators, and are protected by copyright. Figure. 1. and 2. Copyright. Ai Weiwei. || Figure. 3. and figure 4. Copyright. Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation. Reproduced from: http://avax.news/touching/Children_in_Burj_al-Barajneh_Enchanted_by_Show.html || Figure. 5. and 6. Copyright. NGO UNHCR. Reproduced from: <https://eacnur.org/es/actualidad/imagenes/dibujos-africanos-hechos-por-ninos>

As seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the thermal blankets bathed in golden light from flood lamps similar to those used in rescue operations, are positioned on the sculptures to represent the events in Lesbos. *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* represents the heads of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac.

The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation is an organization that works with puppetry, a field of art that is very familiar to children. Their workshops carried out by puppeteers are worthy of mention because they incorporate play-oriented activities aimed at helping children overcome traumatic experiences. This Palestinian-based group specializes in puppetry training for areas of conflict. These projects have involved the training of teachers and are responsible for bringing puppet shows to Syrian children in refugee camps in Lebanon.

This foundation has been chosen because the puppets provides a code for transmitting language through images using a universal format that facilitates understanding and communication of text through the interaction of children who actively engage in a story. This model constitutes an intangible cultural heritage and transmits specific cultural characteristics of each country.

The decision to use this artist and organization has arisen from sessions held at the Art Workshop of the Faculty of Education, in which the students research different artists whose work is related to social themes with the aim of creating teaching resources.



Figure 3. An actor from a theatre puppet show performs at an UNERWA school in Beirut. May, 2015. Photo: Mohamed Azakir/Reuters.

Figure 4. The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation team. Show at an UNERWA school. May, 2015. Photo: Mohamed Azakir/Reuters.

Visual Culture Related to Social Projects

Several artists use their work to address social issues, exploring new ways to engage the audience through interaction. Socially compromised art can generate outrage and demands for change. This specific area of art provides a platform for the community to reflect, collaborate and build; it is therefore a challenge for the promotion of innovative projects that address issues such as human rights, justice and community values.

The project should have an arts-based educational focus and demonstrate an understanding of a current reality using art as a vehicle of expression and communication.

The concept of this proposal is to discuss changes in current society, such as the phenomenon of refugee migration due to war, and how this situation is visualized in certain artistic practices. This consideration serves as a basis for proposing the design of a photographic, drawing or theatre performance-based activity for the elementary classroom.

This study concerns visual culture and Kerry Freedman, who researched this subject in the context of art education, to offer a different point of view.

The images and objects of visual culture are constantly seen and immediately interpreted, forming new knowledge and images about identity and environment. It mediates the social relations formed between artists, artists and spectators, and between spectators. Art and Art Education are forms of mediation between people in which a series of professional and discursive practices play an important role. (Freedman, 2007, p. 27)

Educational Art Project with a Social Character

Social art projects can be designed as agents of changes. Therefore, this paper analyses a selection of temporary art interventions that can be considered as community art projects. The nongovernmental organization United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has carried out art activities, mainly drawing and painting, with children from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia,

Kenya and Uganda (Figure 5 and Figure 6). The children involved have experienced traumatic situations and live in refugee camps in Kakuma, Kenya.



Figure 5. *Walking towards the refugee camp in Kenya.* Drawing by Aden Ahmed Mohid, a 14-year-old Somali refugee in the Dagahaley camp.

Figure 6. *Sailing from Kismayo.* Drawing by Said Abdi Said, a 14-year-old Somali refugee in the Dagahaley camp.

In this context, this project examines activities that have been created in response to the situation of migration. Furthermore, consideration is given to the proposals that can be developed in schools to research the use of art as a means to help children overcome traumatic experiences and integrate in the schools of their host countries.

Finally, a number of activities adapted for schools are proposed that are designed to be carried out in educational stages by using simple materials. This idea aims to connect current undergraduate students who hold elementary education degrees with the work of Ai Weiwei and the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation so that, in the future, they will implement these techniques as teachers in the classroom. As future teachers, they should plan and select the content that they will present to their children, which should be suitable for the children's developmental level, while also meeting ethical and moral standards that do not offend their sensibilities. Therefore, aspects of play, rather than drama, will be strengthened through the content presented to the children.

Aims

The general and specific aims of the photography, drawing and sculpture activities to be carried out by the children are based on a didactic proposal related to the social theme of refugees:

- To reflect upon, from the classroom, the situation that refugees are currently experiencing in certain countries.
- To present how education and art can contribute to minimizing and alleviating human suffering, especially for children who have a great ability to cope.
- To present a method for elementary teachers to use for their artistic practices.

Contents

The children are presented with work related to these themes by artists from each field. The analytical concepts addressed are related to the notion of opposites, such as, ephemeral—lasting, freedom—repression and good—evil. In addition, it encompasses broader ideas, such as journeys, voyages and luggage. Then, they are given freedom to participate in the activity in a creative manner.

The themes included in this project concern three specific fields of art: photography, drawing and sculpture and are aimed at elementary schoolchildren in Spain.

Implementation of the Activity

The activity is based on the understanding that different areas of art can provide an educational support with which to narrate and overcome a traumatic event: migration due to war. It also responds to the idea that the process of making other children aware of another reality, regardless of whether they have experienced it, will enrich their world view.

- The medium of photography is used to propose that the undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education create pedagogical material for teachers to consider the aforementioned concepts. The children will take individual photographs or produce a series of images while adopting the

format of a photo essay, photo installation, photo book or photobiography. These formats offer ways to create photography according to the project designs that are presented to the children through examples of photographers' work.

- Through drawing, the children are able to express their real-life experiences and adverse situations, as well as their future plans for life from a more positive perspective, so the children produce drawings reflecting their experience.
- Sculpture is used to develop the theme of puppets. The idea is to help children to learn meaningful concepts of play, while interacting with other children. Certain other three-dimensional artistic media will also be used, such as intervened objects or assemblage (the latter can help children to visualize in three dimensions, while giving positive value to an object which the children know and have experienced, and then turning it into art. This helps children to acquire educational contents such as the 4R rule: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Recover and works by Japanese artist, Natsumi Tomita. The children paint, assemble, recycle and build a new sculpture or regenerate an object that is meaningful to them, such as their belongings from their journey, etc. In the case of the theatre project, the aim is for children to create their own puppet characters through which they can express themselves to overcome certain fears and to represent characters that produce stimulating and positive memories in their life through a theatre performance.

Conclusions

This activity gives teachers the opportunity to engage and actively participate in a tragic situation; therefore, they can design activities that yield good results and benefit the children's schooling and integration.

Similar activities with puppets have previously been carried out in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cadiz, and the results of these experiences can be extrapolated to concepts such as the schooling and integration of children in the classroom.



Figure 7. *Puppet*, 2009. María Gloria Corrales.

Figure 8. *Puppet*, 2009. Laura Patrón.

Figure 9. *Puppet*, 2009. Ana Belén Jiménez. Faculty of Education. University of Cadiz.

Firstly, let us consider the puppets created in the refugee camps. There is clear evidence of the great benefits and magnificent results produced by these puppets, as has been demonstrated in previous workshops carried out by the Arab Puppet Foundation for Syrian and Lebanese children in refugee camps. This activity could be expanded to the children's new schools in their host countries to involve teachers of different subjects, since puppetry is a universal language.

The themes and characters presented by the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation are appealing and suitable for the young audience. The protagonist is a mischievous child, and the conversations are about typical customs and food that the children know and miss.

The aim is to include this experience as arts-based educational research, since the processes of methodology implementation, results analysis, and evaluation are all fundamental to understanding a reality through research based on the interpretation of images. This new reality, proposed through the creation of new images and visual codes, paves the way for a new generative dimension.

Photography is considered to be a suitable tool, as it captures expressions and changes in attitudes. The aim of this project is for children to know a different reality. In addition, it incorporates images that enable students to show themselves and can be a beneficial tool in their development.



Figure 10. *Puppet*, 2009. Antonio Cruz. Faculty of Education. University of Cadiz.

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