Kenyan Children & Youth Acquire a Space to Create During COVID -19

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Biography

Lucy N. Mugambi is currently a PhD student in the Art and Visual Culture Education program at the University of Arizona. She holds a B Ed (Fine arts), M Ed in Primary Teacher Education from Kenyatta University, Kenya, and an MA in Art Education from University of British Columbia, Canada. Lucy is an artist/teacher / researcher interested in the use of the arts to reach out to the marginalized groups especially dis/abled children. She believes that learning can take place anywhere. We only need to be open to the changes that take place around us and engage all our senses.

Abstract

COVID-19 brought along myriad problems making it difficult especially for parents and school-going children in Kenya. It produced conditions not only for children's interrupted learning but also conditions for mental and physical health challenges for children and youth. In mid-March 2020, Kenya, like many countries was caught unaware by the COVID-19 situation. This meant that the Kenyan government did not have proper guidelines in place to take care of the needs of the children who had to stay home for an indefinite

length of time after the lockdown. Many parents, therefore, had to look for creative, alternative means of taking care, educating, and keeping their children busy and mentally healthy while at home. This paper explores a pedagogical project, which arose out of a graduate school course, grounded in public pedagogy, and socially engaged art practice in the Spring of 2020/2021. As an art educator, I used WhatsApp mobile App as a pedagogical tool to instruct the students while in their homes. The students expressed moments of rapture, renewed creative drive, great social engagement, and discovery of locally available resources for art-making. I propose the inclusion of multidimensional methods of instruction in and out of school art practice.

Keywords

COVID-19, WhatsApp, art-education, social engagement, art practice

Corona Song by Tori

I have never seen anything like it before
Since I was born and in my whole life
You know it struck some dead when they were passing by
And with some soap, I know that we will overcome.
Ooh I hate you, hate you, hate you corona
For you are making our lives a living hell
You, you make me, make me make me wanna cry
And now I beg to hear you gone all at once.

So, I say getaway, far away, far away from us coz

when your gone am sure you, you'll never come again

We just sanitize as soon as we get home

Before we greet our families before we eat,

We just don't socialize but we keep distances

And with some soap, I know that we will overcome.

Ooh I hate you, hate you, hate you corona

For you are making our lives a living hell

You, you make me, make me make me wanna cry

And know I beg to hear you gone all at once.

So, I say getaway, getaway, getaway ooh

I have never seen any other disease spread like you before,

They say far away, far away, far away from us

Coz when you are gone am sure you'll never come again

They say, far away (3) from us

Coz when you are gone am sure you will never come again

UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU

Geta away, get away ooh,

I have never seen any other disease spread like you before

They say, far away, far away, far away from us

Cos, when you are gone, am sure you will never come again

They say, getaway, getaway oooooh

I have never seen any other disease spread like you before

They say, far away, far away, far away from us

Coz when you are gone am sure you'll never come again

KENYAN CHILDREN & YOUTH ACQUIRE A SPACE TO CREATE DURING COVID-19

NOT AGAIN!

(Coronavirus song by Tori, 2020)

Tori's Coronavirus song composition expresses what some children and youth have been undergoing during the COVID -19 lockdown in Kenya. The song was an artistic creation by a 13-year-old girl during an out-of-school project initiated by parents on behalf of their children. In May 2020, some parents from Mbeere, Embu County, Kenya, reached out to me to help engage their children in creative art making activities to keep them "out of trouble" due to COVID -19 lockdown. The parents thought I was a good fit for the intervention since I have been an artist and art educator in Embu County, Kenya for several years and had a chance to work with some parents and teachers in this region. Through WhatsApp video calls and text messages, the parents and some out-of-school students communicated with me about their frustration of staying home without much to do. Some parents complained of how difficult it was to go to work since they had to take care of their children. Moreover, keeping discipline with their children at home became an uphill task and this led to many conflicts in homes. Furthermore, of greater concern, COVID-19 produced the conditions not only for children's interrupted learning but also conditions for mental and physical health challenges.

A report by Plan International dated June 25 2020, indicated that the well-being of thousands of girls in Kenya could be at risk with reports of huge numbers of unintended teen-age pregnancies since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. This is because being out of school increases teenage girls' vulnerabilities not only to early and unwanted pregnancies but also to early marriages or contraction of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS. Policies for Equitable Access to Health (PEAH) on July 14 2020 also reported that 11,795 girls aged between 10-19 years were documented as pregnant between the months of January and

May 2020. This invited me to think about how we could work with the parents to keep their children occupied during the COVID -19 pandemic through creative artmaking.

The out-of-school students also explained that they suffered from idleness, loneliness and felt "stressed out" due to being locked down in their homes. How could all these issues be addressed? I decided to embark on a virtual art education project through WhatsApp, a mobile App, since the students and I live many miles apart. I, pursuing my Ph.D. in the USA while the students are in Kenya. The purpose of this intervention was: 1) To fully engage the students socially, 2) Keep the students mentally healthy as they connect their art practice to real-life situations and achieve enduring learning.

In the process of art-making, the out-of-school students understood that art education is not necessarily confined to educational institutions. Furthermore, it was evident that art-making activities helped them to build social connectedness which has been known to lead to subjective well-being (Diener, 2000). Subjective well-being is a person's perception of their own quality of life that considers both daily moods, as well as overall satisfaction with life (Diener, 2000). Additionally, art activities have been known to bring about social interaction, physical activity and may generate positive effects on well-being (Kavetsos, 2011; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2017; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2019). Research has also observed that social interaction can be a predictor of life satisfaction. For instance, people with more social interaction tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction (Lucas et al., 2008). Likewise, Ellard (1976) looks at well-being in three dimensions that include proper living standards, loving relationships with, and the realization of one's potential (being). Being may include personal growth, integration into society, as well as living in harmony with nature. Therefore, engagement and interaction with others is considered an important resource that helps an individual attain a fulfilled life leading to subjective well-being. This out-of-school creative art-making intervention was intended to bring together safely, the out-of-students with the aim of improving their sub-

jective well-being. In the process of art-making, I sought to answer the following questions: What are students' perspectives on their well-being and learning when they participate in an -out -of school class focused on art-making activities? What kinds of connections can children and youth form with peers through art-making activities? How does the process of engaging students in art-making in an out-of-school environment inform my own art/teaching practice?

The Intervention Vis-à-vis the Expected Kenyan Education Goals

In Kenya, education has been taken to be synonymous with school, college, or university attendance. The process is basically referred to as schooling (Mwaka et al., 2013). This implies that parents highly value the act of children physically attending school with the belief that it is the sincerest way to gain an education. Additionally, according to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST) (2003), education in Kenya focuses on taking care of the social needs of the youth and preparing them for the changes in attitude and relationships which are necessary for any growing child. Therefore, one important education goal for the school-going children in Kenya is self-fulfillment and provision of opportunities for the fullest development of individual talents and personality. Schooling is consequently expected to help its recipients to develop their potential interests and abilities. Another vital goal of Kenyan education is to promote positive attitudes towards good health and environmental protection. Thus, education ought to inculcate in the youth the value of good health to avoid indulging in activities that will lead to physical or mental ill-health. It should also foster positive attitudes towards environmental development and conservation, hence leading the youth to appreciate the need for a healthy environment. With these expectations in mind, parents in Kenya after COVID-19 were left in a dilemma on how to realize these goals for their children while they remained locked down in their homes. Moreover, most working parents take their children to boarding schools because they believe that these schools have a high potential for academic suc-

cess. Taking the children to boarding school also takes away pressure from parental demands while they attend work (Oketch & Ngware, 2010; Abuya et al., 2017). Therefore, this project also aimed to work closely with the parents and not far from the norm of the Kenyan education curriculum objectives.

My Positionality in this Project

Having spent a lot of time in the eastern part of Kenya where this intervention took place as an art educator, I believe, gave me an "insider perspective" (Sullivan, 1996, p. 220), which helped me to understand the needs of the out-of-school students and parents that I worked with, in this project. Additionally, I have a great interest in working with children, teens, and young adults. As an artist /teacher/ researcher, my concerns are geared towards the needs of marginalized groups in my community. I teach because I essentially believe teaching can be a form of trustworthy transformation. I view the group of parents that reached out to me as a marginalized group since they are struggling in many ways to make life ends meet. My heart also goes to the teenage girls and boys who have been at risk of many issues surrounding them, such as, loneliness, teenage pregnancies, and drug and substance abuse, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. This intervention, consequently, served as a lead towards highlighting the needs of the children suffering from loneliness and isolation due to COVID -19. During my teaching art in Kenya, I have taught students across grade levels, from elementary to high school. Therefore, being familiar with the Kenyan school curriculum enlightened me on the creative activities the students wanted to engage in.

Working Together, Learning, and Creating the Bond

Since I am an artist/researcher/teacher, I chose to use a new model of learning that I refer to here as Virtual Community-Based Art Education. As an artist/teacher/researcher, I was also

interested in learning about the community I was working with as well as about myself. More-over, John Dewey (1936) believed that educational experience must be socially worthwhile and personally meaningful. This blend of public discourse and personal reflection is what was at the center of the process of this intervention. To achieve these goals, I chose to engage the learners with creative art-making activities, utilizing locally available materials. The intervention was situated within a framework of creative collaboration community-based art education as well as social art practice (Richardson, 2010; Schlemmer, 2017). My hope was that the practice would "engender and provide rich learning opportunities for all involved and enable the development of meaningful relationships that leave an indelible impact" (Lawton, 2019, p. 216). I was guided by Lawton, et. al.'s (2019) conceptual and transformational framework for community-based art education (CBAE). I found this framework useful in helping to organize, plan, implement, and assess this intervention. This model of CBAE is structured around five guiding principles namely, Educational, Reciprocal, Empowering, Collaboration, and Transformational. According-ing to this structure, CBAE provides teaching and learning opportunities for all those involved through sharing experiences and products gained during the process. It is reciprocal since all the stakeholders' voices are equally heard, appreciated, and considered. This helps to build trust and make everyone feel valued. In CBAE, involvement and co-inquiry generate openings for self and communal empowerment as well as efficacy. It offers collaborative creative encounters that lead to the accomplishment of personal and collective goals. Planning a CBAE project well can lead to personal, communal, and societal transformation for the overall benefit of partic-ipants as well as the larger community as seen in Figure 1. where the students are working together to create signs to educate the community about coronavirus.

Figure 1. *Youth Making Signs to Educate the Community*
Photograph by Wanjiru N. With permission

Planning the WhatsApp Out -of - School Curriculum

While creating a "virtual curriculum" with the out-of-school students, the initial impulse of the parents was to throw the ball of running the model of instruction to me. Since most of the students' parents did not have access to computers and the internet, we agreed to work with their mobile phones and use WhatsApp, mobile App, that was accessible to all. Originally, I was asked to create a schedule for the students to follow. However, the time difference between Kenya and USA became a challenge since I could not see what the students were doing in actual time. I borrowed from Oğuz (2010) the idea that the "family must not provide the child with memorized drawings and paintings but provide [them] with the environment that is helpful on developing creativity and uniqueness" (p. 3006). I, therefore, suggested that each student may create their own schedule and desired activities. My role as the art educator became that of providing guidance on whatever the students chose to do. One common thing that I required the students to do was to keep a personal journal. We agreed that the journal could assume any creative form; including but not limited to writing, picture making, and photography.

In the subsequent weeks, the students came up with ideas of what they wanted to create, and my work was to give step-by-step technical advice and encouragement. Most of the students informed me that they had not been doing any artwork in school since the art subject is not given any prominence in the current Kenyan educational curriculum. The students felt apprehensive about the art-making activities when we began the project as they were not sure what was expected of them. They felt that they did not have the skills required to do creative artworks.

However, what was important for this project was to allow them to move with "flow" and learn one step at a time as they enjoyed the experience. I was inspired by Nakamura & Csik-szentmihalyi (2009), who describe the concept of flow as "a subjective experience of engaging just manageable challenges by tackling a series of goals, continuously processing feedback about progress and adjusting action based on this feedback" (p. 196). As explained by these

authors, under these conditions, experience seamlessly unfolded from moment to moment, and the students entered a subjective state with flowing characteristics. My interest was to unearth the buried treasures with/in the students and then cast them back into society to be valued, recognized, and celebrated. I wanted to give the children and young adults a chance to speak in their own language with and/or without words. I hoped they could have space where they could draw, model, paint, dance, sing and write about them, about their lives, their homes, community, families, and culture. Like Pinar (1975), I believe learning is about a living curriculum—the currere of understanding what is around us. I was merely an initiator, a catalyst with the hope of empowering them in the process of art-making and learning. I allowed the students to own the process and as a result, they felt a great sense of accomplishment in their work.

Recruiting the participants

I initially started with a group of four students between the ages of 3 and 14 from three separate families. The students were in Embu, Mbeere a rural part of Eastern Kenya. Once I began working with these students in the first week, the group eventually grew bigger to a total of 16 in about a month's time through word of mouth. Nine of the students came from Mbeere, Embu County, Kenya, but the rest were staggered in different parts of the country. This number of participants was determined by the students' and parents' willingness to participate.

I exclusively carried out the project through WhatsApp mobile App and kept a record of the activities that took place through photographs, videos, and student journals, and my own field notes. I also kept text messages and audio-visual recordings that I used to provide the art activities' instructions. This was helpful in case the students needed to revisit a certain activity. Additionally, I created backup information in folders on my laptop to make it easy to access them. My hope was to offer the students a chance to view each other's work and hold a virtual art exhibition of their works. This was in line with Hill's (2012), argument that it is important

to "increase public engagement by distributing more accessible versions of research findings to non-academic communities" (p. 164).

Socializing in the Process of Artmaking

Each week the students participated in two, three-hour sessions of creative art-making activities in their homes. Those that live close together eventually decided to have their class meeting in a common ground to share a safe space to socialize and share resources that were available see Figure 2. After every session, the students would share their creations with each other, and the parents would later send me audio/visual recordings of their activities through WhatsApp. Moreover, for the students who live far away from each other, I requested their parents if I could share their WhatsApp mobile numbers with each other to create a network.

Collaborating with the parents provided the support that the students and I needed to make our engagement a success. The parents embarked on the major role of documenting the activities of their children, especially the young ones. Although I provided step-by-step guidance to the students via the App, the students took over the learning process and made it their own. They introduced their own activities, increased their socialization and learning hence leading to bonding together. Some of the activities that increased bonding were the singing and dancing games which they engaged in between the art-making activities. Such activities allowed the students to relax hence reducing the pressure of competition because everyone was free to do their own thing.

Since the intervention was collaborative and participatory, I used artistic tools, processes, and artistic expression to understand, enhance and explore individual and collective experiences (McNiff, 1998; Jones et al., 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Because this was a naturalistic inquiry, I acknowledged that "meaning arises out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 138). In this community of practice, I envisioned

Figure 2. *Process of recycling newspaper to make papier mâché for modeling functional forms. The children tear old newspapers, make papier mâché and use it to model functional forms as they socialize. Photographs by Wanjiru N. with permission*

the students entwining the personal with the social aspects of their lives hence making sense of their lives and the lives of others around them.

Discovering a New

Kraehe's scholarship (2020) enticed me to "raise my voice in support of literacies that enable a person to decode and discern information beyond words and text, to understand and apply visual means of communication, and to navigate and participate in digitally mediated environments" (p. 6). The WhatsApp Virtual learning provided a new platform for the participants I worked with. Even though I had been working with 16 participants, for the purposes of this paper that has limited space, I will only share the outcomes of two students, Tori thirteen years old, and Jay 9 years old.

Through creative art-making, the out-of-school students were able to critically analyze issues that have been taking place in their cultural environment. They used creative art-making as a form of inquiry to explore what was happening in their day-to-day lives. They engaged with the natural world and used the natural materials to produce artworks that were meaningful to them and to the larger community. Tori, a 13 year old from Mbeere, Embu County in Eastern Kenya created the Coronavirus song and made me realize how powerful the creative arts are in reflecting, developing awareness, and critical thinking skills.

Tori, through this song, let out what was bottled inside of her. The coronavirus had become part of her daily life, a thing that she obviously despised. Although she likes drawing and painting, she asked me if she could compose a song about COVID-19, and I was more than willing to offer the support she needed. It took her long hours to practice especially synchronizing the voice with the beats, but I encouraged her to soldier on. She eventually became extremely engrossed in the music-making and entered in a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Enjoying the moment with intense and focused concentration while composing the song, she felt

the activity was intrinsically rewarding. I remember her calling me one day, sometime after midnight to share with me her achievement. Despite the 10-hour time difference, she did not hesitate to share the good news of completing the song. I woke up from my sleep to listen to the song and the following morning shared it with my housemates. The song was in many ways empowering Tori as well as her peers. The song presented powerful words, in a youthful voice and a melody that invoked deep feelings that would otherwise never have been attained.

One of the topics the students worked on was exploring their immediate environment, to learn, create from, and talk of it. Jay, a nine-year-old student in the group, decided to venture into the activities that his ancestors engaged in many decades ago. He was curious to learn how his/our forefathers trapped birds and other small animals for food. His main purpose was not to trap the birds for food, but to learn the process and the art of making a "Giterenge" (bird trapper) using small sticks. This was a project that was going to take time as well as expertise and therefore Jay's parents and I provided the theoretical framework. He was determined to carry on with the process even though he knew he could not do it on his own. He, therefore, used his own genius to invite his two friends who lived nearby to work with him on his project as seen in Figures 3 and 4.

This process involved identifying the right kind of wood and cutting useful branches from the trees without hurting the main tree. They also needed to look for binders/strings in the woods that could be used to join the pieces of wood together firmly to build the form. Working together, supporting each other, and learning from each other was of utmost importance. Although art is fundamental to the Kenyan citizen and is intertwined with the traditions that are part of the local people's way of life, the education system has deviated further from encouraging such practices. Kenya is surrounded by a rich cultural heritage, infused with art and artists who constantly celebrate its existence. This is what we should lay as a foundation for arts education, to take steps to preserve and pass on traditions, from one generation to the next. In this respect,

Figure 3. *Jay and friends at work making "Giterenge" (bird trapper)*
Photographs by Wanjiru N. With permission

the project was an eye-opener for me as an art educator.

Reflection

As the students continued making their own artistic creations, I realized how important it is to slow down, listen and reflect on things that appear ordinary. I was able to reflect on my own art teaching practice, something that we do not get to do often. Eisner (2008) reminds me that the arts develop dispositions and habits of mind that reveal to the individual a world they may not have noticed but is there to be seen if only one knew how to look.

Creative art-making is one good way of making good use of time for children and young adults. Through the creative arts activities, the out-of-school students were able to increase their circle of friends as they worked with each other, shared their experiences, and learned from each other hence improving their subjective well-being. The students confessed that they were no longer bored, lonely, and stressed out. While enquiring about her experience, Tori talked of how she felt elated by her achievement. "I did not know that I could sing, and that people would be

Figure 4. *Jay with his complete "Giterenge" (bird trapper)*
Photographs by Wanjiru N. With permission

happy with my song," she told me during one of our video calls through WhatsApp. She said
that she contemplates composing more songs in the future.

On the other hand, this is what Jay wrote in his reflection journal. "I am very happy with
this school. I have learned what I could not have learned in our regular school. I love it!"

I agree with (Richardson, 1988), that the arts ought to tap into the personal and emotional
world of children. Through this project, it is evident that the arts are a powerful means of
keeping the youth well engaged and staying "out of trouble." The arts helped them make good
use of their time. Moreover, the art-making activities provided a space for social connectedness
through the mobile App even though there was a COVID-19 lockdown.

We plan to hold an art exhibition showing all the works created by the students during the
intervention. Sharing the youth's experiences and artworks with the public and the curricu-
lum planners, I trust will be a good place to start tackling the many issues that children and
youth must deal with during COVID-19. The art expressions by children in this project acted
as an avenue to express that which was hidden and brought to the open. The expressions were

uniquely personal statements that had elements of both conscious and unconscious meaning in them (Malchiodi, 1998) and are representative of many different aspects of the children who created them. The students expressed moments of rapture, renewed creative drive, great social engagement, and discovery of locally available resources for art-making. As the project continues, I realize that the arts play a critical position in making obvious the voices, experiences, and stories of children and youth who are made invisible by dominant structures. I propose the inclusion of multidimensional methods of instruction in and out of school art practice.

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