

VISUAL ART, A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL OF PLURAL KNOWLEDGE.
BETWEEN CREATIVE PRODUCTIONS AND COMMUNITY TIES:
A THEORETICAL-PRACTICAL RESEARCH BETWEEN ITALY
AND KENYA

*ARTE VISUAL, UN INSTRUMENTO PEDAGÓGICO DE MÚLTIPLE
CONOCIMIENTO. ENTRE PRODUCCIONES CREATIVAS Y VÍNCULOS
COMUNITARIOS: UNA INVESTIGACIÓN TEÓRICO-PRÁCTICA
ENTRE ITALIA Y KENYA*

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: Educational places are changed into meaningful spaces where it is possible to unleash creativity and discover plural perspectives, when visual art becomes a pedagogical tool, which activates cooperative dynamics, co-building knowledge and relational skills. This hypothesis was verified as a part of the European project «TICASS» – Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art and Social Sciences (2017-2021) –, carried out between Europe and Africa. Starting from the reference framework, various interpretations of visual languages and ways of perception of individuals belonging to different socio-cultural contexts were investigated (Lester, 2010). This contribution introduces paths and outcomes of the research-action interventions, carried out by a psycho-pedagogical research team in kindergartens and

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primary schools since 2018, involving over 100 children aged 3 to 5 in Italy and over 300 children aged 8 to 12 in Kenya (Deluigi, 2019; Deluigi, Machova & Stara, 2021). **Methodology:** The collection of qualitative data took place through participatory observation, supervision of the workshops and the ongoing critical reflection of the research group. This analysis deals with the use of the image as a stimulus carefully researched and introduced through silent books (Zizioli, 2017) with a less structured input to leave room for a creative process. Thus, children become producers of images and imaginaries drawn from their very personal creativity (Malaguzzi, 1998). **Results/Conclusions:** The results of the workshops carried out can motivate educators, teachers and pedagogues to design interactive experiences among peers (including adults), through the use of creative languages as mediators of community learning processes in an intercultural and transcultural framework (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006).

KEYWORDS: intercultural education; transcultural creativity; community learning; visual languages; participation; action research.

RESUMEN: Los lugares educativos se transforman en espacios significativos en los que es posible dar rienda suelta a la creatividad y descubrir perspectivas plurales, cuando el arte visual se convierte en una herramienta pedagógica que activa dinámicas de cooperación, co-construcción de conocimientos y habilidades relacionales. Esta hipótesis se verificó en el marco del proyecto europeo «TICASS» –Tecnologías de la Imagen en la Comunicación, el Arte y las Ciencias Sociales (2017-2021)–, realizado entre Europa y África. Partiendo del marco de referencia, se investigaron diversas interpretaciones de los lenguajes visuales y formas de percepción de individuos pertenecientes a diferentes contextos socioculturales (Lester, 2010). Esta contribución presenta caminos y resultados de las intervenciones de investigación-acción, realizadas por un equipo de investigación psicopedagógica en jardines de infancia y escuelas primarias desde 2018, con la participación de más de 100 niños de 3 a 5 años en Italia y más de 300 niños de 8 a 12 años en Kenia (Deluigi, 2019; Deluigi, Machova y Stara, 2021). La recopilación de datos cualitativos se llevó a cabo mediante la observación participativa, la supervisión de los talleres y la reflexión crítica continua del grupo de investigación. Este análisis trata del uso de la imagen como estímulo cuidadosamente investigado e introducido a través de libros silenciosos (Zizioli, 2017) con una entrada menos estructurada para dejar espacio a un proceso creativo. Así, los niños se convierten en productores de imágenes e imaginarios extraídos de su propia creatividad personal (Malaguzzi, 1998). Los resultados de los talleres realizados pueden motivar a educadores, maestros y pedagogos a diseñar experiencias interactivas entre pares (incluyendo adultos), a través del uso de lenguajes creativos como mediadores de procesos de aprendizaje comunitario en un marco intercultural y transcultural (Cooper y Sjostrom, 2006).

PALABRAS CLAVE: educación intercultural; creatividad transcultural; aprendizaje comunitario; lenguajes visuales; participación; investigación-acción.

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM IMAGES TO IMAGINARIES

Formal learning contexts can become creative spaces where teachers, educators and mediators plan educational paths aimed at discovering and enhancing several expressions. All

participants become active protagonists of experiences to be jointly built, in search of ways of knowing and building multi-perspective knowledge, based on the interaction and reciprocity of bearers and custodians of identities and differences.

The complexity which characterizes social communities can be interpreted through the hybridization of fluid and open cultural elements and creolization processes, guaranteeing intercultural logics and unpublished transcultural contents open to dialogue (Baron & Cara, 2011).

Undertaking a pedagogical reflection, which is careful not to impose a single «version of the story» (Adichie, 2009), means freeing creative and divergent thinking in the design and management of research-actions aimed at exploring and experimenting participatory processes and implementation paths which are significant for the contexts (Leavy, 2017).

In this framework, visual art can become a pedagogical tool which activates cooperative dynamics, co-construction of knowledge and relational skills, encourage the exchange of text messages, techniques and methodologies, requiring the active participation of the subjects and the crisis of paradigms too often immobilized by the lack of «glances of otherness».

This hypothesis was verified through a theoretical-practical framework where the language of visual communication becomes a mediator of dialogue processes, generating spaces for co-creation of innovative and unexpected perspectives (Alter, 2010).

As part of the European project «TICASS» – Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art and Social Sciences (2017-2021) –, carried out between Europe and Africa, various interpretations of visual languages and ways of perception of individuals belonging to different socio-cultural contexts were examined (Lester, 2010).

The research is based on both similarities and differences of the partnership among Poland, Czech Republic, England, Italy and Kenya, which allows us to take into consideration different social, political, historical, climatic, and cultural conditions while searching for common cultural and human values (<https://ticass.eu/Main/Artykul/intro>). A specific section of the research is devoted to the development of actions aimed at nursery and primary schools in Italy and Kenya and this paper will introduce some of the results achieved.

Through the description of the interventions, the pedagogical principles and skills necessary to trace educational paths in intercultural contexts will be outlined, starting from the interpretations of images and the experimental discovery of colours. The elements explored in this paper will take into consideration the effects, which the creative workshops generated regarding the working methods of teachers, the organizational ways of pupils, the shared learning logics at school, the dynamics of interaction and socialization and trajectories of action research.

2. METHODOLOGIES AND STRATEGIES: A QUALITATIVE DATA RESEARCH USING VISUAL ART WITH A REFLECTIVE ATTITUDE

The second part of this paper describes design and methodology with which Ticass project was adapted to both kindergartens in Italy and primary schools in Kenya. The investigation introduces some educational strategies to experience visual languages within intercultural social contexts.

This pedagogical experience started at «Gianni Rodari» pre-primary school of Macerata, in Italy, during the school year 2017/2018. The target group was composed by 110 pupils (kids of 3-5 years divided into small homogeneous groups of maximum 8 kids). For the realization of this initiative, two professors from the University of Macerata (a pedagogist, prof. R. Deluigi and a psychologist, prof. M. Muzi) were involved as curators of the project and directors of story-telling activities. In this project, there were also four tutors – some students from the University of Macerata – as co-conductors of the activities, in charge of the qualitative observation. The same team was involved in the second Italian implementation – during the school year 2018/2019 – where 84 pre-school kids (aged 3-5 years) and 12 pre-school teachers were beneficiaries of the project. In the Kenyan experience, the staff was composed by one of the university professors (the pedagogist from the University of Macerata), three heads of the schools, three heads of the teachers and 11 teachers in three different schools, where 352 kids and teenagers took part in the various workshops.

Starting from the main goal – how visual language (in its various forms) can facilitate or hinder intercultural dialogue – the first Italian experience intended to stimulate children's imagination and creativity through images and story-telling. The first path of «Visual Ticass» – the Ticass project section aimed at childhood – considers children as both users and producers of images and stories based on silent books (Zizioli, 2017), but also on their personal experience. Since the second edition of Visual Ticass – in Kenyan primary schools – story-telling was used by students together with the exploration of the colours so as to achieve several objectives: exploring primary colours, shapes, sounds and the perspective of intercultural communication in a cooperative way; learning the possibility to create infinite chromatic nuances with primary colours; activating the kids' self-expression both as individuals and a group. The experimentation of the colours as the main tool for stimulating the imagination of the kids (Deluigi, 2021) was also implemented in the following Italian actions within spaces where children can work in small groups: the *mini-atelier*.

Collecting qualitative data for all the creative workshops through participatory observation, supervision of interventions and an ongoing critical reflection of the working group was fundamental for the evaluation of processes and results. During both the first and the second Italian experiences, the participatory observation was carried out by one or two tutors who followed the group dynamics during the narration and the *atelier*, when scheduled. In addition, the retrospective evaluation of every «Visual Ticass» section was also enhanced by audio-recording the laboratories: it was fundamental to collect children's feedback and their reactions during the story.

In the first «Visual Ticass» edition, the tutor's observations had to be noted through a multi-item evaluation grid to highlight participation and narrative dynamics, such as visual language as a narrative support for creative development; ways of interactions and participations; curiosity for the elements of the story. At the same time, the university professor specialized in Psychology noted the personal dynamics connected to children's behaviour, such as speaking turns, listening availability, interventions or acceptance of classmates' proposals.

Starting from the Kenyan experience, the evaluation instruments have become more connected to visual language. The project was indeed inspired by Arts Based Research (McNiff, 2008) and Photo Elicitation tools (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998): a pedagogical-photographical research carried out by both professors and tutors. During the *atelier*, the research group took photos of representative moments of the creative process, in order to examine pedagogical reflection starting from images. At the end of each reading and *atelier* cycle, the *équipe* collected photos and audio-recorded reflections. This qualitative research allowed teachers and students to focus on some aspects which were noted during the experience, trying not to be too invasive with children (Milani, 2017). Professors and tutors shared their plural and contextualized reflections. In this way, the research started from a common orientation, but it remained open to the input of the context. The photographical research allowed to highlight some useful aspects to plan and redesign educational paths and, at the same time, it allowed the research group to compare more languages and to share different meanings of educational actions.

Moreover, the *équipe's* reflection after the experience was enhanced by an attentive and reflective attitude. Indeed, it is important that the researcher monitors the process of epistemic action so as to analyse its actions through a critical reflection. Given that a researcher is never neutral, but always subjectively connoted, his/her thoughts are always influenced by experience. Thus, monitoring the life of a mind is an essential epistemic action to assess the reliability of the activated heuristic processes (Mortari, 2010). Therefore, being reflective researchers means becoming aware of the pre-existing mental structures and analysing their influences in the investigation process (Mortari, 2015).

Silent books were mediators of the activities because of the kids' capacity to embrace different interpretations of the story. Starting from this point, the research group observed an evolution in the role of the story during the laboratories. In the first workshop, the narration was the fundamental activity for young listeners, who were producers of images still strongly connected to the story. During the following workshops in Kenya and in Italy, the book became more and more residual. At the beginning the story represented a fundamental introduction in the *atelier* in order to explore primary colours and shapes. However, at a certain point, children took an individual and group distance from the silent books and tried to create new images coming from their imagination. Once the book became less important to enhance creativity and cooperative dynamics, it was necessary to redesign the workshop. From this moment on, the *atelier* turned into the fundamental «Visual Ticass» experience, where kids could spread their creative and imaginative power.

3. CO-PARTICIPATED NARRATION: FROM SILENT IMAGES TO FREE IMAGINATION

As we anticipated, in the first phase of the project, the image in silent books was the key to open a space for sharing and stimulating different readings among the listeners (Zizioli, 2017). The story took place from the participation of the children who offered multiple meanings and interpretations. We observed their image decoding on the basis of their respective knowledge, personal experiences and everyday contexts. Each idea was accepted without any evaluations; all the versions were possible narratives coming from different points of view. We used audio input and pages with few drawings («O segredo de Anton» Ole Konnecke) so that the children could freely use their creativity. The development of the story plot has become an increasingly unpredictable event and an inclusive action. It is crucial that the narrator accepts all voices so that nobody is excluded. Sewing together every proposal, even the most funniest, unexpected and ironical one, greatly reduces distractions and interruptions. Everyone feels part of the group-experience and does not need to insist with his/her single story, once it has been welcomed. In both workshops, co-narrating silent books was the main activity for young listeners. The sharing space developed into a participatory reading, while the artistic production of images remained an individual and personal time anchored to the story.

3.1. THE *ATELIER*, A COMMON SPACE BETWEEN NEW IMAGES AND DIVERGENT STORIES

In the first activity the sharing space was the narration and the abstract interpretation of the images. In the *atelier*, the meeting with other ideas became more material and physical with shared spaces and boundaries (Gandini, 2017). This time there was no narrator to lead the artistic process: nobody was tasked to stitch together various interpretations and opinions. In this phase of the project, the narration was more residual and mostly served to introduce the atelier. It is interesting to focus on the different reactions between Italian and Kenyan children in front of the blank sheet and the artistic experience.

In Kenya it was observed how pupils were bewildered by lack of precise directions and rules to be followed and in front of new artistic materials. Giving up the fear of getting dirty and indulging in free experimentation and personal interpretation without the rigorous teacher's guidance was a time-consuming process.

Firstly, the children used the colours carefully, mixing them slowly and respecting a certain order in the arrangement of the fingerprints on the sheets. Meeting after meeting, the children improved the confidence with the new setting. So the moderate use of colours during the first meeting has gradually changed, giving a greater freedom and space to the group creativity (Deluigi, 2021).

The experience in Italy was different. The kids of the kindergarten were quickly absorbed in the workshops. By sharing the white sheet, the relational dynamics immediately emerged. Some children painted occupying most of the sheet and «arguing» with their neighbours, others experimented on a corner and other ones directly painted their companions' hands, high-fiving

each other. In a short time the experience has become collective and those who were looking for their own space have been soon influenced by their companions' euphoria, fulfilling every single white space left. Every touch merged into a single abstract paint which continuously changed: from a track of a cars to a shower of meteorites and unexpected rainbows.

Although with different timings, in both countries, children tried more and more to experiment with colours unattached to the images proposed by the book, passing from a personalized «reproduction» to venture into discoveries of new shades for the mere pleasure of artistic gestures: from subjective expressiveness to the creativity of other peers, to the originality of collective production.

3.2. NEW NARRATIVE PLOTS: THE CREATIVE LIFE OF MATERIALS

In the last phase of the project the creative input was an unusual tool: potatoes in all styles, i.e. whole, cut and sliced ones. The children began to paint with a new style and the *atelier* became a sort of a «playground», where they can test footprints, movements, traces of colours. The children were not «inspired» by a specific story, but only by their imagination, due to the fact that the research group focused more on listening to children, as individuals and as members of the group.

Starting from the children's narratives collected by the research group during the art workshop, a new book of images was born. The research group chose some of the paintings of the ateliers and combined them to create a big book to be given back to the children. The paintings realized in Kenya were exhibited in Kenya and Italy. During the exhibition in Macerata (Italy), the young visitors could invent stories starting from the paintings made in Kenya. In this sense, the images became a contact space between different creativities, enhancing the dialogue among producers and readers.

4. CONCLUSIONS: LOOKING FOR CREATIVE TRAJECTORIES

The results of the workshops carried out can motivate educators, teachers and pedagogists to design experiences of interaction among peers through the use of creative languages as mediators of community learning processes in intercultural and transcultural perspectives (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). This concerns the recipients, children and teenagers, as well as researchers and teachers who can rediscover themselves together as creative subjects, becoming more aware of their ways of plan research and learning actions.

The use of plural languages amplified the chance to open multiple spaces for design and contextualized action, aimed at giving voice to the different meanings which emerged in cooperative dynamics. Story-telling and artistic *ateliers* became renewable and adaptable experiences, depending on the aims and questions of the research team. In fact, the dialogue between the parties led to the development of new paths, taking into consideration new variables of the context and developing closely related thoughtful and operational strategies.

The experiences carried out promoted intercultural communication as a paradigm regarding professionals, subjects and learning contexts in a spiral of reflection-action which generated new shared and implemented ideas. In this sense, direct observation supported an interpretative position open to changements and various creative solicitations, carrying out activities in the field, prolonged stays in educational places, planning and re-elaboration times. Listening to the subjects of the research-action and respecting their own time (following the modalities of participation and re-elaboration of experiences) opened up to new project ideas, in the logic of shared discovery and the promotion of further creative learning practices.

Individual and collective images and imaginaries assumed new shapes and dimensions along the different research trajectories, mostly opening up to the solicitations coming from several researchers, teachers and students. This is a result of the development of non-linear educational paths, which are able to be revised in progress in order to facilitate the cooperative expression and cross-cultural crossing of the visual language. The pedagogical discourse took on new shapes and colours thanks to the different trajectories it has interpreted over time, gradually creating and ensuring a greater space for the voices of the recipients. The opening to new languages during the creative experience generated spaces and times of mutual discovery, through interpretations and artistic productions made in interaction among peers and the development of reflective itineraries oriented by participatory methodologies and multiple exploration techniques.

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