

**Vaos Antonis,
Stellakis Nektarios, Apostolou Zoe**

University of Patras, Greece

„Meeting ourselves, meeting art, meeting language...“: A project for kindergarten

Introduction

During preschool age enormous changes in physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth take place. One of the most important challenges of this age is child's attempts to meet and communicate with persons who don't belong to his/her family. In order to communicate effectively a child has to develop a strong self-esteem as well as to confirm this esteem day to day in various communicative instances.

Children's spontaneous paintings and stories reveal their inner "dialogues" and efforts to reply the question „Who am I?“ In this paper an educational program, in which art and literacy activities are taken place, is presented.

The main purpose of this program was to encourage preschool aged children to study and compare a range of self-portraits of various artists and construct their own. We see artistic act as an expressive effort, through which invisible aspects of reality are revealed (Merleau-Ponty 1991, p. 43). We argue that this fundamental characteristic of any artistic act can be incorporated in an educational program applied in a preschool class. Moreover, children were invited to discuss about

artists' self-portrait, to analyze the worlds, the perspectives and the possible stories behind and beside the person, to find out the artists' purposes and techniques. After revealing the silent aspects of a self-portrait they were encouraged to examine their own personal world and story and construct – not just painting- their own self-portrait. Children's self-portraits formed the exhibition of „Class Gallery”. Parents, teachers, children of other classes and visitors were invited to visit, see, examine these self-portraits.

The issue about the meaning and the role of visual arts activities in early childhood

The design of every educational activity based on art must begin from a very profound question about the chance it will offer so that a particular aspect of the artistic phenomenon can rise and get connected to the various aspects of the reality. The involvement of preschoolers in the artistic process is one of the most undisputable and self-evident parts of the artistic education, especially during their early childhood. The questions that rise about the meaning, the role and the goals of this involvement specify an extremely complex field of research and act as feedback in a constantly open discussion. These questions are interwoven with the wider aims of artistic education, for which there is no consensus.

According to the approach that appears throughout this paper, visual arts education attempts to create the appropriate conditions, so that the children can have artistic experiences such that will allow them to get in touch with art and incorporate it with a substantial way in their private lives, getting access to this field of culture, by getting visual arts education. This aim does not change or degenerate according to age. On the contrary, we think that early childhood is an eminently privileged time for a first, yet essential contact with the artistic phenomenon.

However, the access to this field of culture does not get accomplished with the mere transmission of knowledge and information, nor does it get accomplished with the involvement in a mere experience, but through essential experiences that the children acquire by getting involved themselves in original artistic processes. The composition of an overview about the visual arts is interwoven with an ensemble of issues, questions, attitudes, theoretical and practical knowledge and presupposes getting familiar with the processes of creation and perception. In this framework visual arts education has two parts because it intervenes in two basic and integral directions when it comes to the people:

With the first part, the children get involved in original artistic processes and create visual forms, using certain means of expression. This way they realize the ways through which visual forms are created and the reason why they are created. They get aware of the fact that, through an act they are asked to perform, they are offered the chance to determine their attitude towards an experience, a thought, a sentiment, a situation while they can simultaneously express themselves and share their experience with other people.

With the second part of the aims of visual arts education the children are facilitated to comprehend that they are involved in a process in which other people have been involved, regardless of the fact that they might belong in different age groups, civilizations or eras and that they might express different experiences, attitudes, ideals or viewpoint of life. The children learn that there is a wide range of visual forms in their environment that have particular features and functions, that are connected with different approaches and aims. They also learn that a work of art can be judged and that different people might have different opinions about it (Chapman 1993, p. 17, 19).

These parts must be considered as completely related. As the children develop the ability to create visual forms, while their personal experience concerning the possibilities of means of expression

expands, it becomes easier for them to comprehend works of art and the visual forms. Reversing this we can say that the contact with the works of art offers the children new spurs and creates new motives and conditions. Thus their ability to express themselves and create new forms expands. Without the systematized and essential connection of these two aspects, there is the danger of visual arts activities that remain on a practical and superficial level. The involvement in the artistic act helps the children realize these issues intimately, realizing essential concepts of art and obtaining basic skills.

This approach has been the keystone to the design of the project that is being presented, in which there activities were combining the procedures of creation with the approach and the remarks on the visual forms. Through the combination of these two aspects, that correspond to the two parts of the aims of visual arts education as they have been analyzed above, we attempted to reveal the analogies that exist between the procedures in which children are involved and those in which the artists are involved.

Meeting art – meeting myself

The revelation of the expressive dimension of visual forms, as an attempt to express meanings, is a constant as well as interesting challenge for the teacher, and has also been the starting point for the design of the project that will be presented from now on. The artistic creation itself can be considered as a discussion that reflects the human ability to think, feel and create, as well as to share thoughts, feelings, experiences and ideas in various ways. The element that adds something special to every visual form is not the technique, but the ideas of the artist and the society in which it has been created (Danto 2003, p. 13; Gombrich 1998, p. 374).

Of course, it is impossible to give a definition which is fixed and acceptable considering the art phenomenon, as it reflects the many

and various ways people have stood against themselves and the world that surrounds them. Nonetheless, for the frame of the actions we present here, we have considered Merleau-Ponty's approach completely compatible and useful. According to Merleau-Ponty art is mainly an expressive activity, an attempt to give form to what would otherwise be trapped in each and every conscience (Merleau-Ponty 1991, p. 43). At the starting point of the visual arts action there is the conscious or subconscious attempt to utter meanings in a visual way (Read 1961, p. 18).

The expressive attempt, as an attempt to utter meanings, has been posed as the starting point of our design because we considered that it offers a powerful motive for the participation in the visual arts procedures and leads them to success. This procedure means that I can „dive” in myself, but also distance from myself, getting in touch with others, that I comprehend my experiences, but also the experiences of others, that I can get out of my narrow borders, by “certifying” my existence to others, rendering myself “present”.

The case of self-portrait painting has been considered the ultimate example of this procedure. The most interesting works of arts among this category are not a neutral depiction of the features of the illustrated person, but concentrate in various and different ways the ideas, the ideals and the attitudes of a personality and echoes the age in which the person lived. The contact with the works of artists that created self-portraits and the creation of self-portraits by the children themselves was considered as a chance for them to realize that art offers them an excellent chance to express themselves and present this expression to others.

The project

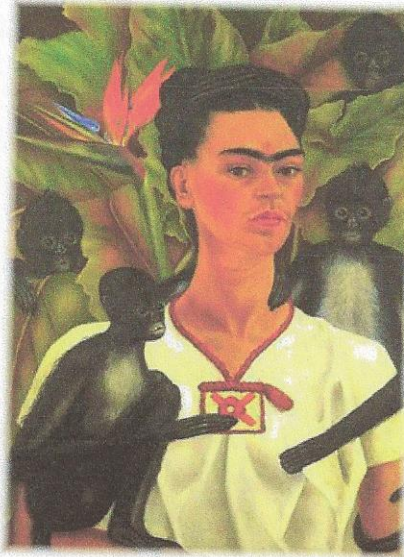
The educational program under consideration took place the spring of school year 2010–2011 in a public kindergarten in the area of Patras, Western Greece. It lasted two weeks and during its application the kindergarten teacher was assisted by the authors.

The program followed the three phases of a project (Helm, Katz 2001).

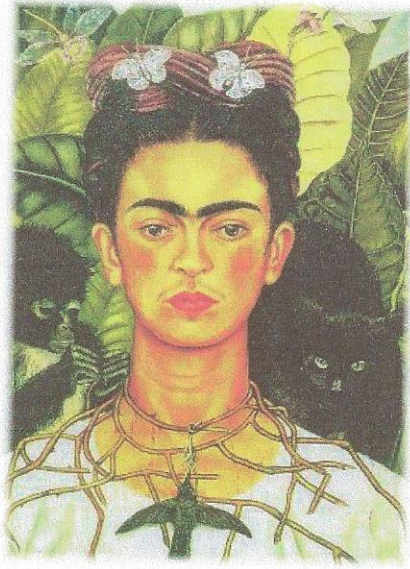
During the initial phase children studied and discussed self-portraits from various artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Andy Warhol, Frida Kalo, Kontoglou etc. Through their observations children tried to find out how these famous artists present their personalities, which aspects seem to be obvious and which could be guessed, which stories can be “read” in these artifacts. Children were encouraged to observe facial expressions, clothes and background details. Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits seemed to be the most narrative ones and thus children decided to study in more detail her life and work.

A particular element of her works is the juxtaposition of elements on the background that are connected with personal symbolisms and situations as well as the social and cultural frame in which she had lived and that defined her personality.

At this point we should make this clear. The works that had been used were not presented to the children as models they



should follow or avoid, but as a chance for them to realize the different ways the artists work, even though their subject is the same. This was the reason why artists from different eras and styles were selected.



At this direction, even though the preschoolers focus mainly on the subject of a work of art, special attention was given to the highlighting of the main structural features and the particular creating idiom of every artist. This way, discussions were planned and we asked the children to observe and comment on the general features as well as the individual details of every work of art, the elements that were notable and unusual, the impressions that were created,

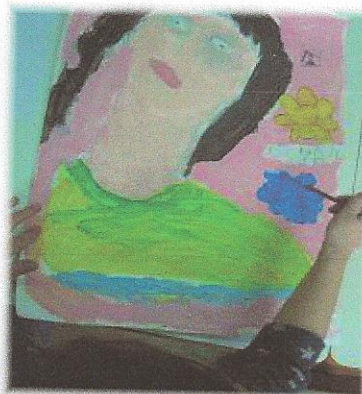
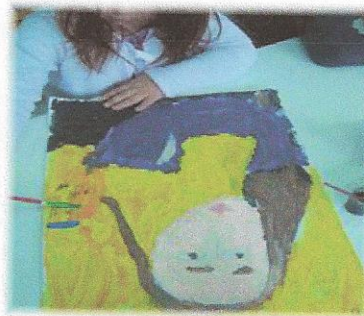
searching their own personal attitude. In this case we adopted Parson's model, according to whom the aesthetic value of an object is not its natural property, but it's the matter of the observer giving meaning to it (Efland 2007, p. 40; Parsons 2002, p. 26-27). A teacher's duty is not to "explain" a specific work of art, but to activate an interrogative and inquiring attitude against every artistic form.

During the second phase various activities took place. Firstly, children were invited to bring to school photos of their own from different periods of their lives. This gave them the chance to observe and discuss how they are changing from year to year. Given that these photos had taken by their parents children encouraged to find out which activities, periods, or instances seem to be of great important for their parents. By studying their photos they were given the chance

to form their own story and present it to their classmates. Secondly, children paint their self-portrait. The aim was to capture a certain time of their growth. After observing their face in a mirror and different facial expressions and gestures they paint a sketch and afterwards they added color and background details. After finishing their self-portrait children present their artwork to the class.

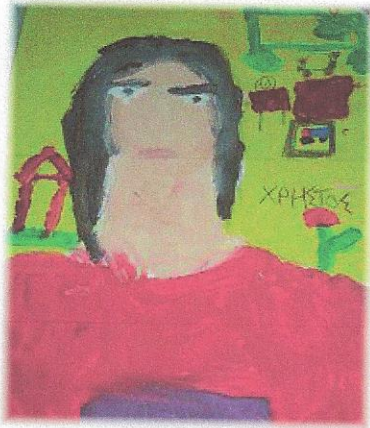
During this action they were offered a variety of materials (temperas, crayons and pencils) and they were encouraged to use them simultaneously. This encouragement for a mixed technique doesn't mean that we focused on the aesthetic quality of the final work of art.

On the contrary, the simultaneous use of different means, was considered to facilitate an open "route" whose visual arts results are not predictable from the very beginning (Ardouin 2000, p. 76; Gaillot 2002, p. 99-100). The determination of the goals in the artistic processes does not mean the predetermination of a specific visual work of art that should be proof of success. These restricting educational goals are a problem



for the visual arts activities. Their significance does not consist of the children's creations, but of the quality of the experience. The challenge is not having satisfactory performances, but also satisfying the children. Their satisfaction comes as their ability to create and comprehend the visual forms expands.

During the last phase the class was transformed to a Gallery. One of the walls in the class was emptied and children's self-portraits were exhibited. On one of the other walls various photos and concept



maps from various activities were presented, in order to be given the chance to the visitors to observe the whole process. Parents, teachers, children of other classes and visitors were invited to visit the exhibition and if they liked they were offered materials in order to paint their own self-portraits in case they were willing to participate.

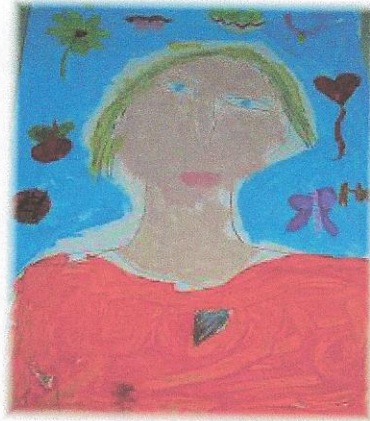
This was a frame in which everybody could participate was created. The children confirmed and gave feedback to the originality of their artistic effort, as they were involved in a united process of observation, analysis and evaluation of their personal experiences in regard to the experiences of other people.

The exhibition offered them a chance to show the processes in which they participated, the questions they posed the obstacles that they faced and overcame during this effort of theirs.

Considering the things that happened, they activated their thought, analyzing and comprehending their attempts. From this viewpoint, this has been an extension of the teaching process, but also a useful tool for the evaluation, as it shed light to all the aspects of the

educational progress and the variety of the educational results (Robinson 1999, p. 156).

This process did not have a competitive nature, with awards and distinctions of works of art. They were offered the chance to have a visible memory of all the things that happened, a representation of their course with valuable educational significance, a point of reference of a collective effort, but also the motive for further processing.



4. Meeting language

What we would like to comment in this short presentation is how literacy was incorporated in this visual art project. As we have argued before (Koustourakis, Stellakis 2011), Greek official Curriculum for the teaching of language in preschool education adopts the commonly accepted view that oral language development is the foundation for literacy and school success (e.g. Roskos, Tabors & Lenhart 2009). This view recognizes that literacy is connected with the processes of mastering control “*over the more elaborated forms of language*” (Halliday 1996, p. 340) which typically associated with written language (Halliday 1996). In other words, the cornerstone of teaching language in kindergarten is the engagement of children in decontextualized talk (e.g. Dickinson, McCabe 1991; Curenton, Lucas 2007), which refers to the language used to talk about past or future events or to transfer information about abstract objects, events and situations. As far as the structure of decontextualized language is concerned, it demands a more extended and precise vocabulary as well as complex

syntactic sentences. Thus, children's engagement in activities through which decontextualized language is facilitated empowers their ways to literacy.

In the following table a translation of the Greek Curriculum for Language Teaching in Kindergarten is presented. Its study reveals that elaborated or decontextualized language use is encouraged by understanding or producing various kinds of genres such as narratives, descriptions, explanations, argumentations (Knapp, Watkins 2005).

Oral communication (speech and listening): DEPPS for Compulsory Education, 2003	
Abilities which are aimed to be developed	Indicative cross thematic activities
to narrate / re-count	Children are given chances to recount their experiences taking into account the sequential order of events and to use words such as: firstly, later, after that, etc. Children are encouraged to narrate a fairy – tale. Children are exhorted to connect stories they hear with their life and their own experiences. Children are instigated to compose stories with / or without any kind of guidance.
to describe	Children are encouraged to observe and describe facts, objects and personal experiences (for example, they are encouraged to describe to other persons how they collect materials for collage and how they make it)
to explain and to construe	Children are instigated to give explanations for their choices and preferences and to justify their views and acts.
to participate in conversations and to use basic argumentation	Children are given chances to understand that in any conversation the participants are successively speakers and listeners and thus they speak in turn. Children are encouraged to develop a basic argumentation in order to justify their views and persuade their interlocutors. Children learn to hear their interlocutors, without interrupting them, and they learn to speak the relevant time having taken into account what has proceeded.

to improve and enrich their oral language	<p>Children are trained to use correctly words or phrases which are related to special circumstances, like wishes, greetings etc.</p> <p>Children are accustomed to learn by heart and recite poems, to learn counting-out games, riddles, tongue twisters, to recite small roles in the framework of performances in the class.</p> <p>Children are accustomed to produce correctly the initial and final phrase of fairy-tales, like „Once upon a time” and „and they lived happily ever after” etc.</p> <p>Children are trained to comprehend simple metaphors (to be able to discriminate the basic difference between literal and metaphorical phrases) by participating in word games.</p> <p>Children are trained to compose their speech, compounding simple sentences by using the appropriate compound words (and, for, but, because etc.)</p> <p>Children are encouraged to restate phrases or sentences, using words with relevant or opposite meaning.</p>
to acquire phonological awareness	Through songs, counting-out games and rimes children are getting aware of phonemic aspect of language and they are getting able to discriminate the phonemes as elements of words.

In the project under consideration children had remarkably many chances to use these genres in order to speak about themselves, present their stories, and analyze their views. The main challenge was that children should observe visual art and translate their feelings orally, express themselves using the symbolic tools of art and analyze these tools verbally by using language.

Since there is a lot of concern, at least in Greece, about coding and decoding skills teaching in kindergarten, we mention that children had the opportunity to use their own first name not only to sign their artifact but in various other instances. Even though (de)coding skills should not be a priority in kindergarten we think that art activities provide many chances to acquaint children with alphabetic principle.

5. Meeting art

What we would like also to point out in this paper is how literacy, art and some other fields of knowledge were incorporated in this visual art project. Greek official Curriculum for the teaching of language in preschool education adopts all these aims we have mentioned before. But also our official curriculum refers to many other aspects of children's efforts to capture knowledge. With the same activities the children have many opportunities to discover and 'build' various kinds of knowledge.

Human environment and interaction DEPPS for Compulsory Education, 2003	
Abilities which are aimed to be developed	Indicative cross thematic activities
to realize their uniqueness and to identify similarities and differences with others and to respect them	Children with appropriate activities (e.g. comparisons of features, painting, personal narratives, narratives, etc.) understand their uniqueness (e.g. their own characteristics, name, sex, age, etc.) but also similarities with other children (e.g., common interests, preferences, needs, weaknesses, desires, etc.).
to meet its immediate human environment	Children (with various activities) are encouraged to explore their immediate environment such as home, school, neighborhood, village and city and to recognize differences (e.g. ground floor house, apartment, number of classrooms, the occupations of the people of the neighborhood, similarities and differences of the village and town) (Environment Study, Language, Music)
develop an interest in historical events, problems and dilemmas people of different ages	Identify and comment historical material (e.g. photographs, paintings, statues, etc.) and understand that these are different representations of the past (Study Environment Visual Arts, Music).

Child and Visual art DEPPS for Compulsory Education, 2003	
Abilities which are aimed to be developed	Indicative cross thematic activities
experiment with various materials and colors, learn or invent various techniques and apply them to design and paint	Children are encouraged to use materials (e.g. different size brushes, markers, nontoxic paints, finger paints, crayons, charcoal, white and colored paper, paperboard cartons from magazines, etc.) to paint an individually or in teams. Encouraged to experiment (e.g. mixing paint, etc.) or to devise techniques (e.g. use of water paints and straws. Blow, for example, the straw color and create new combinations).
to meet and call various kinds of art, to meet works of famous painters	Children are given opportunities to recognize types of folk art (e.g. lace, ceramics, wood, etc.) and some characteristic works of art, Greek and other countries. Encouraged to observe, to describe and identify these issues and subjects (art, environmental studies).
encouraged to develop language, communication and use technology	Children are encouraged to develop their vocabulary (eg. names of colors, drawing, painting, etc.) to express their thoughts, preferences, their interest Artworks in many ways. Use technology (e.g. camera, E / H) safely and in a way that serves their purposes and needs (Visual Arts, Language, Study Environment, Mathematics).

Conclusion remarks

We tried to show how a simple visual art activity such as a self-portrait painting could be enriched in order to facilitate children's understanding of the artistic work as transformation of reality and meaning making process as well as how the use elaborated forms of language can be facilitated by participation in these artistic activities.

In future applications of this educational project we will try to enrich it by using plastic arts (clay, three – dimensions constructions) and photographic self-portrait. Moreover, new technologies provide a range of challenges and we think that they could be used in various ways in order to deepen children's understanding about themselves and expand their opportunities to talk and present their personalities to others.

There lies the biggest educational value of the meeting of children with the world of art. In the development of their ability to pose and share questions, discovering themselves and others and giving meaning to the reality around them. In this frame, the teaching of art must seek a model which doesn't transmit and reproduce certainties, but act as feedback in a constant and open discussion, that keeps in mind the flux, the relativity and the polysemy that accompany the artistic action.

In any case, we argue that children should be encouraged to tell their stories, to reveal their distinctive characteristics, to share who they are and who they want to become. Kindergarten is the ideal place for the development of this kind of dialogues through meaningful artistic and language activities. The voices of children should be heard, but firstly we, as educators, should give them opportunities to form their own voices.

Literature

- Ardouin I. (2000) (1997), *Art Education in School*, Translation by M. Karra, Athens, Nefeli.
- Chapman L. (1993) (1978), *Approaches to Art in Education*, Athens, Nefeli.
- Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework and Curricula (CTCFCE) (2003), Ministerial
- Decision 21072b/G2/ Official Gazette issue B, nr 303/13-03-0, Iss. B, nr 304/13-03-03 (in Greek).
- Curenton S., Lucas T. (2007), *Assessing Young Children's Oral Narrative Skills: The Story Pyramid Framework*, [in:] K. L. Pence (Ed), *Assessment in Emergent Literacy*, San Diego, CA: Plural Pub, p. 377-432.
- Danto A. C. (2003), *The Abuse of Beauty, Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, The Paul Carus Lectures 21, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle.
- Dickinson D. K., McCabe A. (1991), *The acquisition and development of language: A social interactionist account of language and literacy development*. [in:] J. F. Kavanagh (Ed.), *The language continuum from infancy to literacy*, Parkton, MD: York Press, p. 1-40.
- Efland A. D. (2007), *Arts Education, the Aesthetic and Cultural Studies*, [in:] L. Bresler (Επιμ.), *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, New York, NY: Springer, p. 39-44.
- Gaillot B.-A. (2002), *Plastic Arts. Elements of a critical teaching (Bernard-André Gaillot, Arts plastiques, Eléments d'une didactique critique*, Paris: PUF, 1997, Athens: Nefeli.
- Gombrich E. H. (1998), *The Story of Art*, Αθήνα, Μ.Ι.Ε.Τ..
- Halliday M.A.K. (1996), 'Literacy and linguistics: a functional perspective', [in:] R. Hasan and G. Williams (Eds.), *Literacy in Society*, London: Longman, p. 339-376.
- Helm J. H., Katz, L. G. (2001), *Young investigators: The project approach in the early years*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Knapp P., Watkins, M. (2005), *Genre, Text, Grammar: Technologies for Teaching and Assessing Writing*, Sydney: UNSW Press.

- Koustourakis G., Stellakis N. (2011), *A sociological approach on teaching decontextualized language in Greek kindergarten: the Curriculum adaptations*, [in:] N. Stellakis, M. Eystathiadou (Eds), *Perspectives on Creativity and Learning in Early Childhood*, European Conference of OMEP 2011. Nicosia, Cyprus, 6-8/5/201,179-185. Nicosia: Cyprus National Committee of OMEP.
- Merleau-Ponty M. (1991), (1948, 1964), *Cezanne's doubt. The Eye and the Mind*, Translation A. Mouriki, Athens: Nefeli.
- Parsons M. (2002), *Aesthetic experience and the construction of meanings*, "The Journal of Aesthetic Education", No. 36 (2), 24-37.
- Read H. (1961), *Education through art*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Robinson K. (1999), *The arts in schools: Principles, practice and provision*, Athens: Kastaniotis. (Original: K. Robinson, *The arts in schools: Principles, practice and provision*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation).
- Roskos, K., Tabors P., Lenhart L. (2009), *Oral Language and Early Literacy in Pre-school*, Newark, DE: International Reading Association.