Interconnections between contemporary visual arts and drama in the Cyprus educational context

Nicoleta Avgousti

Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture

Andriani Chrysostomou

Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture

Dr Iacovos Psaltis

Middlesex University Institute for Work Based Learning

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the interconnections between contemporary visual arts and drama in education, and their role in providing a creative space where children may be actively involved and function as researchers, creators and viewers who negotiate ideas and meanings. The paper describes and reflects on a unit of lessons that were designed and delivered in two diverse primary school settings in Cyprus, involving children of six (grade A) and seven years old (grade B). A contemporary video art work and a children's story set off children to search for meanings, investigate identities, look into the artistic process, find alternative ways of representing ideas, connect with their reality, their body and self, and become viewers of their peers' stories and worlds. A case study in two primary school classes, helped to concentrate on one aspect of the problem - the relationship of drama and visual arts with identity development - and simultaneously offered the chance to probe deeply and analyse it intensively. Participant observation was chosen as the main means of collecting data and giving answers to relationships. Two educators, designed and delivered the lessons and also observed and collected the data. The findings indicate that drama and contemporary visual arts as part of a Curriculum could encourage children to construct their own meanings rather than accept meanings that were built by others through texts and images. This process is important: a) in the development of their perceptions and "personal voices", which can constitute the basis for the identification process of children in our contemporary

multimodal world , b) in building their identities, or even temporarily changing identities and c) in getting involved in imaginative situations that promote creativity.

Introduction

Diverse art genres such as sculpture, video art, installation, drama and music rapidly approach one another as they break up limitations and divisions of the past, utilise common conventions, coexist in multimodal works, and enter various aspects of everyday visual culture. Contemporary art forms in today's multisensory scenery appear engaging, interactive, communicative and reflexive, investigating possible selves, identities, interaction with others and the environment, human body, and real life in general. The interconnection of various contemporary art forms are increasingly found in educational processes and settings as well; in class lessons, performances, installations, presentations and exhibitions a range of art forms are utilized such as drawing, photography, video, dance, sonic arts, drama, costume design, setting design. Teaching and learning through arts are becoming multimodal as they tend to simulate everyday life, connect school life to real- world issues and engage children in meaningful learning processes and in-depth experiences.

Drama and visual arts education share a common principle; to provide a creative space where children may be actively involved and function as researchers, creators and viewers who negotiate ideas and meanings. Thus, an educational system which attempts to foster creativity, critical thinking, emotional involvement, and communication skills has an advantage when it interrelates these two art disciplines.

The need to create a new Curriculum for the Schools of the Republic of Cyprus (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010) opened the way for Drama and Theatre Education to be introduced, seeking to provide alternative ways of learning and expression. Drama Education plays a significant role in the whole education of children, as it aspires to promote alternative learning processes that will enable them to learn in and through Drama. It becomes a conduit which facilitates a flow of imagination between process and product (Cremin, Goouch, Blakemore, Goff, & Macdonald, 2006). Children come to live and experience a situation through drama as they think, feel, react and act. As a result, they may bring alive even those topics, incidents and predicaments which are difficult to understand.

The new Visual Arts Curriculum as part of the Curriculum for the Schools of the Republic of Cyprus (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010) also introduces contemporary visual arts into education, enabling children of all ages to actively engage with current issues, in dialogue and debate about their experiences of the real out-of-school world (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007; Krug, 2002) and link contemporary arts with aspects of their personal and cultural identity (e.g. family, community and nationality). Contemporary visual arts encourage visual and critical thinking, and can have a major contribution in educating young minds and souls in our increasingly

multimodal lives (Art21, 2007). The newly introduced Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010) encourages the focus of teaching and learning on local as well as international artists and recognises that contemporary artists may serve as role models who can inspire about the birth, development and realisation of ideas in response to their experiences of today's world.

Case study: Drama and Visual Arts

Bruner (1986) recognised that we know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations. This reinforced Guss' view (2005) that through dramatic play and visual arts children extend and trouble their existing identities and construct new temporary identities. As "[o]ur identities are made from the building up of those parts of our lives which are strong and positive, from all the things we feel we belong to and belong to us" (Dewdney & Michels, 1988, p. 75), the need for a creative space where children have the chance to investigate identities and discover the realities or possibilities of life and their everyday experiences is significant in today's school education.

This paper attempts to explore the interconnections between contemporary visual arts and drama in education and their role in providing the aforementioned creative space. The paper describes a unit of lessons that were designed and delivered in two diverse school settings in Cyprus. A contemporary video art work and a children's story set off children to search for meanings, look into the artistic process, find alternative ways of representing ideas, connect with their reality, their body and self, and become viewers of their peers' stories and worlds of possibilities.

The educational context

The research was conducted in two socially and environmentally diverse educational settings. The school where the unit of lessons was initiated was a small institution of ninety-two (92) children at a rural environment, at a village not far from the capital of Cyprus, Nicosia (referred as the first educational setting later on). The village comprises the residences, the school, the church, and the traditional coffee shop (the 'kafenio'), which is a predominantly male environment where men meet to have coffee and play cards. Because of a nearby shopping and entertainment area, the village has been kept only as a residence area. People still have a close relationship with their land, as their ancestors' main occupation was agriculture.

The second educational setting was an urban school situated in the biggest suburb of Nicosia, Strovolos, and numbered two hundred and seventy-three (273) students. The school building is surrounded by tall apartment blocks, as well as luxury residences.

Research Approach

In order to examine the interconnections between contemporary visual arts and drama and their impact on children's identity, it was evident that qualitative research was the most appropriate method of research to be applied. Qualitative research uncovers perceptions, feelings, attitudes that relevant individuals have about an issue, and as Baskas (2011) states, it is characterised by a continuous dialectical exchange between the researcher and the data throughout the course of action.

Within this research paradigm, the case study approach was adopted in the form of the observations of two elementary school classes throughout the implementation of a unit of lessons. Stake (1995) defines case studies as "...the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances..." (p.xi) whereas Merriam (1988) states that a case study approaches a problem of practice from a holistic perspective. Additionally, it allows detailed in-depth study and produces credible and accurate descriptions of participants' actions (Gray & Malins, 2004).

A particular case study design was employed in this project in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved. This also helped to concentrate on one aspect of the problem - the relationship of drama and visual arts with identity development - and simultaneously offered the chance to probe deeply and analyse it intensively. Cohen and Manion (1994, p.107) state that this research method "constitutes the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider populations to which that unit belongs".

Participant observation was chosen as the main means of collecting data and giving answers to the relationship of Drama and Visual Arts in regards to the development of identity. After all, at the heart of every case study lies a method of observation (Cohen and Manion, 1994). The two educators that designed and delivered the lessons and also observed and collected data were the art teacher of the school at the first educational setting, and a teacher of the school at the second educational setting. The two educators were involved in every activity that took place in the classroom. Hence, it was really difficult to stand aside and not participate. Bernard (1994, cited in Kawulich, 2005) states that the researcher at first should blend into the community so that the participants will act in a natural way but then one should "remove oneself from the setting to immerse into the data to understand what is going on and be able to write about it" (p.139).

Researchers provide several advantages of using participant observation over other methods of data collection. Participant observation, according to De Munk and Sobo (cited in Kawulich, 2005), affords access to the "backstage culture" (p.43). Hence, it gave the observers the opportunity to participate in unscheduled events, to react to them and follow new leads. It also enabled the researchers to redefine the existent research questions and develop new ones.

Participant observation is a rich source of highly detailed information about all aspects of group behaviour, since the observer can collect different types of data. Therefore, participant observation gave the two educators the opportunity to check for nonverbal expressions of feelings, interactions happening among children and observe events that

participants were unable to share. Therefore, this technique offered the possibility of utilising the teacher-student intimate relationship to discern ongoing behaviour as it occurred, and make appropriate notes on its salient features. The observers had the opportunity to see things first-hand rather than relying upon other people's opinions, and be able to record behaviour as it happened.

The unit of lessons

A unit of fourteen lessons was developed and implemented during a two and a half-month period in the two educational settings. The unit involved the cooperation of the two educators and their two classes with students of six (grade A) and seven years old (grade B) respectively. Issues involving human values, the living environment, building relationships and their importance in forming identities were investigated in the first educational setting through a contemporary children's story. The issues were later expressed through visual artistic processes, and presented through art works to the second educational setting for further exploitation through drama. The project concluded with the physical meeting of the children of both schools and their common work on the investigated issues through presentations, recalling of events, an exhibition, games and exploration of the environment.

The procedure at the first educational setting

The contemporary works that were chosen to be part of the programme at the first educational setting were a video artwork and a children's story. The video artwork "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", by the Cypriot artist Konstantia Sofokleous (2005) was selected for its popular theme among children and the simplicity of imagery the artist used which resembled children's drawings. The artist's choice to avoid using the story's protagonist Alice except as a symbol at the end, drawn in white chalk on a blackboard (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005), was additionally considered as a hybrid postmodern strategy "of the visual and the conceptual" (Gude, 2004, p.8) that could lead children to a creative conceptual play with their own artmaking. The images of the video presented elements of the story which appeared through symbols. Such symbols were an orange dot for the orange marmalade. The artist invited viewers to create their own story, but also to identify the story as if they were familiar with it (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005). These aspects also seemed promising to help children explore "how one's sense of self is constructed within complex family, social, and media experiences" (Gude, 2007, p.8), and to help them assemble visual stories between the self and the unknown. Sofokleous (2005) is well known among the visual arts happenings of the country since it represented Cyprus in the Venice Biennial exhibition in 2005.

The unit of lessons was initiated with the screening of the video artwork. The video has a duration of only thirty-two (32) seconds in a fast pace that is quite difficult for children to capture, so multiple screenings were considered vital for its study. As video

challenges our accepted mode of viewing and refuses to grant the audience a passive role, children were helped to investigate the strategies that the video work suggests with video-related activities such as sketching isolated symbols, writing key words, constructing imaginative stories, listening to the reading of the original story and sketching scenes, and exchanging sketchbooks with their peers for reviewing.

Video constitutes one aspect of the broad technology spectrum which has a history as aesthetic means in artists' work for almost ten decades (Elwes, 2005; Martin, 2006; Spielmann, 2010). However it was not until recently that digital video technology became accessible and easy to use so as to develop into an important artistic practice. Because of this latest immediacy of digital video technology, video has entered students' everyday reality both as a form of viewing and as a tool for making. Part of this programme was led by the curiosity about children's reaction and interest to the contemporary video art work that was presented, the process of video making, and children's involvement in conceptual investigation and construction of one's sense of self through a story. Children were involved with enthusiasm in all of the above, and wondered how they could tell another story through their own video or artworks.

Following this, children listened to the reading of the Greek children's story "The tailor of words" by Antonis Papatheodoulou (2012). It was chosen because of its original textual and visual approach to issues of everyday relationships, human behaviour and changes in life that eventually construct one's identity. A first reading of the story, either by a child or an adult, generates mental images and ideas for creating artworks.

After they listened to the story, children performed selected freeze frames that simultaneously enacted as a performance art work. They went on to sketch images that corresponded to words from the story: sun, scurf, fireplace, summer, flame, radiator, ice-cream, swimsuit, swimming pool and hug were a few words that denoted warm and cool words. These words represented the state where the story characters showed friendship and love among them at times when they lived in a small village-like town. A second group, the cold words, was identified as words that showed alienation and sadness, the state the characters got into after their small village-like town was transformed into a busy city. Some of the cold words were ice-cube, wind, snow, crystal. The new behaviour of the characters, described indirectly by the cold words, eventually formed their new altered identities when they had to adapt to the change of their everyday environments.

Experimentation with various materials that connected the isolated story words with three dimensional art forms followed. Children experimented with pieces of wood, found plastic containers, different kinds of paper, glue and paint (Figure 1).They were encouraged to test materials and containers that they found in the art room. They tried to build forms that would represent the words, the way they identified with them, and simultaneously the story characters' transformed identities (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Experimentation with various plastic containers and pieces of wood (segment from the visual arts lessons).

Figure 2: Art creation. Attaching the pieces together (segment from the visual arts lessons).

They were also encouraged to search and find their own meanings in their artworks through building imaginative scenarios, connecting situations with memories, or just being playful with their selected word. Immersing in experimentation was a vital part of the artistic process.

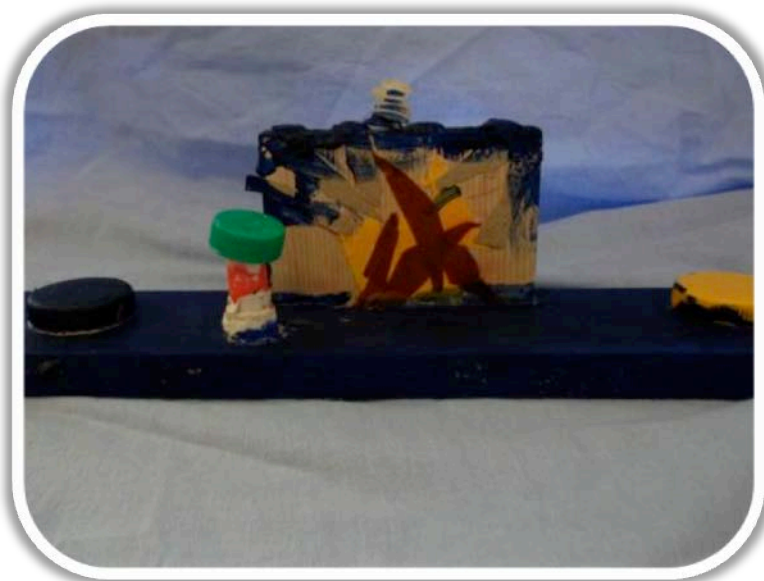Figure 3: Student's artwork entitled: *Ice-cream* (segment from the visual arts lessons).

Figure 4: Student's artwork entitled: *A warm fireplace* (segment from the visual arts lessons).

Various activities followed such as giving titles to their works, photographing them, and deciding what they could have changed on them if they had the chance. Some titles they made up for their artworks included *a relaxing beach, the ice cream* (Figure 3)*, the empty pool, snow*, and *a warm fireplace* (Figure 4).

When the teacher announced that children would temporarily depart from their artworks so they could be transferred to children at a city school for new lessons there, they were surprised and puzzled. They expressed their emotions and confusion through writing spontaneous notes, and waited to see what would happen next.

The lessons continued in the absence of the artworks. The digital photographs of the finished works were printed out and placed on the table in an imaginative timeline. This activity led to experimentation with the sequence of their images, and formed the beginning of their video creation (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Video-related activity: Building an imaginative timeline (segment from the visual arts lessons).

The same photographs were synthesised in the Windows Movie Maker software by the teacher, with the whole process projected so children could have discussions and contribute to video editing decisions such as slowing down or speeding up the image flow. Through the projection they were able to review their work-in-progress, and soon they decided to add new introductory scenes to their video using the technique of stop motion animation. The technique involved setting up and photographing new scenes using found containers, importing the photographs on the software and setting up the desired display time. Finally they viewed their finished video art work, and went on to participate in reflection activities such as interviewing the "artist" and placing the photograph of their work in a new environment like a cityscape (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Reflection activity: Placing the work in a new context (segment from the visual arts lessons).

The procedure at the second educational setting

The three dimensional works were packed and transferred to the urban school. Four drama workshops were designed and implemented there at a class of first graders ($\bar{x}$ = six years old). In each workshop there were warm-up drama games, team building activities and closing games. After every vital activity there was a whole group discussion. Two main drama conventions were used, tableaux vivant and improvisations. The first technique provides one of the most flexible methods of working in drama and marries the art forms of the stage with those of painting or photography. Moreover, with tableaux vivant or "living pictures", children were asked to tell a story through a series of prepared still images and then brought it to life through improvisation. Improvisation is defined as an unexpected sequence of activities where participants react impulsively to what others are doing or saying. However, it requires a balance between spontaneity and controlled inspiration not to lead to chaos (Wee, 2009).

Workshop 1: *The Mystery Box*

The first workshop aimed to introduce children to icebreaking and team building drama games. After a discussion, a common work code was established which would enable them to cooperate in a safe and agreeable environment. The teacher showed them *the mystery box*, a box that contained the three dimensional artworks of the children from the first educational setting. Children tried to guess the box's content (Figure 7) and then observed the artworks in-roles as in an art exhibition. They went on to write down their own titles for each of the artworks. Some titles included *the kid's bedroom with toys, a beautiful magical flower, a ship with lifeguards, the super fan, the shadow theatre.*

Eventually they set up an exhibition in a corner of the classroom. This gave the children the opportunity to observe the artworks further.

Figure 7: Guessing the content of the mystery box (segment from the drama lessons).

Workshop 2: The sculptors

During this workshop children explored the hidden stories behind the artworks. They worked in groups where one student took the role of the sculptor and the rest of them were the clay. They went on to build a tableaux vivant telling the story to the class by using their body postures (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Tableaux vivant or living pictures (segment from the drama lessons).

Following this activity, children enhanced their living pictures with movement and verbal language, and eventually presented their work to the rest of the class. At the end of every presentation there was a debriefing session, where children expressed their opinions and suggestions for developing the scenes.

Workshop 3: One, Two, Three, Action!

The third workshop dealt with the concepts revealed and explored in the previous workshops. Children worked in small groups and presented freeze frames about a combination of three artworks. Then, they continued with improvisation as their peers made suggestions for further improvement and development. This was a great way to help children to deepen their understanding and to develop empathy (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Improvisation using the three dimensional artworks (segment from the drama lessons).

Workshop 4: Once upon a time

The fourth workshop aimed to further explore children's stories around the artworks. They continued to work on the story from the previous workshop, having in mind their peers' suggestions on how to improve their story's plot. Afterwards, the essential elements of a story were discussed and they proceeded in writing tasks based on their improvisations.

The meeting

A few days later the mystery box was packed again with the artworks. Children and artworks travelled to the rural school for a special meeting of both classes that brought together the creators and the receivers, and solved the "mystery" behind the works. After some introductory and ice breaking activities (Figure 10) children from both schools cooperated to set up an exhibition where they displayed the artworks and the titles given to the works by both classes (Figure 11).

Figure 10: The meeting: Ice-breaking activities (segment from the meeting of the two classes).

Figure 11: The meeting: Setting up the exhibition (segment from the meeting of the two classes).

The *relaxing beach suddenly* became *the kid's bedroom with toys* (Figure 12). The *ice cream* was transformed into *a beautiful magical flower.* The *empty pool* turned out

to be *a ship with lifeguards* (Figure 13). *Snow* was converted *into the super fan,* and *the warm fireplace* eventually resembled *the shadow theatre!*

Figure 12: Titles given to the work by two children from the two different schools. The *relaxing beach* or *the kid's bedroom with toys* (segment from the exhibition).

Figure 13: Titles given to the work by two children from the two different schools. The empty pool or a ship with lifeguards (segment from the exhibition).

Children of both schools played guessing games, watched filmed segments of activities that took place at both schools, as well as the video art work created by the children of the first educational setting. Later they shared a walk in the village and identified elements that constitute the rural environment (Figure 14).

Figure 14: A walk in the village: Identification of rural elements (segment from the meeting of the two classes).

Conclusion

The unit of lessons was built around and offered children experiences and stimuli for investigation, experimentation, interaction with others, the surrounding environment and the human body, that led to deconstruction of the known and reconstruction of the novel.

Children used their life experiences, knowledge and memories to give to the three-dimensional art works titles and place them in a new meaningful context. For example *the warm fireplace,* a familiar part of a traditional house in the first educational setting was transformed to *a shadow theatre*, since the children of the urban school watched a performance of a shadow theatre earlier on and were really impressed by it.

Furthermore, children at the second educational setting constructed new written stories based on the improvisations, the freeze frames and the three-dimensional art works. They proceeded with their writings with enthusiasm and a high level of engagement. Ideas were already set. They wrote about events which stood strongly in their mind as they were created by them. At the same time some of them expanded their imagination and changed their story. Each student had a diverse writing style and offered to the audience a different creative solution for the same artwork. *Shadow theatre* generated two different but interesting stories; a short play and a story about a special Christmas

present. Finally, children were eager to share their work with the children from the urban school and listen to others' writings.

Children felt safe working in environments that welcomed their home cultures, backgrounds, heritages and language. They had the sense of possibility, transformation and change. Thus, they were able to start realising and forming their social and personal identities through drama and visual arts, by embracing difference in each and every child.

The whole procedure enabled children to think innovatively, meet challenges and find imaginative solutions to problems. Unexpected outcomes were possible, since the drama and visual arts activities were open-ended and allowed for multiple ideas and answers. Through experimentation, play, critical thinking, and teachers' guidance at crucial points, children imitated artists' creative procedures and were helped to realise that artists may not be aware of their final results before they begin working. This is an important aspect of a contemporary visual arts education curriculum that focuses in promoting possibilities, diversity of choices and creative thinking in children's lives (Gude, 2007).

Children were encouraged to explore and discover new meanings about themselves and others. There was an ongoing process where critical dialogue, investigation and play were dominant and children were able to express their views in a sharing and loving environment. Moreover, they were given the feeling that they have an important contribution to make not only in the classroom environment but in real life situations as well. As they had the opportunities to feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals, they simultaneously had the chance to develop strong self-identities.

The three-dimensional art works and video art narrated personal stories or formed new ones. The art works changed forms, meanings and interpretations throughout the consequent lesson as children added or removed materials and colours, investigated ideas and concepts, interacted with peers. The video art work was created with the photographs of their three-dimensional works in their chosen sequence so as a new story was generated. References to the original children's book by Papatheodoulou (2012) were evident, but the imagery was entirely new and quite abstract, allowing for the story to be retold, as Alice was retold in Sofokleous'(2005) video art .

Through improvisation children hopefully cultivated sensitivity, awareness and freedom, all essential elements for the creation of a sense of self. As identity is composed of elements such as origin, family, environment, religion, culture, but also dreams, wishes and the fantasy world (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) the exploitation of these through imagery creation, deconstruction, reconstruction, improvisation and storytelling were possible.

The thin lines between visual arts and drama were manipulated through the interdisciplinary character of strategies or conventions employed such as freeze frames and the sculptors. Children were allowed to take the roles of producers, writers, actors, directors, and take important decisions about work and self presentation. They showed

an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and were willing to share their skills and knowledge with others. During the phases of improvisation and video art production children had the time to negotiate with their peers which role they wanted to have. It is worth noticing that weak or shy children took the least demanding roles, while strong and confident ones took the main roles. However, weak children were not made to feel neglected or left behind because their part was necessary for the interaction to take place, both during improvisation and video art production. Surprisingly, by the end of the activities, one could not easily distinguish the shy or the weak children because everyone was actively involved and contributed in the group work.

Reflecting the notion of Holland's (2000) double sideness – the social/public side identities and the personal/intimate side - children developed a sense of themselves within the collective body of the two schools, by organising segments of their lives (e.g. the meeting, the acquaintances, the play, the set-up of the art exhibition, the walk at the village) and relationships in order to act in the name of their concern about, coming to terms with the challenges of the new school, the new environment, the new children and the new tasks. Hence, the achievement of consistency, confidence and certainty, in children's sense of themselves in the world.

Despite the fact that Drama "has its own agenda located within its artistic and cultural practices" (Winston & Tandy 2001, p.103), the truth remains that it is a social art form. Hence, there is a dual relationship between drama and social skills such as working constructively in a group, listening and respecting others and developing empathy, the ability to recognise and react to other peoples' emotions, "which are being prerequisite for drama as well as being exercised in drama" (Winston & Tandy 2001, p.103). The social aspect of drama is also stressed in the new Cyprus Curriculum, through which children understand their personal and cultural identity.

Through the visual arts and drama workshops the appropriate environment was created for social skills to be enhanced. The use of a variety of activities like story reading, circle time, role play and games helped in promoting listening skills, turn taking and understanding and respecting other's points of view. Children developed a positive sense of who they were and that they were valued and respected as part of the group. All children were deeply engaged in the visual arts, drama and writing activities, felt free and safe to experiment, expressed their opinions, created and formed their personal and social identity stand point. Drama helped them develop their social skills naturally in a social collaborative learning environment. Indeed, drama had a positive impact on their whole school life, helping them to strengthen their inner voice and construct meanings and at the same time reinforce their ability to accept others, really listen to each other, respect and empathise with others.

This is where Holland's (2000) concept of identity as a "higher order" organisation is resounded. In this higher order children had to sort out their thoughts and feelings with respect to who they were, how they wished to behave and how they evaluated their own behaviour, with a view to organising, coordinating and controlling their collective life

and at the same time organising, coordinating and attempting to control their own daily life and intimate experiences.

The value of Drama as an educational tool, according to Doughill (1991), consists of fostering the social, intellectual and linguistic development of the child. For example, Eccles (1989, p.3) claims that

> *"[d]rama provides an infinite variety of situations which will require specific language uses-to inform, to instruct, to negotiate and mediate, to reason and logically persuade, to report-and the talk (and writing will not be in isolation but embedded in the situation, and subject to modification imposed by working in a group."*

Therefore, drama is a unique teaching tool, vital for the development of language. After the role-plays, the freeze frames or the improvisations most of the pupils proceeded with their writings with enthusiasm and a high level of engagement. Ideas were already set. They wrote about an event which stood out strongly in their mind as it was created by them. At the same time some of them expanded their imagination and changed the story. Drama does inspire children with ideas which they are willing to share with writings. Their active engagement in drama motivated and excited them, and led to the creation of the specific outcomes. Children need 'pretend' play not as a treat but as a right. We need to think carefully as to how good quality pretend play activities can be introduced into the classroom. We are required to meet the needs of all our children. When working with the young ones, we must be observant and mindful of careful intervention so that children can make sense of their different worlds in a secure and safe environment.

Arts can encourage children to construct their own meanings rather than accept meanings that were built by others through texts and images. This process is important in building their identities, or even temporarily changing identities and getting involved in imaginative situations that promote their creativity. The importance of leading children to construct their own meanings in the early years is tremendous because it involves the development of their perceptions and "personal voices", which can constitute the basis for the identification process of children in our contemporary multimodal world. By embracing difference, by exploring their own attitudes in relation to equality and diversity, children develop the insights, self-awareness and skills that are needed to help them develop a strong sense of identity and belonging (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

According to Holland (2000), feelings with respect to who one is, how one wishes to behave and how one evaluates one's own behavior may be viewed as mediating devices, which can serve as important links between social and personal identities operating in two directions, resulting in conceiving social action as making personal activity public, and personal life as making social practice intimate. Moreover, Holland (2000) adds that after early adulthood, barring severely traumatic conditions, one's identity is expected to remain essentially the same, but any one person is likely to form a number of personal identities in relation to academia: to family life; to political life; to the world of romance and attractiveness.

School projects, whether visual arts, drama or language projects, "… should reflect the complexity of actual art" (Gude, 2004, p.12) and immerse children in the investigation and construction of social and personal identity by following the creative processes of contemporary artists who begin with the birth of ideas, continue with the development and conclude with the realisation of ideas in response to their experiences. Drama and contemporary visual arts as part of a Curriculum that corresponds to and reflects real life could make the difference in liberating, uniting and empowering children of all backgrounds and capabilities to investigate aspects of their lives and the lives of others, and to imagine and construct possible selves. Offering contemporary visual arts and drama a proper place in the Curriculum could open up the way for a creative space where children could act as researchers, creators and viewers of their most important asset: their self.

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