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Exploring, Creating, and Transforming: Parameters for the Observation of Creative Processes in Visual Arts Education

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Abstract

In an attempt to connect theory and practice with regard to research on creativity and visual arts, this study aims to explore how visual materials created by children can help determine qualitative parameters in the process of observing creative activity. These materials are the result of a series of workshops designed by the authors, artists,

and professors in a faculty of teacher training carried out with pupils from public second-cycle preschools and elementary schools. Having developed a data collection strategy based on participant observation, the materials are grouped into three interrelated parameters: movement, language, and transformation-aesthetics. These parameters are designed as a flexible observation tool, which allows for every researcher to implement it, by contributing to the development of new research in various classroom contexts.

Introduction

As visual artists and professors in the Faculty of Teacher Training in Spain, one of our objectives is to explore the creative processes in visual arts and the field of education. To this end, we designed and conducted workshops, named *creative workshops*, together with our students in training—future teachers of preschool and elementary school—and second-cycle preschool children (3-6 years of age) or elementary school children (6-12 years of age).

These workshops derived from the need to connect theory and practice about research on creativity and visual arts education (Zimmerman, 2015). As teacher trainers, we need to leave the academic field and embrace other contexts which allow for direct experiences with children. As Zimmerman (2015) writes, "Researchers need to expose themselves to actual art classroom contexts so that their research is grounded in reality" (p. 13).

In Spain, there are no specialist teachers of visual art education in kindergarten and primary school (Royal Decree 1594/2011 of November 4). As a consequence, there are no specific art classrooms and the use of commercial products, based on the reproduction of stereotypes, is common. One of the challenges we encountered when transferring our experience to the teaching community was the difficulty of setting parameters that help to identify creative processes developed by participant children, which in turn help teachers to determinate whether or not the approaches used in the classroom encourage creativity overall.

From a qualitative research framework, in the field of visual arts the question arising is: is it possible to set qualitative parameters to help us observe creative process in children, and second, if so, what are the characteristics of these qualitative parameters?

To set these parameters we started with the observation of a series of empirical materials created by the children participating in the workshops: drawings, artefacts, conversations, gestures, etc. Therefore, it is framed within qualitative research as a set of practices and materials that interpret and at the same time transform the world of the observer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The motivation is twofold. On the one hand, visual arts education comes with the responsibility for art practitioners, in this case, teachers in training, to introduce research in their own classrooms (Zimmerman, 2015). To this end, the design of a flexible observation tool, which allows for every researcher to implement it, can contribute towards developing new research in various classroom contexts. On the other hand, this research should be seen not only as an interpretation of materials but also as a transformation of educational contexts. These parameters should act as a tool to discriminate proposals carried out by teachers with children in the classroom. Thus, they should counteract neoliberal curricula pressures which offer objective and measurable results from a reductionist technical perspective. It is about counteracting reproductive methodology, increasingly present in the school system, based on commercial data sheets and stereotype reproduction. Authors such as Freinet (1964), Freire (1968), Schön (1987), and Torres Santomé (2014) stressed the need to design empowering educational strategies intended to imagine and design pathways for possible better futures.

Creativity and Visual Arts Education

Two differentiated paradigms exist in connection with the value of creativity in visual arts education (Katz-Buonincontro, 2015; Zimmermann, 2010, 2013, 2015). One is rooted in a pragmatic or extrinsic view and is concerned by economic and social demands in general. The other one emerges from a humanistic or intrinsic view, which draws from the right of each individual to creative self-expression and the development of their own aesthetic experience, on the basis of their abilities and concerns (Zimmermann 2010). This research focuses on a humanistic approach to creativity "primarily concerned with a learner's creative process and cultural identity (…). In addition, it focuses on how a learner can transform a lack of academic motivation to become a more academically engaged agent in his or her schooling" (Katz-Buonincontro, 2015, p. 39).

Setting parameters to evaluate creativity is complex, as there is no official consensus on its components, and it depends on the observer's criteria. In the field of visual arts education, Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) argued that one of the components of creativity that there is greater consensus on is fluency (i.e., the capacity to generate numerous ideas). Other factors being considered are the capacity to rapidly shift from one argument to another, and the capacity to provide unusual or disjointed ideas. Other criteria considered difficult to measure are the openness of the individual to the unknown and new things. The authors linked creativity to the concept of change, at the individual as well as the social level. They argued that creativity is the opposite of conformity. However, they specified two types of conformity: conformity to rules of conduct, which are fundamental and necessary to society as long as they can be modified by the people concerned; and mental conformity, which can constitute a potential danger to society.

Another point to consider in creativity research has been the attempts to draw up its phases, even though there is no consensus on them. In the field of psychology, early research on creativity structured it in four phases: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (Wallas, 1926). From then on, other classifications followed. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) question the traditional stages in the development of creative thinking and consider creativity as an ongoing process as the best preparation for creating is creating itself. Hausman, Hostert, and Brown (2015) define creativity as "an active response, reaction, or experience in the making of novel forms and ideas that occur within the context of unforeseen situations and challenges" (p. 73). They argue that creativity cannot be taught and that visual arts education should focus on developing what they call a "pedagogy towards the creative condition," constructing ideal settings for developing personal and creative acts.

Play is an essential tool for learning and creativity, equally for adults and children. There is a consensus between different theories that link play to creativity in the visual arts, as they both present similar qualities (McKenna, 2015). McKenna (2015), drawing from Stuart's Brown's theory of play (2010), suggested that these links are: voluntary participation, diminished consciousness of self, and risk-taking. She selected three out of Brown's seven types of play due to their particular importance for art creation and education contexts: object play, storytelling-narrative play, and transformative-integrative play. Object play has to do with the relationship established with the object with no end in mind, exploring its possibilities. Storytelling-narrative play allows reflecting on the experience. Transformative-integrative play transcends everyday reality, de-familiarizing the ordinary and allowing us to explore ideas in different ways.

Also, numerous artists who have worked in the educational field such as Paul Klee (1925), Viktor Papanek (1971), and Bruno Munari (1977) developed theories on creativity based on their experience as artists. Joseph Beuys proposed a model of the creative process since he highlighted the phases of the creativity process itself. There are three phases, which he called: chaos, movement, and form. Buschkühle (2019) presented them as follows: the chaos phase has to do with the capacity of facing uncertain or risky situations, where concept and form are unclear. This phase is essential for new structures, experiences, and perspectives to emerge. Without chaos, exploring beyond the known and familiar is not possible. Movement is the creative process phase that goes from chaos to form and demands certain capacities. One of them is will, which requires taking responsibility for what we do, as well as moving through the inevitable phases of frustration and searching to create a well-thought-out form. Other required abilities are at the technical level and are integral to the making of the artwork.

Methodology

This research is designed by using a qualitative approach, which is framed by the action

research method. As Kemmis and MacTaggart (1988) point out, action research is a method seeking educational change, and is characterized as being a process constructed from and for practice, so as to be able to understand and improve it. Our research was conducted with children, in public schools, designing and carrying out *action scenarios*. These enable forms of creativity across experience and making. Workshops are designed as participatory production where children stand as active agents involved in creating and producing data (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, data production techniques are related to an active creative process in which participants get involved by drawing, building, modeling, collage making, etc. These processes give voice to participant children as they get recognized as *competent beings*, whose creations, actions, opinions, and decisions have value (Thompson, 2008). A data collection strategy based on participant observation was developed, where data was analyzed in an inductive manner. This strategy allowed the research to be structured to establish general patterns, instead of testing hypotheses concerning existing theories or models (Angrosino, 2012).

To provide a better understanding of our research, we would like to further explain the context in which the workshops were designed and conducted. We are visual artists, and we started working together as professors at the Faculty of Teacher Training in Lugo (University of *Santiago de Compostela*, Spain) in 2008. As professors, our objective was to transfer creative processes to the classroom, which, as visual artists, we experience in our study. These processes emerge from learning by doing, and are based on a reflexive and critical perspective on our environment. However, we began to perceive difficulties to bring these processes closer to our students and future teachers. These difficulties mainly arise from the lack of social recognition of visual arts education in Spain. This can be perceived in the progressive loss of influence of arts teaching, the under-representation of arts in the curriculum of initial teacher training, and the lack of visual arts specialists in preschool and elementary school (Sumozas, 2021).

As a result, all too often, learning activities in schools encourage the production of stereotyped commercial models, leading to resolution methods with are mechanical, homogenous, and predesigned by adults. Ruiz Gutierrez (2010) consolidates the results from several studies undertaken in different Spanish provinces. These studies show that 95% of early childhood education teachers make use of these commercial products as an educational method. Being our students' future teachers, they come from a school with methodologies that are strongly standardized. These exclude experience, childhood research and creativity development, since they do not allow personal development. Reflecting on teaching practice from an artistic point of view requires a great effort of deconstructing deep-rooted beliefs, covering aspects that are both specific to visual arts and education in general (Blanco & Cidrás, 2019). Furthermore, these prejudices increase during our students' school training

period, where stereotyped and commercial activities are common.

To counter this, we deemed it necessary to carry out workshops with children in the faculty classroom, for our college students to be able to observe and assess children's creative processes. At first, these workshops were planned informally. We started collaborating with teachers from a nearby school. Each workshop was previously designed in collaboration with trainees. We prepared the materials and initial motivating action. Children were then invited to experiment with materials and discover their functions. About 25 preschool or elementary school students were brought to our classroom, for 1.5 to 2-hour sessions, and a small group of teacher candidates started the action with them, while the rest of them observed without intervening. When discussing observations, we noticed that college students lacked strategies (at the level of both observations and vocabulary) to differentiate approaches encouraging creativity from approaches leading to standardized actions. This issue led us to think about creative processes which, as artists, we intuitively carry out in our studio. This allowed us to open up to the possibility of developing strategies to translate these processes to the education field.

While all workshops had a clear educative purpose from the beginning, they did not include systematic data collection about the experience. Observations were accompanied with notepads, allowing college students to move freely through the space, and write down children's actions working in the workshops. Afterwards, once the children had left, their productions and processes were analyzed. The information collected was shared by discussing the observed actions and attempting to structure them into different groups while addressing processual and aesthetic aspects. At the same time, such analysis served as feedback for our own artistic process, resulting in numerous informal conversations in our studio. This helped us reflect on the different creative strategies we carry out as artists, as well as make them visible. Over time, a series of recurrent patterns were identified and grouped into three observation parameters.

As our research was developed, we started collaborating with other schools in rural areas, whose students came to our faculty to undertake the workshops. Some workshops were also conducted in these schools or in our studio. From 2014 to 2020, we conducted 70 different creative workshops, working along with 5 schools, in which the idea of an atelier or laboratory is retrieved, and where learning occurs through experience and play. Workshops were planned and designed according to three objectives: reinforcing the idea of the process; experimenting with different materials, techniques, and artistic languages; and fostering the creation of a personal imagination and style.

Results: Observation Parameters

In this section, we present three observation parameters derived from an inductive analysis of the workshops. This analysis is based on the actions and productions carried out by the children in relation to three aspects: the exploration with materials; the processes of personal creation; and the aesthetics of their productions. We named them Movement, Language and Transforming-aesthetic parameters. These are not considered as isolated phases of a process, but rather as interconnected elements which take place simultaneously.

1. Movement parameter

The movement parameter is related to creativity as an action in continuous transformation. Artist Paul Klee (1925) defined creativity as a continuous process where what matters is not the result, but the action of making itself. Klee's creativity theory could be summed up in the following paragraph: "What is good is form as movement, as action, as active form. What is bad is form as immobility, as an end, as something that has been tolerated and got rid of. What is good is form-giving. What is bad is form. […] Form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is live" (Klee, 1973, p. 269). If, just like Klee, we perceive creativity as movement, we can associate it with Dewey's (1938) principle of experiential continuum. This principle is based on the idea that educational experiences enable students to have more enriching experiences in the future. Conversely, any activity halting or changing the course of the development of future experiences has negative effects, as it may cause numbness, and lack of receptivity and response.

Creation must always be an open process, stimulating the imagination, and not an end or finished product, which may inhibit children's participation. The workshop needs to allow children generate and register improvised actions where mind and body are always active, and where everything is made and unmade, as with everything in life. As artist Bruno Munari (2016) reminded us, what matters is the possibility of playing with countless opportunities, changing constantly, testing, and trying. Only then, mind becomes flexible, thinking becomes dynamic: "the creative individual" (Munari, 2016, p. 197).

This parameter includes actions arising from sensitive experience with materials, based on enjoying and experimenting with their qualities. These actions often take place in a spontaneous manner, and there is no research intention or a defined objective behind. They occur with surprise and amazement because of the qualities of the material. Their duration can vary widely, as they can last only a few seconds, or longer in time. During childhood, they usually result in narrative actions, when discovering materials becomes part of an action or story.

Table 1

Classification of actions from the movement parameter

Movement parameter
Sensory interactions with objects and own body: scale, volume, hollow, balance, movement… Exploratory actions with materials: With graphic materials: tracing, blending, marking, erasing, connecting, superimposing, staining… With building materials: moving, dragging, grouping, hitting, stacking, balancing, throwing, tearing down, breaking, joining, deforming, marking, splitting…

2. Language parameter

The language parameter refers to the capacity of connecting sensory interactions and exploratory actions with personal experience. Vea Vecchi (2010) suggested that workshops "can and must make techniques become languages, how the ability to execute a technique must be developed in the context of broader and more complex meaning" (p. 38). These languages are developed across numerous artistic techniques (drawing, construction, performance, etc.), often coexisting with words. In the catalogue of the exhibition *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* (Vecchi, & Ruozzi, 2015), it is noted that even if drawing and words are autonomous languages, they do coexist in children, by getting intertwined and conforming a mosaic of experiences. "Drawing and telling stories means imagining, analysing, and exploring spaces, forms, colours, words, metaphors, emotions, rhythms, and pauses, entering into a narrative dimension that is both internal and external to the self, playing on reality, fiction and interpretation" (p. 15). The language parameter encompasses both an expressive dimension in the development of techniques, processes, and artistic languages, as well as a narrative dimension, which enables the construction of meaning, giving sense to the experience.

Table 2

Classification of actions from the language parameter

Language parameter
Artistic expressive dimension: projecting, imagining, developing, composing, connecting, prioritizing, guessing, observing, establishing hypotheses… Narrative dimension: storytelling, describing, discussing, dramatizing, metaphor making, symbolic playing…

3. Transforming-aesthetic Parameter

The transforming-aesthetic parameter refers to the workshop capacity to allow process and idea generation, beyond the aesthetic models established by adult conventions. It is related to the concept of *estrangement*, a term coined by the writer Sklovskij, and introduced by Loris Malaguzzi to the educational world as a principle to reveal aesthetics in children (Hoyuelos, 2012). Estrangement is a way of de-familiarizing the ordinary, creating new connections beyond convention limits. This parameter refers to three actions:

- Dissociating from stereotyped images and productions, disseminated by the different reproductive agents: school, media, etc. Aguirre (2005, p. 243) defined stereotype problems in the early stages of education as the use and abuse of graphic, chromatic, or plastic schematism which, not pertaining to singular and natural expressiveness of childhood experiences, are part of most of their plastic work.
- Shaping a personal style and imaginary, aside preestablished aesthetic and academic canons.
- Building relationships and cooperation patterns among participants. The artist Bruno Munari (1977) introduced the concept of creativity in the social dimension. A creative person is, above all, a person capable of contributing to the community. Community cultural growth depends on everyone's contributions. Creativity in visual arts is performed through social interactions and is related to the concept of *distributed cognition*, which implies that human beings acquire more knowledge as a group than individually (Freedman, 2015).

Table 3

Actions from the transforming-aesthetic parameter

Transforming-aesthetic Parameter
Distancing from stereotypes Creating individual or collective imaginaries and narratives giving voice to the action participants. Relationships and dynamics of cooperation among participants: playing, caring, collaborating, listening, empathizing, belonging…

The Aberrant Drawing Workshop

We are going to exemplify these parameters through one of our workshops. The proposal entitled *aberrant drawing* includes the main lines of research we carry out as artists and professors of future teachers. We're interested in this definition of the term *aberrant*: different from what is typical, natural, correct, or acceptable. Separated from its moral connotation, this term interests us as an opposition to a directive school system, which from an adult perspective, establishes what is good and right. The latter is done by using a reproductive methodology where children repeat stereotypes and color on pre-made shapes. Therefore, what is aberrant, just like what is strange, opens up a perspective of opposition and resistance to what is established.

The workshop is defined as a means of action and simple facilitator (thick paper painted with chalkboard paint, geometric and amorphous templates referring to that which lacks a fixed or stable form and chalks as a tracing tool) (see Figure 1). It was carried out with children of different ages, between 3 and 12 years of age.

Figure 1

Here we work with simple resources, including cardboard templates so that children create overlapping open forms, which get blended and contaminated. Forms emerge immediately and children can imagine many things from them. Understanding that something can become something else is knowledge related to change, which is a process inseparable from life.
and the child can transform them into many things

Introducing the action is very important. If we had instructed them "Take the chalks and draw," this would lead them to class activities, probably resulting in stereotyped drawings of houses, hearts, suns, etc., and among the youngest children, their name writing. Furthermore, due to the domino effect, all children would end up doing the same. To prevent this, an initial outlining action was carried out by using chalk on black paper (Figure 2). All children who participated internalized the workshop dynamics, and shortly afterwards, the support started to transform with strokes and overlapping forms (Figure 3).

Figure 2

Figure 3

We would like to clarify that children attending our workshops typically made copies of commercial and standardized drawings at school. The objective of using templates is not for children to merely trace the forms that adult hands have created, but to minimize the reproduction of these acquired pre-designed images. That is why when observing the workshop, we need to keep in mind that templates are a means of initiating personal development processes (language parameter). These should not become a mechanical action of outlining, which would bring us back to stereotypes.

The second part of the workshop was focused on reflecting on the two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. It was proposed to fold and bend big pieces of paper, conforming to a three-dimensional element. To hold their shapes, vertices were joined by using a paper sack sewing machine. Two forms appeared, arising from the ground and reaching about two meters, transforming the scene (see Figures 4 and 5). The drawn surface acquired new volumetric relations, explored from a spatial perspective.

Figure 4

Figure 5

Interaction with form-volume aspects of the paper implies modifying space and our physical relationship with it. It is important for children to confront their own bodies, and learn that they are also a form and, as such, they are related to other forms in space, which can be moved, avoided, surrounded, etc.

We are interested in incorporating drawing into workshops as an observation tool. For that purpose, children are provided with rigid support where they can paste A4 paper, and with a different tracing tool: charcoal. After that, they surround the forms to observe and draw details, and to understand that there are different perspectives and ways of seeing (Figures 5 and 6). This allows children to let go of copy-drawing, which they are quite accustomed to. It also allows them to embrace observation drawing, which will help them gradually develop drawing habits and consider their creations as a personal document or view of the things they do, discover, and invent.

Figure 6

Here below, we analyze the workshop based on the parameters presented. These results are obtained from the observation of actions and processes carried out by children in workshops. This observation begins by having a look at the collective aspect of the workshop, like an overall reading of it. This is followed by a focus on individual productions.

Movement Parameter

For3-year-olds, we noticed that there is a greater relationship between the cardboard object and their own body. Large format paper placed on the floor allows for gestural body expression, challenging static drawing, so present in the school setting. Actions, such as looking through cardboard, as if using a screen, or going through holes using their heads, feet, and arms were performed (Figure 7). Children also tested materials considering their weight, by throwing them into the air or dropping them, moving them on the surface, or knocking them against the floor. In the second part of the workshop, while interacting with the form-volume, children were again confronted with their own bodies in relation to space, and actions such as moving, dragging, or hrough forms appear.

Figure 7

Regarding material exploration, it was noted that 3-year-old children showed greater initial exploration with cardboard objects, while the older group began with chalk drawing. These are immediate and improvised actions, adjusting continuously, as a result of the enjoyment of using the materials. Children perform marking actions on paper with chalk, accentuating their gestures and spotting, while they perform these actions repeatedly. Cardboard templates are used to trace forms, by making use of contours or by filling in holes (Figure 8). Other actions taken are erasing with hands or blending by using one's body when crawling across the surface (Figure 9). Using chalk on paper allows to make drawings, which can at the same time fade away, due to both casual actions such us crawling across the surface and intended actions. This allows for blurred strokes and contaminated drawings, reaching new imaginaries through children's own actions.

Figure 8 & *Figure 9*

Language Parameter

In contrast to the movement parameter that resembled Beuys' chaos phase, where neither form nor concept is developed, the language parameter invites us to assess whether explorations result in processes of graphic expression and narrative, being significant for the person that makes them. The language parameter implies an even more complex new dimension because it includes experiencing not only with materials and techniques, but also with children's knowledge, expectations, and desires.

Here we observe how forms become images. Children begin to make compositions by using

cardboard templates, by developing relationships between forms and size hierarchy or marking intensity. In the first example (Figure 10), a child takes over the initial silhouette, a circle, and makes it his own by drawing strokes autonomously, repeating this action in all four initial circle forms. In the second example (Figure 11), action emerges from spontaneous smudging previously done, triggering a series of compositions through form connection, and exploring graphic possibilities of saturation, delimitation, overlaps, and contrast. These actions could be defined as creating a medium, considered as a specific language generated from this experience.

Figure 10 & 11

Figure 12

The narrative dimension is also present at some point in the workshop. Groups are made spontaneously, in which dialogue is initiated and followed by action. In figure 12, a child carries out a symbolic play, and imagines the cardboard form is a fish scaring him.

Transforming-aesthetic Parameter

The transforming-aesthetic parameter emphasizes the observation of processes carried out by children regarding stereotype dissociation. It is very common to see how children have internalized stereotyped images (hearts, stars, schematic animals, etc.) and how they reproduce them automatically, overriding the creation of their own imaginary. When designing our workshops, one of the challenges we continuously faced was creating contexts and work tools which make the reproduction of these stereotyped images difficult. This allows us to make way for a personal imaginary emerging from the creative process itself, from experiencing with materials, gestural actions, careful observation, and not from an external imposition.

The forms in the charcoal observational drawings (Figure 6) show a sensitive look, where the things experienced become reflective. Such reflection already incorporates its own imaginary which springs from experiences contrary to stereotyped forms. When sharing drawings, it is possible to appreciate the diversity of views, allowing children to recognize and value one another as being different without establishing hierarchies based on value judgements.

Workshops also generate collective action fields, where children's markings get intertwined without fear of being excluded or hierarchized. They become a space where learning can be done from the encounter. In the case of the drawing in Figure 11, it can be observed that graphic action leads to collaborative dynamics where research is shared and supported by others.

Concluding Thoughts

The intent of this research is to transfer creative processes to the classroom, which we experience, as artists, in our study, and which emerge from learning by doing. These processes are, according to us, spontaneous and intuitive, hence difficult to verbalize and explain. Parameters are presented as a way of structuring this intuition, so that it can be shared with professionals with no experience in the field of visual artistic creation. Yet these parameters should be considered as a flexible structure, a starting point which can be modified by each person in every context, enabling to develop new research. The ultimate objective of this structure is not to remain standardized as a measurable method but, on the contrary, to be minimized when transformed by each person and turned again into intuitive thinking. After all, intuition is an important part of the creative process.

The three parameters presented—Movement, Language and Transforming-aesthetic—emerge from qualitative data, produced by participants in workshops through artistic means such as drawing and constructing. They correspond to three actions: exploring, creating, and transforming (understanding a breakthrough of boundaries marked by convention), inseparable from artistic creation. These actions are related to the creative production of art, with regard to playfulness, self-expression, and risk-taking, which are part of the human condition (Freedman, 2015).

These parameters do not seek to value individual creativity, but rather focus on the teaching action and the construction of environments that facilitate creativity. Each individual brings with them a set of skills, previous experiences, and obstacles that should be borne in mind. It is not a matter of participants getting to the same place, but developing their creative processes beyond convention boundaries or conformity.

Teachers should provide action scenarios that give the opportunity to create. Even though schools are not the only context where creativity is developed, it is indeed the space where it should be encouraged. Visual arts education is a way of thinking that helps to create a personal world view and school is the space where this construction is carried out with everyone else, with one another, with those different from us, because they have other types of knowledge and learning experiences. Developing strategies to avoid standardizing their productions is a way of initiating creative processes.

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