

# **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# FUTURE AND ACTIVE EDUCATORS' TRAINING IN HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE.

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# Manuscript Info

#### Abstract

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..... The present paper presents an educational action, driven by the principles of experiential learning, concerned with the thematic unit of Human Rights and particularly, the Rights of the Child. This thematic unit was approached through Art and most specifically, by the method, 'Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience'. This action was undertaken by a team of active Early Years Educators but it could also be undertaken by groups of future educators, as part of the practical training they follow during their undergraduate studies. For this purpose, the educational action is hereby presented analytically, as well as the stages of application of this particular method. Moreover, some of the participants' views regarding the method are presented, ensued by a comprehensive discussion. Overall, the participants considered art a basic tool in teaching but they had not realised that it could serve as the basis for intellectual and emotional reflection as well.

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# Introduction:-

Education in Human Rights is an integral part of the right to education and increasingly becomes recognised as a human right, both in international community and organisations. Knowledge of rights and freedoms is considered to be a fundamental tool for ensuring that all Human Rights are respected. To that end, educational programmes should include values such as peace, equal treatment, equality, justice, non-violence, tolerance, and the respect of human dignity. For the implementation of the above, it is considered necessary to train and educate future and active educators in issues related to Human Rights, so that the teaching of Human Rights becomes part of the curriculum of every subject. To support all the above, this paper presents an educational action regarding the thematic unit of Human Rights, and its subcategory, the Rights of the Child. This thematic unit is approached through Art and more specifically through the method, 'Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience', which has been applied in a team of active Early Years educators and could also be applied in groups of future educators as part of their practical training, mainly during their undergraduate studies.

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#### A. Human Rights and Education: -

The standard definition for the role of Education regarding Human Rights is included in article 26 (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where it is stated that:

«Education shall be directed to the full development of the human

personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace».

At the same time, the need for the educational system to function in accordance with Human Rights, for the benefit of all children, is prescribed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child in article 29 (1) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), whereby it is stated that all States Parties agree that the education of the child should be directed to:

"[...] (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations [...]

(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin."

Long before the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, in the Resolution on the Rights of the Child (1959), we find references to the importance of education in Principle (7), where it is formulated that "education [should] promote [the child's] general culture [...] on a basis of equal opportunity" but also in Principle (10), where it is proclaimed that:

The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious and any other form of discrimination. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.

Having proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an ideal all the peoples and all the nations must have in common and work towards, the General Assembly of the United Nations declares in its preamble that, "every individual and every organ of society [...] shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms", as prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In order to put Human Rights into practice, the United Nations General Assembly passed *Resolution 217 D*, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1948, titled as, 'Publicity to be Given to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. This resolution, introduces a series of requests towards Governments of Member States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the specialised agencies and non-governmental organisations that are involved in issues related to Human Rights, to contribute in the dissemination of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The dissemination of this Declaration set the foundations for the education in Human Rights, since the adoption and implementation of the teaching of Human Rights cannot be achieved if individuals and wider social groups do not have the relevant knowledge. Knowledge of Human Rights is a necessary requirement for individuals and social groups to be able to demand respect for their rights and freedoms (Alfredsson, 2001).

#### Educators' training in Human Rights:-

Schools are able to promote and successfully implement education in Human RIghts (Lucas, 2009; Payaslyoglu and Icduygu, 1999) only when this task is carried out by devoted and experienced educators (Leung, 2008; Singh, 1997; Starkey, 1994). While many educators adopt various principles of Human Rights, such as justice, equality and respect towards other people's rights, very few in Greece have been actually trained for education in Human Rights (Pitsou, 2013).

It is necessary for Human Rights to serve as a fundamental principle for the professional progress of both active and future educators, in order to see themselves not only as educators but also as proponents of Human Rights (Flowers and Shiman, 1997). This presupposes that educators, being professionals, should comprehend Human Rights issues, advocate their behaviour to related principles, create a classroom environment that reflects the philosophy of Human Rights, provide students with experience that actively promotes human rights and encourage them to act according to those principles, (Flowers and Shiman, 1997; Kang, 2007; Osler & Starkey, 1994; Osler, 2002). Under these requirements, active and future educators would be able to contribute in the making of an up-coming generation of open-minded and active citizens, because both the promotion and the protection of Human Rights against violations lies in the foundations of education in Human Rights (Maran, 1997).

On account of all the above, is hereby presented an educational action that was undertaken by active Early Years Educators for a period of twenty-four hours. This action makes use of the aesthetic experience in education. The choice of aesthetic experience is owed to the fact that, «for adults and old people, arts can be a relief, an opportunity to re-activate, strengthen and increase an existential joy» (Cuco, 2014:301) and for this reason, any kind of education offered to them, «should allow the individual the possibility of a responsible, independent and meaningfully complete existence, so that they can contribute, as a member of it, to a free and democratic community» (Denac, 2014:1718). Even though the action was carried out by Early Years educators, it could also be taken on by educators in various other fields, who are either in teaching positions or studying towards that end. This is because:

"Aesthetic education accesses a mode of cognition, and a way of thinking and knowing which can be applied to elements that combine to promote a response that connects us to the human experience. If these modes of cognition are to be applied in educational contexts, it is important that this connection to the human experience not be confined to school classrooms. The significance of exploring the human condition in higher education is similarly imperative" (Jacobs, 2011:235-236).

# Educational framework for the educational action in Human Rights: -

This particular educational action was organised by the present author in collaboration with the School Consultant of the 64<sup>th</sup> district of Early Years Education and was implemented in Patras, the third largest city in Greece, during the school year 2014-2015. The participants were fifty Early Years Educators, who worked in the regional unit of Achaia in public schools. They were all women, between the ages of 30 and 50. The fact that the sample consists of women alone might not allow for analysis regarding sex but is consistent with research by the Development Center for Education Policy, General Confederation of Greek Workers (2013), where it is noted that 99% of staff in Early Years Education in Greece is women. The educators participated voluntarily, accepting invitation to an educational action of 24 hours, titled "I have, You have, We have a Right". There were six four-hour long meetings and training that involved the use of aesthetic experience took place in the last two.

The focus of the seminar overall was on Human Rights but the last two sessions focused on the subcategory of the Rights of the Child.

The purpose of the seminar was to raise awareness of the Rights of the Child violations that can be observed in the schools the participants work.

Aims for the participants:

- At the level of *knowledge*: To know the Rights of the Child and be able to recognise violations against them.
- ✤ At the level of *skill*: To make use of practices and techniques that promote the Rights of the Child in both the school area and the wider social context.
- At the level of *attitude*: To adopt a positive attitude towards the Rights of the Child in order to defend their values.

For the execution of this educational action, we applied the method "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience" (Kokkos et al., 2011), which is here presented and analysed stage by stage. The aforementioned method proposes a systematic examination of artworks, with the aim to develop critical reflection regarding a particular teaching subject (Kokkos, 2010, Kokkos et al., 2011). In other words, through the examination of artworks, the participants develop critical reflection, which enables them to re-evaluate their beliefs regarding a particular issue they are called to teach (Kokkos, 2010; Kokkos et al., 2011). This might be a very ambitious goal for such a programme (Mezirow, n.d.) but one or more mental habits of the team in training can be transformed, to a certain extent, by applying this method (Kokkos et al., 2011:88).

B. Presentation of the educational action in relation to the stages of application of the method "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience": -

#### *1<sup>st</sup> Stage: Determination of the need for critical examination of the issue*

During the years the present author spent working on her PhD thesis, she came into contact with many active educators and students of Education Studies, all of whom expressed a reluctance to engage with issues regarding Human Rights and the Rights of the Child in class, even though they consider such issues to be crucially important. When she asked them to what they attribute their insecurity, they answered, in the lack of training or education in such issues, both during their basic studies and as active educators. This gap in teachers' education had been also

identified by the School Consultant of the Early Years Education District 64, in Patras, Greece, who proposed to the author of this paper to organise an educational action on Human Rights. They agreed on its execution, went on to design it and invited educators of all district to participate, most of whom responded positively. Thus, this particular seminar was organised.

## $2^{nd}$ Stage: The participants express their opinions about the issue

At the second stage, the participants were asked to form equal teams of five people each and write a paragraph where they express their opinions on the following open question: "Which violations against the Rights of the Child do we see on a daily basis?"

The participants' views have been categorised and presented below in the form of a list:

- Violation of the right to freedom of expression
- Violation of the right to food (no snack)
- Bodily violence that children inflict upon each other
- Verbal violence that children inflict upon each other
- Bodily violence that parents inflict upon children (visible signs)
- Lack of respect of difference (Roma, Albanian children)
- Separating the Gypsies from the non-Gypsies in hospitals
- Not recognising a child's special requirements (aggressive child) by other children's parents

It is worth noting that further to the violations, the participants also mentioned what they have done in order to «cure» them:

- Addressed social organisations
- Contacted the School Consultant
- ✤ Kept parents up to date and discussed with them
- Implemented related educational programmes

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Stage: Identifying sub-issues and critical questions

At the third stage, the instructor, having studied the texts of the participants, formulated two sub-issues and two critical questions.

More specifically:

1<sup>st</sup> Sub-issue:

Cases of violation against the Rights of the Child

2<sup>nd</sup> Sub-issue:

Actions that contribute to the combat against violations of the Rights of the Child

1st Critical question:

What do we think about the people who violate the Rights of the Child?  $2^{nd}$  Critical question:

How can we contribute to addressing violations of the Rights of the Child?

4<sup>th</sup> Stage: Selecting works of art and relating them to the critical questions

At the fourth stage of the Method, due to the participants' inexperience and for better facilitation of the process, the instructor selected six works of art (a film excerpt, a poem, a literature excerpt and three paintings), which she presented to the participants. Due to time constraints, the teams were asked to choose only two. The ones chosen are the following:

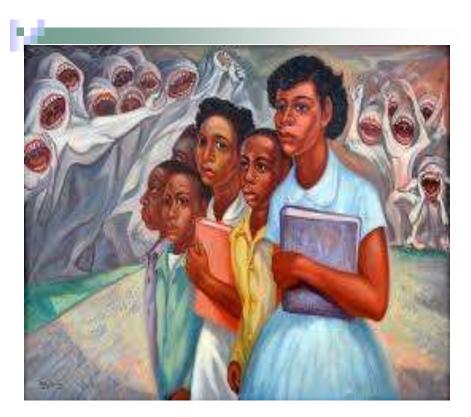


Fig 1:- 1<sup>st</sup> work of art: Domingo Ulloa. (1957). Little Rock Nine



Fig2:-2<sup>nd</sup> work of art: Edvard Munch. (1983). Scream

# 5<sup>th</sup> Stage: Analysing the art works and connecting them with the critical questions

During the educational action, the instructor and the participants had enough time to analyse the two works of art that had been chosen. Their analysis took place in the order the works of art are presented above. For the analysis, Perkins' model was followed (Kokkos et al., 2011), which consists of four phases that relate to one another.

### 1) First Phase: Initial remarks

In the first phase, the participants carefully observed the works of art without being asked to offer an interpretation or critique. It was simply their first aesthetic contact with the artworks. In this phase, the participants did not attempt an interpretation but «objectively observed» what they saw. In their approach towards the artworks they made use of former experience and formulated some initial remarks, in answering questions such as:

What is this? What do you see? What interests you? Does it make you question anything?

### Indicative answers given by the participants:

#### 1<sup>st</sup> work of art:

White ghosts, frightened black people, why should black people be afraid of the white? Why are they holding books?

#### $2^{nd}$ work of art:

Sea, wave, river, a bald man, sunset, bridge, two people in the background, man with a mental illness, personal impasse at the end of his life or in despair?

### 2) Second Phase: Broad observation

In this phase, the participants observe the work of art with an open mind and creative attitude. They are observing the artwork while thinking, "What would the artist have liked us to observe?" In this phase, open thinking is activated, which is not aimed at interpreting the work of art, but at enabling participants to observe it as best as they can. The artwork's content is approached more creatively by posing questions such as:

Is there anything you would like to discuss in more detail? Are there any symbolisms and connotations the artist wants to convey? Are there any surprises in the artwork? Do you see a movement? How does it make you feel? What is the role of colours, shapes, perspective, light?

Through the conversation, the participants proceeded to analysing the stance and style of those two artworks, emphasising the way in which the two artists have rendered the expression of the central characters. Moreover, they expressed their negative feelings, even aversion, towards both the white ghosts of the first artwork and the two characters in the second artwork, who seem to be walking casually, indifferent to the tragic situation of the person in front of them. However, they were impressed by the fact that both artworks have vivid colours, which they related to light; light can mean redemption.

#### 3) Third Phase: Detailed and in-depth observation

In this phase, the participants went deeper into interpreting the artworks, based on the observations they had made during the first two phases. They attempted a deeper enquiry.

In this phase, questions were posed such as: What would you like to investigate further? What interests you most? What else impressed you? Why did the artist make this choice or that, is there a message? Which elements create tension and dynamism? What is the role of colours, shapes, lines and symbols?

The most important issues mentioned are the following:

- There is no movement of the people that are depicted; on the contrary, their attitude is cold, a symbol of intransigence, isolation, oppression and monarchy.
- The colours that are use are related to light (1<sup>st</sup> artwork) and fire (2<sup>nd</sup> artwork), both of which could be connected with «a new life rising from the ashes».
- Intense and hard outline of the faces, without making use of specific symbols to provide more clarity in meaning.

By the end of this phase, the instructor felt that the team had enriched and developed its views and proceeded to the next phase.

# 4) Fourth Phase: Review – making connections

In the fourth phase, the participants took part in a plenary discussion, approaching the artworks globally, making use of the experience they had gained in the previous phases. At the same time, they presented how their initial thoughts, beliefs and assumptions regarding the works of art were transformed. At this point, the 5<sup>th</sup> stage of the method "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience" was completed.

The 5<sup>th</sup> stage was completed, after the participants «returned» to their teams and discussed what had happened, in order to evaluate the critical questions that had been set to them.

#### Regarding those, the following was said:

What do we think about the people who violate the Rights of the Child?

- Probably they haven't realised the importance of respect towards another person
- Perhaps they are themselves victims
- They haven't learned to listen and they think that violence is an easy solution to problems
- Lack of self-knowledge
- \* Their living circumstances are difficult and they are facing problems, personal or financial

### How can we contribute to addressing violations of the Rights of the Child?

- Food, we address the social workers of the Municipality of Patras, Holy Metropolis, Philanthropic Societies, Stavros Niarchos foundation, Parents' and Guardians Association
- Child with aggressive behaviour contact with the school consultant, frequent contact with all parents
- Discussion, updates, information, communication with the relevant institutions, empathy, active listening, implementation of educational programmes

## 6<sup>th</sup> Stage: Critical review

At the  $6^{th}$  and final stage, the participants worked in their original teams. They were given the text they had produced at the  $2^{nd}$  stage and they were called to write one anew, answering the same question.

After the end of the educational action, the instructor examined both the texts the participants had composed at the beginning and at the end of the action, in order to evaluate the procedure as a whole. For the evaluation, the «critical thinking evaluation scale» was used, as in ARTiT. ARTiT is a transnational programme Grundtvig, which aims at the development of a novel methodology for educating teachers, so that they are able to design their educational units, based on the systematic observation of works of art, with the purpose of enhancing critical reflection and creativity in adult learners. Based on the comparison of the texts the teams produced, one in second stage and one at the end of the action, the teams scored 2 on the evaluation scale. This score is justified by the fact that even though they improved the way in which they approached the issues at hand, there was no indication of having developed a more critical attitude towards stereotypes.

At this point, it is worth mentioning some indicative answers the participants gave during the discussion for the evaluation of the action as a whole: «... even though art, as a medium, plays an important role in my school, I hadn't realised how much it could help me develop as a person» (T:3) ... «I discovered new ways of extracting meaning and value from what happens around me» (T:16) ... «I realised that many issues are not a concern for specialists only but for all of us, since they are part of our lives» (T:24) ... «it is necessary to change our beliefs regarding a particular issue, even gradually, and only then we'll be able to improve ourselves» (T:32) ... «a different educational experience, full of emotion» (T:37) ... «collaboration of feeling and logic» (T:42) ... «one's experience is united with another's, in order to change the world for the better» (T:47).

# **Discussion:-**

Engaging with the issue of Human Rights, and by extension the Rights of the Child, through the method "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience", is a novel educational action. An action which invites the participants to recall previous experience and reflect on the issue at hand, in order to be guided towards actively defending Human Rights. This educational action approaches issues related to Human Rights and the Rights of the Child in a critical way and this could prove useful in the design and implementation of educational programmes that are related to the aforementioned issues, addressed to both active and future educators. The critical approach does not aim at memorising the Declaration of Human Rights but aims at a deeper understanding of their value, so that active and future educators may act as role models for their defence against violations. If this happens, educators

will be able both to encourage their students to act according to the principles of Human Rights and create a classroom environment that will reflect the philosophy of Human Rights so that those are actively promoted (Flowers and Shiman, 1997; Kang, 2007; Osler and Starkey, 1994; Osler, 2002). It becomes clear that in order for the above to be achieved, it is necessary to create a flexible educational framework for the education of active and future educators in Human Rights (Lenhart, 2006; Stone, 2002). A framework that is not be defined by rigid guidelines that educators must follow (Ray, 1994) but it is based on contemporary methods, such as "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience". Such methods inspire educators and provide them with a theoretical framework for engaging creatively and productively with Human Rights and the Rights of the Child. This also enables them to understand the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of others expressed in works of art. Finally, developing this kind of understanding helps educators better process complex situations and proceed to a more accurate interpretation of what happens around them (Raikou and Karalis, 2011).

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