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Project-based Integration of Contemporary Art Forms into Teaching Visual Arts to Primary School Students in the After-School Art Clubs

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Abstract

This article addresses issues connected with project-based integrative teaching of visual arts to primary school students attending after-school activities. It explores the pedagogical outcomes of using contemporary art forms and materials for the promotion of collaborative knowledge construction and researches these processes in the classroom from the teacher's perspective. Contemporary art forms, being integrative in their nature, are viewed as a suitable means of introducing students to the varieties of ways for seeing the world around them and using their knowledge acquired in other subjects for the creation of new original artworks through reusing, remediating and bricolaging recyclable materials for the construction of an art installation. The results of this action research prove that such an approach to visual art teaching encourages collaboration and art appreciation and contributes for the development of the student's aesthetic awareness in a world where the visual image is dominating all aspects of our lives.

Introduction

A prevalent theme in the current scientific dialogues about education for the new millennium is how to plan, design and organize formal education (Götsch & Mateus-Berr, 2015; Steers & Hardy, 2006) so that it can prepare the new generation for meeting the challenges set by today's rapid development of diverse modes of visual representation and of various media for disseminating and sharing such material. In this fast-changing social and technological environment, dominated by the *visual*, new means of expression, methods and materials for art creation are constantly emerging. So, in order to suggest answers to the educational challenges of the future, it becomes more and more necessary to expand curriculum horizons and to find approaches for making use of the new and the contemporary (Watts, Cox & Herne, 2009). Traditional organization of school education which artificially puts knowledge into categories without providing conceptual links between them, i.e. without integrating it, is no longer seen as an adequate alternative for unified knowledge construction. Therefore, within this debate it is pertinent to ask the questions of *why* and *how* to change our thinking about education, and more specifically about art education, and what suitable approaches can be implemented *now* to meet these demands.

In this paper I explore these issues by delving into some pedagogical implications of the integration of contemporary art forms adapted for primary school level students through the use of non-traditional materials in the visual art classroom. In order to achieve the aim of my study and answer the research questions set below, I accomplished the following tasks:

- Design and implementation of an integrated art project in the visual arts after-school clubs, which I teach to primary students in an international school in Helsinki, Finland. The final artwork produced with the students as a result of this project implementation is described in detail later in this article. It is a site-specific installation made of recyclable materials, and reminiscent of some contemporary art forms.
- Observation and description of the mechanisms behind the process of work, required for the completion of the project artwork.
- Discussion of some aspects of the integrative educational effects of introducing contemporary art forms on the primary students' knowledge construction.

Towards Integration: The Finnish Curriculum Reform in Basic Education

At the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year, Finland introduced a major reform in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Opetushallitus, 2015). Some of the pillars that structure the newly-reformed guidelines emphasize the introduction and organization of “collaborative classroom practices [...] brought about in multi-disciplinary, phenomenon- and project-based studies” (Halinen, 2015, para. 5). According to the reform, “pupils and students

are expected to participate [actively] in the planning process of [their] studies” (European Commission: Eurydice, 2019, “Teaching Methods and Materials”, para. 6) where student involvement in the teaching/learning process through the organization of multi-disciplinary study projects and modules, is seen as a tool to make studying “more inspiring and meaningful” (European Commission: Eurydice, 2019, “Teaching Methods and Materials”, para. 6). Implementation of teaching approaches, such as the integrated one, which support knowledge construction by guiding the students into discovering the interrelatedness between disciplines and by making “associations beyond the different subjects” (Karppinen, Kallunki, Kairavuori, Komulainen & Sintonen, 2013, p. 149) and beyond school-gained knowledge, is not only encouraged but has now become part of the official regulations for basic education in Finland.

Theoretical Background

In view of this current reform and the latest scientific findings in Finland (Tani, Jutti & Kairavuori, 2013; Turkka, Haatainen & Aksela, 2017) and abroad (Bautista, Tan, Ponnusamy & Yau, 2016; Björklund & Ahlskog-Björkman, 2017; Chemi, 2014) which confirm the pedagogical usefulness of the integrated teaching practices on different educational levels and subjects, the present paper adopts a socio-constructivist perspective as a basis for developing the current theoretical background. On the one hand, to discuss knowledge integration and collaborative classroom activities in light of the Finnish curriculum reform, this paper makes use of ‘integrated teaching’ as a teaching approach (Juuti, Kairavuori & Tani, 2010; Karppinen et al., 2013), which originates from the socio-constructivist theoretical ideas (Burr, 1995; Best, 2008; Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Gergen, 2009; Rauste-von Wright & von Wright, 2000; Säljö, 2004; Swan, 2005; Tynjälä, 1999). This is combined with Mercer’s (1995) socio-cultural theory of the “guided construction of knowledge” (Mercer, 1995, p. 1). On the other hand, based on these theories and the current tendencies in contemporary art, the paper establishes a conceptual link between the integrated approach to teaching and contemporary art forms and practices. The findings relate this conceptual link to primary student extracurricular visual arts education in view of its potential for knowledge integration.

The integrative potential of contemporary art production materials and techniques

The new Finnish curriculum guidelines presented above clearly highlight the introduction of the integrated approach to teaching in school which starts as early as the primary school level and aims at educating *multi-literate* citizens who can actively create, interpret and communicate with different kinds of “texts” (Opetushallitus, 2014, p. 3) or “modalities” (Räsänen, 2015, p. 22). Visual, audio, kinesthetic, verbal, numeral entities, represented by separate school subjects (Arts and Crafts, Music, Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, etc.) are integrated and the logical connections between them are revealed in a collaborative

learning process. In this respect, applied to teaching visual arts, the integrated approach, which by definition encourages creation of links between different spheres of knowledge, proves suitable for the new educational demands as it facilitates the introduction of topics, work materials, techniques and methodologies from various spheres of knowledge into visual arts, crafts and design education with the aim of promoting multi-disciplinary knowledge construction.

Described this way, the integrated approach in education, I would argue, is very similar to the approaches for contemporary art creation. Two concepts are relevant here. The term *bricolage*, introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1966) to refer to the creation of objects and meanings with found materials, can be applied to contemporary art, whose eclectic nature allows the incorporation of “bits and pieces” (Hartley, 2002, p. 22). The innovative and alternative modes of expression created in this way, encourage contemporary artists to cross the boundaries of traditional representation by “remixing, reconstructing and reusing artefacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols and styles” (Deuze, 2006, p. 15). The other concept that can describe the object of my study is *remediation* – “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 45). Approaching art creation through bricolage and remediation, results in building conceptual links between various seemingly unrelated entities, offering its viewers original perspectives and points of view. Thus, as a consequence of the natural interaction between the arts, and facilitated by the freedom to *bricolage* and *remediate*, new ways of communicating artistic ideas, new techniques and combinations and new art forms are constantly emerging. This endless variety of combinations and associations utilized by contemporary art’s expressive devices demonstrates that the very mechanism of conceptualizing and producing art nowadays is integrative.

Therefore, the hectic eclectic permissiveness of today’s art not only demands innovative ways of approaching the creative process, but it also requires adjustment of the way art is presented, analyzed and taught in school. For this reason, “contemporary art practices [are seen to] have the potential to make a significant contribution to the art curriculum [and respectively to] students’ learning” (Watts et al., 2009, p. 219) by enhancing their opportunities for knowledge integration, as advised by the Finnish reform (Opetushallitus, 2015). This research draws upon the concepts and ideas outlined above, and focuses on the integrative nature of contemporary art forms, utilized pedagogically to promote integrative knowledge construction and to encourage creativity. The project described in this article illustrates how the processes of bricolage, remediation and reuse of found materials by the students for the production of their site-specific installation create new artistic quality in the classroom.

The integrative nature of contemporary art collaborative practices

Socio-constructivist in its essence, the integrated approach, just like some contemporary art

practices (such as performances, digital installations, some forms of monumental land art and site-specific art, etc.) places emphasis on exploring new combinations and innovations by constructing knowledge through experiences, collaborations and active interactions between people. It sees learning as a holistic process, requiring interaction and reflection, where students learn while solving problems together (Edwards, 2009; Engeström, 2001; Miller, 2011). In such a learning environment based on active member collaboration, interaction in the classroom is essential. Therefore, knowledge is no longer seen as an “individual mental possession” (Mercer, 1995, p. 1), but a shareable experience, i.e. it is socially constructed (Mercer, 1995, p. 1). The size and the constructional complexity of the site-specific installation, which was the product of the integrated visual art project presented in this paper, called for active classroom collaboration and solutions to practical problems, so in the teacher notes taken throughout the project implementation phase, special attention was paid to *the guided construction of knowledge* (Mercer, 1995) in the classroom.

These knowledge construction processes were observed in my previous research projects (Blagoeva, Karppinen, & Kairavuori, 2019) and were seen as an important outcome of implementing the integrated approach. Accordingly, these earlier results were taken into account during the planning stage of the project presented here. They were incorporated into my initial teacher planning notes and their practical realization was carefully recorded in the teacher diary after the completion of each project phase. All these notes were taken into consideration in the observation and analysis discussed below.

This theoretical framework serves as a starting point for conceiving and implementing the contemporary art project described in the empirical part of the paper, which uses the ‘integrated approach’ to teaching visual arts to primary six to eight-year-old after-school students. It is expected that putting into practice a socio-constructivist approach for a holistic education through integration and collaboration would facilitate the introduction of contemporary art practices and promote innovation, while at the same time these contemporary art techniques and practices in basic art education would encourage collaborative knowledge construction.

Research Questions

This study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- How can the project-based integrated approach to teaching visual arts to primary school students in the after-school promote collaborative knowledge construction through the introduction of contemporary art forms and materials?
- What are the pedagogical outcomes of introducing contemporary art forms and materials for primary students in their visual arts learning?

It is expected that the results of the project, described in this paper, would shed light on the possibilities of introducing various approaches and techniques for utilizing contemporary art expressive devices for teaching art at a primary school level, and on their effect on improving the integrative potentials of the students together with their overall artistic skills and art appreciation.

Methods

To achieve its aims and provide answers to the research questions, the study applies two types of methods, described below: (1) structured observation through pedagogical documentation (written and visual) for the data collection, and (2) action research for the implementation of the integrated project and for the analysis of the results.

The empirical phase of the project involved an *action research* approach where a guided step-by-step intervention into the teaching process was carried out and its results were described and analyzed so as to draw meaningful conclusions about the possible effects of such intervention on the teaching/learning process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005, p. 226). This particular study embraced the idea suggested by Stenhouse and Whitehead (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005, p. 230) that action research can be employed by the teacher-researcher alone with the aim of introducing new teaching approaches in real-life situations and reflecting upon them so as to improve his/her teaching practice and to suggest possible positive developments of it (Stenhouse & Whitehead, cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005, p. 230). In other words, the teacher-researcher had the freedom to construct her own teaching plan but also, by actively participating in its implementation, to let it develop, thus gaining first-hand experience and research data from each unique classroom process and telling about it in her own voice. For this reason the action research approach proved to be a suitable research tool in the context of this research, whose aim was to generate knowledge and experience through practice.

A simplified model of a single-cycle action research involves the following stages which can be applied to the analysis of any classroom process: planning, implementation, teacher observation and reflection upon (or analysis of) the results. The current project, represented on Figure 1, which is the object of study in this paper, is viewed as an upgrading to the teaching methodologies employed previously in my teaching practice and described elsewhere (Blagoeva et al, 2019). This paper once again takes a teacher perspective on the analysis of each action research stage from the initial teacher conceptualization of the project to the presentation of the main results of teaching contemporary art and design through knowledge integration. Each action research step required verbal and visual documentation of the process and in this way allowed the teacher to verbalize her teaching experiences and observations and to reflect upon their pedagogical outcomes.

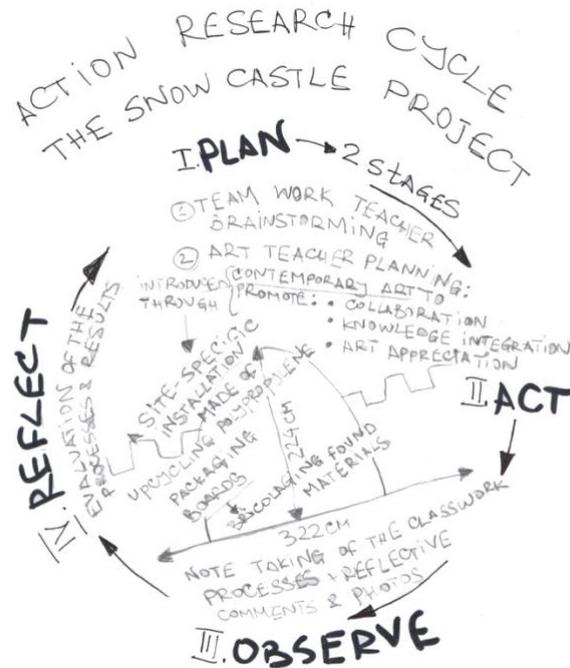


Figure 1. The Snow Castle Project Action Research Cycle

Data

The method employed for the collection of the data is structured observation (Silverman, 2000, p. 3), using pedagogical documentation (Carr & Lee, 2012; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007) by making notes and taking photos so as to “make the pedagogical practice visible and, in doing so, open for reflection” (Rintakorpi, Lipponen & Reunamo, 2014, p.188).

The data collected during the project is classified into two main categories: written and visual. The written data consists of two sub-categories collected during the first two steps of the action research:

- loose-leaf teacher notes from the planning stage of the integrated project
- a loose-leaf 10-page hand-written teacher diary from the process of implementation

All of these notes, taken by the teacher-researcher, chronologically follow the process of conceptualizing and implementing the project, and their content analysis reveals details of the teaching process and the challenges met while introducing contemporary art as a tool for integrative teaching. The main focus of the notes is on the teaching mechanisms for adapting contemporary art to the primary school student level, on the expected results of such an

intervention as well as on the actual results from the classroom activities. In addition, the planning notes set the initial theoretical and methodological framework of the project, while the teacher diary notes reveal the project's practical applications. Reflecting upon the teacher planning process and the subsequent classroom activities described in the diary shows that placing the teacher planning within the theoretical framework, chosen for this research, marks a positive change into my art teaching practice and takes the implementation of previous action research cycles (Blagoeva et al, 2019) one step further.

The visual data used to illustrate the research stages is collected through the process of photo-documentation (Rose, 2007, p. 243). It consists of preliminary teacher sketches, student sketches and drawings, process photos of classroom team work and photos of the final result. The visual material is coded so as to link the images to the research questions, i.e. "a set of descriptive labels"(Rose, 2007, p. 64) and a number is attached to each photo to ensure easier identification of a given image and to make each one of them "more obviously interpretative" (Rose, 2007, p. 65). So the visual material collected during all stages of the project in question is coded into the following three categories:

- Sketches on paper from the project's planning stage (a total of 35 photos) – pedagogical teacher sketches (15 photos) and student plans and drawings (20 photos)
- Digital photos of the process of work in the classroom (30 photos)
- Digital photos of the final installation on site (2 photos)

All paper images were digitized in the process of collecting and managing the data (scanned or photographed and assigned a unique number for further reference). There are a finite number of images taken by the teacher during the project, 67 photos in total.

All images are used only as supportive material to the diary notes. They illustrate the process of developing the installation idea pedagogically, i.e. how to introduce the idea of a big common artwork exhibited in a public space, what materials to use and how to use them, what new knowledge and what previous knowledge is integrated so as to realize the idea. The process photos supported by the teacher's notes follow the students' conceptualization of the idea, the problems they encountered while working on its implementation and the ways they solved them.

The varied nature of the collected data calls for a qualitative method analysis (Silverman, 2000). For the purposes of this research, a single-action research cycle, which includes planning, action, observation and reflection (see Figure 1) serves as a basis for reporting the results of the project as well as for conceiving the analytical framework (Bryman & Burgess, 1994) of this paper. To answer the research questions, the analysis is focused mainly on the

process of work as recorded in the Teacher's Diary: the student response to working in collaboration on a common project with found recyclable materials, the visual and constructional aspects of such work as well as the opportunities it opens for knowledge integration.

Content analysis (Silverman, 2000, p. 3) of the written data, structured to follow an action research cycle, shows the main educational tasks and objectives of the art activities and reveals the pedagogical thinking behind the introduction of contemporary art forms to teaching art to primary school students (aged six-to-eight). The notes pinpoint the teaching challenges from such intervention in practice which give grounds for further analysis of the learning outcomes of the integration of contemporary art forms into primary visual art education.

The description and analysis of the pedagogical implications of the integrated project presented below as well as some important details about its implementation are reported chronologically and supported by respective reflective passages based on the teacher's diary notes.

Project Description

The main aim of the integrated project, *The Snow Castle*, presented in this paper, was to introduce the young learners to the possibility for using alternative materials in the visual art classroom, and through contemporary art forms to guide them into collaborative work for establishing interdisciplinary connections, thus expanding their experience of art appreciation. To achieve these aims an enormous, site-specific installation from a recyclable material found in the trash was created by the students and exhibited as an intervention into the school's public space. The artwork in question produced by the students at the end of the project implementation was a castle gate (height 224 cm/width 322 cm) big enough to pack the main entrance to the school's assembly hall for the annual Snow-White-themed after-school show. The idea for decorating the assembly hall glass door entrance and giving it a new temporary identity was loosely inspired by Christo Javacheff's early wrapped artworks (Blackbourn 2011) and site-specific installations (Javacheff 2019).

Plan: Teacher planning and conceptualization

The idea to present such a site-specific installation as part of the after-school annual spring show celebrations was conceptualized in the following two stages: (1) Collaborative teacher planning and (2) Individual art teacher planning.

- 1) The joint teacher planning of the annual after-school show took place during two discussion sessions attended by all after-school leaders. The main idea of the show

originated from the school's integrative practice to choose a topic of the year which is developed and viewed from different aspects in all subjects and for all grades over the whole academic year. This time the general topic was *Light* and in the first discussion session it was conceptualized through active brainstorming and sharing of ideas, pedagogical views and experiences about after-school education. Abstract associative notions based on *light* (e.g. "contrast, darkness, shadow, white, whiteness, lightness, snow, snowflakes" etc., Teacher diary notes from the planning stage) emerged during the discussion but they had to be adapted for primary student level, so the after school team finally decided that the popular tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which loosely relates to the notions of *white, whiteness, lightness, snow, snowflakes*, and at the same time is familiar to most students, would provide an appropriate basis not only for the smooth flow of the performance development, but also for the visual integration of the topic of *light*. As the leader of the after-school visual arts clubs (Sculpture, Painting and Drawing, Art Mix and Crafts), I proposed that my groups provide suitable decorations and setting for the show in accordance with the main theme. In this way, by choosing to work on the topic of the year, the after-school activities were planned to be a continuation and useful addition to the main curriculum. The notions of light which emerged during this discussion session as well as the integrative opportunities it brought up were recorded in my art teacher diary and were taken into consideration during the planning described below.

- 2) The results of this joint teacher discussion were taken into account when I decided on the art clubs' contributions to the show and on the educational goals of the particular art activities. Using my experience both as a teacher-researcher into integrative art practices and as an active contemporary visual artist, I carefully considered the topic of the show in relation to the aims of the art clubs I lead and to the possibility of encouraging knowledge integration through collaboration by introducing contemporary art forms into the art activities. Bearing in mind the research questions set at the beginning of this paper, I defined the educational tasks and the challenges of pedagogically adapting contemporary art forms to teaching visual arts to primary school students. The idea of teaching contemporary art understanding and appreciation through *bricolage*, i.e. using found materials, stemmed from the theoretical link discussed above between contemporary art and the integrative teaching approach. So I devised a plan for upcycling polyethylene (NEFAB, 2019) boards from computer packaging to construct an all-white site-specific installation of a castle gate. By being site-specific and bricolaged, this installation utilized contemporary art, and by being related to the annual show topic of the Snow White fairy tale, integrated the primary students' earlier experiences and knowledge of the tale.

This initial teacher planning, reflection and conceptualization of the teaching process was

pedagogically and theoretically developed in the form of notes and sketches and thoroughly recorded in my teacher diary which turned into a methodological tool that was valuable for the success of the project. It aimed at minimizing the possible unsatisfactory results and at the same time defined the expected outcomes of student learning about contemporary art and design. Thus it related to the main analytical notions set in this paper, concerning *collaboration*, *knowledge integration* and *art appreciation*, observed and reflected upon as a result of the integration of contemporary art forms into the primary after-school art clubs.

The specific idea for the project gives possible solutions to the above-mentioned research questions. The installation possessed the qualities of a contemporary art piece as it was planned to be an exclusively site-specific intervention in the school's public space; the artwork's materialization was based on the principles of *bricolage* (using found material); the castle gate was *remediated* (reproduced in an alternative material) and the main function of polyethylene as computer packaging was *re-contextualized* and the material *re/upcycled*. The fact that the installation was loosely inspired by Christo Javacheff's (2019) early site-specific artworks (Blackbourn 2011), wrapped in white canvas, was mentioned to the students as part of the teacher explanation of the installation at the early stages of the project classroom implementation. Designed in this way to use contemporary art forms, the installation's pedagogical outcomes were planned "to raise the young learners' awareness of the various sources for art inspiration" and "to encourage [their] creative abilities" to solve not only aesthetic problems but also practical issues related to design and construction (Teacher diary notes from the planning stage).

To adapt these ideas for primary school level and simultaneously to strengthen the integrative potential of *The Snow Castle* project, I drew inspiration for my teaching process not only from the notions of remediation, re-contextualization and bricolage but also from different school subjects and areas of life: "Art and Crafts, Design and Architecture, Natural Sciences and Environmental Studies, Mathematics (Geometry, Algebra, Combinatorics)" (Teacher diary notes from the planning stage) so as to observe the process of collaborative knowledge integration on students' design thinking and problem-solving during the implementation stage of the project. Such integrative knowledge construction solutions are in line with the current Finnish reform in basic education and their application to the teaching process through different projects facilitates the smooth introduction of the reform in my teaching.

To serve its purpose, the whole installation had to be completed in seven weeks (40 teaching hours of 45 minutes) prior to the show time as planned by the after-school team. Thirty-seven six-to-eight-year old primary school students from three after-school art groups (Sculpture, Art Mix/Crafts and Painting and Drawing) worked collaboratively to plan, construct and set up the castle gate on site.

Act: Classroom activities

The Snow Castle project was realized in two stages in the classroom – (1) Student Planning and (2) Building and Installing the Gate – each of which is described and analysed below. The teacher recorded her observations after each lesson and added the notes to the teacher diary. These notes reflect the challenges met during the project implementation and are part of the data collected for this study.

To answer the research questions set at the beginning, the processes that took place during the classroom stage of the project are discussed in relation to the following thematic fields: *collaboration, knowledge integration, art appreciation*, focusing on specific moments from the teaching-learning process where I observed them.

Student Planning

I devoted four teaching hours only to assigning the topic to the students of all art club groups and to preparing initial student sketches. During the first hour, the students were “to use drawing materials of their choice (pencils, markers, crayons, etc.) to sketch castle gates on A4 sheets of paper the way they imagine them from memory based on their previous experience” (Teacher diary notes from the planning stage). At this point I did not interfere or provide any visual materials to support the students’ thinking. The aim was to encourage the students’ creativity and to provoke their associative thinking without imposing teacher’s ideas on their art process. In the discussion which followed right after, I showed the students photos of existing castle gates from different historical periods and pointed out the main characteristic features of a castle and its entrance gates. We paid special attention to the linear shape and silhouette of the different gates, i.e. their design. This classroom activity called for integrative thinking as the students had to link old and new visual knowledge in the creation and refinement of their preliminary sketches. So, the order of these actions was not random. It was initially planned in the Teacher diary in this way and with these aims, and after the discussion the students were given time to revise the sketches if they found it necessary.

After completing the preliminary sketches and the initial discussion, the students were introduced to the main idea for the installation as described above and the material for its realization: polyethylene boards from computer packaging. The students from all three visual art groups were each given the chance to play freely for an hour with the building blocks in order to feel the material, the possibilities for construction it gives as well as its limitations (see Figure 2: digital photo from the process of work in the classroom). Getting to know the material they had to use for constructing the gate was of great importance for making a final group decision on designing the exact shape of the gate. (Teacher diary notes from the process of implementation).



Figure 2. Playing with the boards.

The next teaching hour was spent outside of the art classroom – in front of the main entrance to the assembly hall where the artwork was to be installed. This lesson served two purposes. Firstly, the teacher introduced and emphasized the importance of the place where the installation was to be exhibited. Transforming the main entrance of the assembly hall was a planned intervention into the public space of the school which had to set the mood for the show by letting the audience enter the performance space through a magic gate. Secondly, exhibiting the installation at a site that usually stays clear of art, demonstrated in practice that art can be found and appreciated in unusual spaces.

Moreover, as the installation was planned to be site-specific the students had to work in collaboration to take exact measurements with a measuring tape of the actual space that had to be covered by their artwork. This was an important step not only for the successful completion of the project but also from the point of view of guiding the integrative knowledge construction (Mercer, 1995). Bearing in mind the teaching material covered in the Mathematics classes both in Algebra and Geometry by the third-graders (who were the oldest students in the group), I guided the students to sketch, measure and record on paper the width and height of each of the four sections of the entrance, and carefully monitored this process so as to eliminate possible calculation mistakes that could have reflected negatively on the project's end result (Teacher diary notes from the process of implementation).

At this point, the students were prepared for the next step – they were made aware of the constructing possibilities of the material and the actual dimensions of the installation, and they had accumulated visual knowledge about the shape and design of castle gates. During the next teaching hour, the students worked as a team to design a simple, yet recognizable shape of the castle gate that they were to construct. They also gained awareness of the importance of good planning in design – a topic which was discussed at later stages of the project as well.

Although *The Snow Castle* project was implemented as part of the after-school visual arts clubs, the nature of the planned installation required the integration of knowledge obtained not only in core curriculum school subjects such as Visual Arts and Mathematics but also from various other areas of life and art. The process of work required the students to be involved in discussions of design issues, perspective and spatial relations and, by applying their knowledge of Algebra, Geometry and Combinatorics, reach certain conclusions that helped them complete the task. Apart from the purely formal problems that were solved, environmental topics of reusing, recycling, upcycling found materials into artworks, were a central part of the conversations during the art activities (Teacher diary notes from the process of implementation). These discussions not only broadened the students' knowledge of the necessity to preserve nature and the possible ways to do so by recycling, but also demonstrated how seemingly useless materials can be *re-contextualized*, *bricolaged* and *remediated* to be turned into a “highly personalized, continuous and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly and re-assembly” (Deuze, 2006, p. 7), called a work of art – in our case, a site-specific installation. This way, the primary students' general knowledge about visual arts, gained during the regular art lessons, was upgraded through the after-school art activities to include contemporary art forms and approaches.

Building and installing the gate

The whole installation was built, finalized, and installed in twenty-two teaching hours over the course of three weeks. The total size of the installation was 224 cm in height by 322 cm in width. It consisted of six separate boards – one board on each side (136 cm/84 cm), two boards at the base of the gate (114 cm/77 cm) and two oval-shaped boards at the top of the gate (77 cm/110 cm) (See Figure 3: digital photo from the process of work in the classroom). These boards were built by gluing together polyethylene building blocks of different sizes – bigger (44 cm/46 cm; 47 cm/32 cm) and smaller ones (12 cm/18 cm; 21 cm/24 cm; 31 cm/37 cm) (Teacher diary notes from the planning stage).

At this stage of the project the students, guided by the teacher, discussed their approach to building the gate. After once again comparing the building blocks, the students made logical links with their previous building experiences (for example, playing with Lego, building sand castles, etc.), and on their own arrived at the conclusion that bigger building blocks should be

used at the base of the gate in order to secure its stability. The smaller blocks were more suitable for shaping the topmost parts of the castle gate sides. This was recorded in the Teacher diary notes from the process of implementation as discussed earlier in this paper.

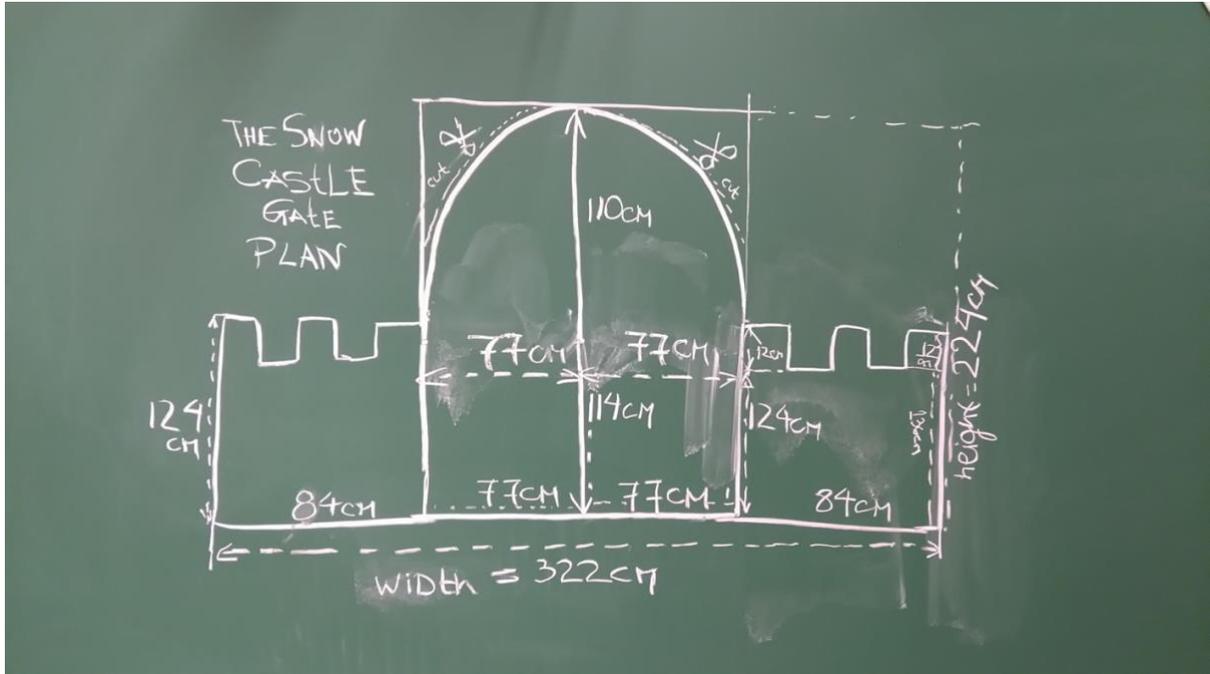


Figure 3. Plan of the castle gate with measurements.

During the building process the students displayed their ability to solve not only dimensional problems such as the ones described above but also constructional ones. One such successful in-process problem-solving occurred after two hours of hard team work during which the students applied white glue on the thin sides of the boards and had to explore options to keep the structure together until it dried. This was recorded in the ‘digital photos from the process of work in the classroom’ as discussed above. Photos 4 and 5 illustrate this point of the work in the classroom. In fact, the original teacher plan to use “white construction glue” (Teacher diary notes from the planning stage) had to be reconsidered and altered. This work-in-process challenge triggered collaborative group discussion about the use of different glues in the classroom and their gluing properties. Finally, the group together with the teacher decided to use fast-drying hot-gun glue instead of white construction glue. For safety reasons, the teacher’s active assistance was required when working with the hot-glue gun (Teacher diary notes from the process of implementation). Hot-glue was applied on the thin sides (4.5 cm thick) of each building block and the students working in a team kept the boards together for a few minutes until the glue dried completely. The whole castle gate was built, shaped and decorated with small silvery sparkling semi-spheres, in sixteen teaching hours.



Figure 4 and 5. Gluing the boards with white construction glue.

The gate was installed on site for two teaching hours prior to the after-school show. As a result of their good initial planning the students saw that the four pieces of the installation fit perfectly in front of the glass door. The light weight of the installation material allowed it to be securely taped to the glass doors without posing any danger to the show participants and guests, and to stay there until the end of the performance without falling down (See Figure 6: a digital photo of the final installation on site).



Figure 6. The finished artwork – The Snow Castle Gate – installed on site.

Discussion

The results from the project implementation confirmed the theoretical assumption that contemporary art forms, expressive devices and materials are a suitable source of inspiration for devising integrative teaching-learning modules. *The Snow Castle* site-specific installation is an example of an integrative project, specially designed to make use of students' previous experience and knowledge gained from other school subjects and to transfer this knowledge onto a new learning situation. The results from the project suggest that knowledge integration is an in-process event which does not always have to be overt or pointed out by the teacher. Throughout the project, knowledge integration was strengthened by collaborative problem-solving and discussions on various topics arising from problems experienced during the

process of work. The contemporary nature of the installation sparked discussions on topics varying from sketching a design of the castle gate that would be possible to materialize; to using mathematical knowledge in the calculation of the installation's dimensions; to applying knowledge and experience of space and dimensions as well as of other materials in analyzing the limitations of the found material; to the aesthetic question of *bricolaging* as a source of inspiration and art creation; to recycling materials and the importance of nature preservation. All of these topics were envisaged by the teacher as early as the planning stage of the project and later they really emerged naturally in the process of collaborative in-class discussions and problem-solving situations. Moreover, as observed above, the nature, purpose and dimensions of the site-specific installation, required constant team work and coordination of activities between the students and the teacher at all stages of the classroom project implementation. In this way, collaboration was a prerequisite from the very beginning of the planning stage of the project. Its successful implementation confirmed that the project-based integrated approach to teaching visual arts to primary school students is a suitable one. It also revealed the possibilities to encourage collaborative learning by introducing untraditional contemporary art forms and alternative materials into the art teaching process.

The results from *The Snow Castle* project, described above as well as the active student collaboration supported by the project's conceptual framework and its contemporary materialization provide an answer to the first research question and confirm the positive effects of the integrated approach as a holistic socio-constructivist approach to leading the visual arts after-school activities. Such an opportunity for the holistic development and well-being of students is in line with the recommendations of the Finnish National Agency for Education (Opetushallitus) for the provision of after-school activities (Opetushallitus, 2011). Planned as a multi-disciplinary collaborative classroom activity, the project and the process of its implementation was not only in accordance with recommendations set in the reformed National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Opetushallitus, 2015) but also proved its benefits on a more general level for the students' future development of transversal skills and knowledge construction (Opetushallitus, 2015).

As stated in the theoretical section of this paper, in its essence, contemporary art nowadays is eclectic and draws inspiration from everything and anything in the surrounding world, allowing the artist to experiment with ideas, expressive devices and surprising materials. Therefore, my work on this project confirmed my preliminary ideas reflected in the theoretical part of this paper and in the Teacher diary planning notes, that teaching contemporary art forms to young learners is by its nature integrative as it gives the art teacher the opportunity to step out of the traditional techniques and art forms and to integrate multiple sources of information and inspiration into the planning of the art lessons. Thus, the utilization of the integrative nature of contemporary art forms and materials in the process of teaching visual

arts provides an answer to the second research question, demonstrating that the pedagogical outcomes of such intervention foster integrative thinking and knowledge construction in primary students as demonstrated by the successful completion of *The Snow Castle* project.

Last but not least, one of the main purposes of art education, be it formal (in the regular art classes) or informal (in the after-school), is to equip the students not only with the necessary skills to create art but also with a set of mental tools to comprehend its meaning and to appreciate it. Contemporary art in all its forms is often a puzzle, an idiosyncratic accumulation of ideas in space or time which is hard to understand. For it to be fully understood and enjoyed, the viewer has to be aware of its origins and principles. The conceptual idea behind *The Snow Castle* project encouraged creative thinking by linking a fairy tale literary text with a contemporary art form such as a site-specific installation and a contemporary mode of expression – *bricolage*, *remediation*, *re-contextualizing* and *upcycling* of seemingly useless materials. The classwork processes of planning and creating the installation were modelled to represent a real-life artistic work where (bricolaging) found materials were seen as a valuable source of inspiration which could generate the project's artistic idea and hold the artistic value of the installation. This is how the introduction of contemporary art forms and materials broadened the young learners' views about visual art and its many variations. Developing the students' art appreciation abilities through introducing contemporary art forms into primary student art education is yet another answer to the pedagogical outcomes of the project, which in practice showed to the students some less conventional paths of viewing and interpreting their surroundings as a continuous source of inspiration.

Conclusions and Implications

The integrated project presented in this paper can serve as an example of a successful practical application of some of the guidelines set in the newly-reformed Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Opetushallitus, 2015). The study reveals the connection between contemporary art forms and other spheres of knowledge, and the possibilities this gives for the introduction of project-based integrative teaching and learning. The conclusions drawn from this action research confirm that collaborative knowledge construction, integrative thinking, and art appreciation can be promoted through the introduction of contemporary art forms in the visual art classroom at the primary school level.

One of the suggested pedagogical implications that can follow from this integrative project is that the use of contemporary art in the visual arts primary education can enable transferability of knowledge and skills from different subject areas by allowing free appropriation, re-contextualization, recombination, collage and bricolage of images (Deuze, 2006; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Bolter & Grusin, 1999), as well as recycling and re-use of found materials, old ideas and modes of expression for the creation of new original

works of art. The successful project implementation on a primary school level demonstrated that contemporary art forms are not a reserved territory for upper educational levels only but, through teacher planning and understanding of their essence, such practices and forms of expression and representation can be adapted to suit the pedagogical needs for knowledge integration on any school level. In summary, this paper suggests one way of demonstrating *how* to expand “curriculum horizons” (Watts, 2009, p. 229) and utilize “the new and the contemporary” (Watts, 2009, p. 229) so as to educate “multi-literate” (Räsänen, 2015) individuals prepared for the challenges of the future.

Further research into the application of integrative visual arts teaching through contemporary art forms could contribute to a deeper understanding of its pedagogical benefits for turning the teaching/learning process into an engaging creative experience where students solve problems that do not arise from artificially created lesson abstractions but emerge from real-life artistic situations.

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