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*Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: The
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Numerous educational theorists and practitioners (Biesta, 2013, 2017; Dewey, 1934, 2012, 2021; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1990; Malaguzzi, 1996; Devjak et al., 2012) have long argued and demonstrated that the development of artistic domains in education is not just an “add-on”, but represents a fundamental mode of expression and thinking, as well as a holistic development of the child. They advocate approaches that recognise art as a medium for exploring and understanding the world and one’s role in it, while encouraging independent thinking, (self-)reflection and active engagement beyond knowledge acquisition and socialisation. The awareness of the importance of art in education, especially as a means of expression and communication, led to the development of the SKUM project (Developing Communication Skills through Cultural and Artistic Education), the results of which are comprehensively presented in the monograph *Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: The SKUM Project*. The project, which ran from 2017 to 2022, was one of the most important research initiatives in the field of education and focused on developing links between educational institutions, artists and cultural organisations. The main goal of the project was to improve students’ communication skills, which was achieved through the collaboration of 32 consortium partners and 224 educators from different educational institutions. Through this network, almost 3,000 kindergarten children, more



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than 4,700 primary school children and over 2,000 secondary school students were involved. In addition, 25 artists from seven different art disciplines, 20 cultural institutions and 24 experts from public partner organisations took part.

The intensive collaboration, in which artists were integrated into daily teaching practice, offered a new perspective on education and encouraged the development of innovative pedagogical approaches that contributed significantly to the creativity of the participating children and young people. In addition to the aspects already mentioned, the project placed particular emphasis on the development of individual identity and empathy (Kroflič, 2019), which was promoted through the aesthetic experience of engaging with various forms of artistic expression, such as music, theatre, visual arts and literature. Collaboration with theatres, museums, galleries and other cultural institutions offered children and young people the opportunity to learn in authentic artistic contexts and thus broaden their understanding of the complexity of emotions and experiences. In this way, aesthetic experience became a crucial component of experiential learning and understanding of the world on an intellectual, emotional and social level.

The final phase of the project coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated prolonged school closures, which presented a new challenge: overcoming educational barriers in remote learning locations while coping with students' emotional distress and declining motivation (Štirn Janota et al., 2022). However, the results show that through the creative use of digital technologies, the participating artists were able to maintain their artistic engagement, reduce social isolation and reaffirm the value of education.

In the introduction to the monograph *Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: SKUM Project*, editors Kroflič, Rutar and Borota outline the core ideas of the project and describe the methods used for planning and evaluating art education. They emphasise the refinement of the five-step model, which is based on reflection and communicative pedagogy. This model requires educators to act as reflective practitioners, engaging in critical dialogue with children, young people and other professionals, while systematically documenting the pedagogical process. The diverse documentation, including evaluations and reflections, enables continuous monitoring of educational activities, with a focus on responding to the initiatives of the participating children and young people. In the SKUM project, this approach formed the basis for a participatory planning and monitoring framework that ensured the active involvement of all of the stakeholders and contributed to a deeper understanding of the educational process and the development of innovative pedagogical practices.

The monograph *Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: The SKUM Project* is divided into nine chapters, each containing scientific and theoretical contributions by the participants in the SKUM project. In the first chapter, Kroflič examines education through art and first-person artistic experience as key components of contemporary education within phenomenology and reform pedagogy. He defines the process as a dynamic dialogue between an individual and a work of art, which promotes cognitive, emotional and motivational engagement. This holistic involvement enhances perception, self-reflection and personal growth. Kroflič also emphasises the importance of actively engaging with art as a viewer, listener or reader. Such experiences cannot be conveyed through explanations, but arise through direct artistic interaction, which deepens understanding and interpretation. Finally, he presents examples from the SKUM project, highlighting participatory gallery visits, artistic explorations of educational content and storytelling through photo narratives. These approaches allowed the participating students to creatively express personal experiences, especially during pandemic-related isolation.

The second chapter, written by Rutar, Kalin, Kožuh and Borota, addresses the importance of fostering encouraging, open and innovative learning environments in the context of arts and cultural education. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of the different types of learning environments and their impact on the educational process. They emphasise that in order to effectively integrate these environments into schools, it is crucial to innovate the pedagogical core, which includes the development of learning objectives, methods and resources, as well as interaction between students and educators. In addition, they emphasise the need to establish “formative organisations” supported by strategic leadership and continuous assessment of learning outcomes, and to promote openness to partnerships that foster collaboration with families, communities, higher education institutions and other schools. An important component of an innovative learning environment is the arts, with their transformative power to stimulate imagination, intuition and creativity. Within the SKUM project, the authors identify four key principles that position the arts as a fundamental element of education: active participation of students, teachers and artists in shaping the learning process; connectivity and openness of the learning environment to the wider community; facilitation of artistic and intuitive experiences for a deeper understanding of learning content; and diversity and authenticity of artistic experiences. The interweaving of these principles forms the basis for a learning environment in which art promotes personal development and integrates the cognitive, emotional and imaginative dimensions of learning.

The next chapter provides insights into the significance of artistic experiences in the educational process. Smrtnik Vitulić, Sicherl Kafol, Korošec, Podobnik, Prosen and Geršak use a content analysis of evaluations of the project activities to show that these experiences transcended the boundaries of specific educational environments and raise awareness of the importance of artistic activities in a broader social context. As a result of the project implementation, participants in the SKUM project emphasised the acquisition of new artistic experiences and the development of communicative skills, as well as the acquisition of new knowledge and reflective skills that foster interpersonal relationships, emotional development, personal growth and creativity. The analysis also reveals that future educators in both formal and informal education need more structured training to effectively incorporate artistic activities into the teaching and learning process. This is crucial, as artistic experiences can change not only the acceptance and perception of art, but also the learning and teaching process itself. Such a pedagogical approach enriches learning processes while contributing to the holistic development of the individual and society.

The fourth chapter, written by Podgornik, Kalin and Jeznik, deals with the role of educational institutions as cultural centres within the local community. The authors analyse the extent and nature of cooperation between kindergartens, schools, artists and cultural institutions, finding that although some educational institutions had already collaborated with other organisations prior to the project, the range of activities expanded considerably during the implementation of the project. These activities included various art exhibitions, photo exhibitions in galleries and libraries, film screenings, celebrations during public holidays, choir performances, cultural bazaar events, the Day of the Arts and much more, which were reported on in various media such as local newspapers, social media, radio, websites and television. Throughout the project, it became clear how important and challenging it is for educational institutions, local communities and individuals to work together and promote the culture of dialogue. Educational institutions and local communities became key partners, supporting each other through collaboration and co-creating learning and development opportunities for individuals and the whole community.

Another discussion deals with the promotion of narrative competence in education through various artistic languages. Štirn Janota et al. emphasise that storytelling is a fundamental starting point and a skill through which we think and articulate ourselves, enabling empathetic immersion in the perspectives of others and critical engagement with social reality. As part of the SKUM project, an analysis of the ongoing and final evaluations and the educators' reflections showed that the participating children and young people developed an

improved ability to observe interpersonal relationships and social and natural phenomena. Through storytelling, the students gained a broader understanding of the topics covered and were able to express themselves more easily. The analysis also reveals changes in the participating educators and artists, as the chosen documentation method allowed a deeper insight into the learning processes. This led to a more subtle perception of the students and deeper reflection on their own role in the pedagogical process, while promoting reflection on the meaning of the topics covered and the teaching methods used.

Chapter seven offers an examination of the role of the artist and artistic experience in the educational process by exploring and analysing the understanding of artistic principles through the processes of creation, co-creation, re-creation and mediation. Author Bednarik Sudec not only emphasises the interaction between pedagogical and creative work, but also highlights the integration of different artistic perspectives and approaches within the SKUM project. The children involved in the process engaged in practices of observation, creative expression and public participation in different spatial contexts, an approach deeply rooted in the long-standing traditions of art and museum education within various gallery discourses. The pedagogical approach implemented was oriented towards the paradigm of teaching through artistic practices, which equates aesthetic education with intellectual development and is based on the notion that human existence is defined by a holistic interplay of interests and abilities (Read, 2002). The pedagogical process described in this chapter was therefore designed to promote the comprehensive personal development of the individual, with artistic experiences playing a fundamental role in the development of cognitive, emotional and social competences.

Chapter eight is based on the UNESCO (2006) and European Commission (2016) guidelines, which author Rotar Pance has thoroughly analysed to show their impact on the development of cultural and arts education in Slovenia. This is reflected in the annual organisation of the Cultural Bazaar and numerous other forms of cooperation between various actors and institutions in the field of cultural education. As part of the SKUM project, educational institutions, artists and cultural organisations took part in five events in which students actively participated as performers, listeners and creators in six artistic fields. A unique challenge and opportunity arose during the pandemic, when schools acted as local cultural centres and encouraged students to use information and communication technologies creatively. During the pedagogical process, a new teaching model emerged that emphasises the integration of artistic creativity and close collaboration between teachers and artists. This model promotes participatory learning, whereby students acquire knowledge through

their own creativity and active involvement in artistic activities. Particular emphasis is placed on developing communication skills in the language of music, enabling students to develop aesthetic sensitivity and a deeper understanding of artistic processes through improvisation, ensemble performance and reflection on their own artistic expression.

The final chapter looks at the role of professionals and artists in fostering creative storytelling and expression. Baloh and Birsa emphasise that the personal participation of all of those involved means that art becomes a key factor in the holistic development of children and not just a means of expression. In order to promote storytelling skills in preschool and school children, the authors emphasise the importance of listening to stories and storytelling itself, highlighting various supportive strategies. They find that activities are only effective if three key dimensions are addressed: expressiveness, playfulness and communication. As part of the SKUM project, they investigate how educators foster children's storytelling and visual art skills, and how artists are involved in this process. The results show that the continuous interweaving of content from various curriculum areas encouraged the sensitivity of children, who even created their own book with an ongoing story. The participating artist entered the project through movement activities and emphasised the importance of the active role of educators, even when other staff are involved. The project work confirms that an approach combining observation, reflection, creation and supportive strategies contributes significantly to the empowerment of pedagogical staff, and consequently to the development of children's storytelling and visual expression skills.

The monograph *Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: The SKUM Project* offers a valuable insight into the role of art in education, while at the same time serving as a practical guide for educators who want to enrich their teaching with innovative artistic approaches. The analyses of the activities carried out as part of the SKUM project highlight existing shortcomings in the education system and suggest improvements to pedagogical processes based on examples of good practice. The results show that art can be an indispensable part of the education system, promoting the development of children and young people into well-rounded, critically thinking and creative individuals.

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