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Categories of teaching through arts activities in elementary school. Educators' reactions

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Abstract

This paper rests on the hypothesis that the teaching-through-the-arts process can present differences depending on the educational role ascribed to the arts. It was investigated if the educators felt that the teaching situation in which art was used as a teaching medium was different to that in which art functioned as an aesthetic approach of a subject. Two activities were designed in which art plays the role of a teaching medium (TMA) and two activities in which art is the teaching approach (TAA). Final-year pre-service preschool and primary school teachers were trained to use these activities. The trainees used the TMA and TAA with pre-schoolers or children in the first grade of primary school. Following the completion of every activity, the implementers answered the questionnaire developed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 24 closed-ended questions in which the subjects were called upon to grade various aspects of every activity on a scale of 1-5 (Likert). Thus, the TMA and TAA were examined and compared in terms of their objectives, processes and results. As the results show, when the role ascribed to art is that of a teaching medium, the technical characteristics of art are taken advantage of more, whereas when the role of art is that of a teaching approach, then teaching functions more as an aesthetic process, through which the children are given the opportunity to deal with the taught subject in an original manner and produce new knowledge about it.

Key words

Arts activities, aesthetic teaching, elementary school

Introduction

Within the context of formal elementary education, arts education is not limited only to the hours of "arts" classes in which the arts function as distinct cognitive teaching subjects. In accordance with a tendency that has appeared in the last decades known as "arts integration" (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin, 2007), contemporary studies have turned to the "effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the other skills and subjects of the curriculum" (Deasy, 2003, p. 3). Thus, during the teaching process, art is frequently ascribed the role of a teaching tool (Bamford, 2006; Catterall, 2002b; Deasy, 2002; Rooney, 2004; Walker, Tabone, & Weltsek, 2011; Winner, & Hetland, 2007). In other words, given that involvement in the arts is an attractive activity for children, there is an effort—frequently successful—to create a more pleasant and effective learning environment. Based on this, "teaching through the arts" is becoming more and more popular, particularly among generalist teachers. Within this context, scholars are seeking either broader benefits (physical, social, emotional or intellectual), or a positive influence on other school subjects. It is indicative that theatrical activities were found to improve verbal skills (Catterall, 2002a; Kelner, & Flynn, 2006; Walker, McFadden, Tabone, & Finkelstein, 2011; Walker, Tabone, &



Weltsek, 2011), while music contributed to a fuller understanding of certain mathematical concepts and improved spatial-temporal perception (Bilhartz, Bruhn, & Olson, 2000; Jausovec, Jausovec & Gerlic, 2006; Scripp, 2002). Given these encouraging results, it seems fitting to explore the qualitative characteristics of activities that correspond to teaching through the arts. This paper rests on the assumption that the process of teaching through the arts can present differences depending on the educational role ascribed to the arts. In teaching-through-the-arts activities in current curricula art usually plays the role of a teaching medium. That is, most times, art helps create an attractive learning environment, and the educational focus is not on art itself, but rather, on the subject that is being taught. What follows is a study of the possibility of discovering new and more benefits of teaching through the arts if, during the design process of such activities, art is given another role, that of an approach to the taught subject. This issue may be linked to serious changes in arts education policy (Sotiropoulou, in press), insofar as it has to do with the methodological basis upon which the pre-school and primary school teachers stand to utilize the arts as part of their teaching work.

Methodology

Objective

What follows is a look at and comparison of arts activities in which art plays the role of the teaching medium and arts activities in which art functions as a way with which to approach a taught subject. The hypothesis is, that depending on which of these two roles is ascribed to art during the designing of an activity, a different teaching situation emerges and leads to a different level of arts integration. In fact, we hypothesize that when the role ascribed to art is that of a teaching medium, the technical characteristics of art are taken advantage of more, whereas when the role of art is that of a teaching approach of the taught subjects, then teaching functions more as an aesthetic process. Based on this hypothesis, an exploratory study was designed, aiming to show if the educators who used teaching activities through the arts felt that the teaching situation in which art was used as a medium of teaching was different to that in which art functioned as an aesthetic approach of a subject.

Two types of activities were designed: those corresponding to the first case will henceforth be referred to as teaching medium activities (TMA), while the others will be referred to as teaching approach activities (TAA). After the activities were used, they were examined as corresponding to the two types of activities, and compared in terms of their objectives, processes and results.

Design of the study – Means of collecting data

The study was carried out in four stages.

In the first stage, arts activities were designed to teach “the correspondence of phoneme-grapheme in lowercase letters /o/, /i/ and /a/”. Two activities were designed for each category, i.e. two TMA (in which art plays the role of a teaching medium) and two TAA (in which art is the teaching approach). For example, TMA were designed in which the visual arts and physical expression mainly serve the learning of phonemes and graphemes. These arts were used to create an attractive environment in which to teach the subject. In one of these activities, the teacher handed out plastilene and asked children to make one of the three letters being taught /o/, /i/ and /a. Afterwards, the teacher put a scarf around a child’s eyes and placed before him the grapheme one of his classmates had made. With his eyes closed, the



child felt the plastilene forms to find the grapheme he had in front of him, while his classmates looked on. Taking the scarf off, he looked to see if he had correctly identified the grapheme. The same was done with all the other children. In another TMA, children were called upon to find various ways in which to form with their bodies the graphemes being taught: with their extremities (hands, fingers) or with all of their bodies, or in pairs (that is, two children working together to form the grapheme) etc. TAA were designed whose goal was for children to express the manner in which they connect the knowledge they have about each letter with their personal experiences. On a practical level, in TAA children were called upon to deal with the taught subject as an aesthetic stimulus. In one of the activities tried out as TAA, the educator asked the children what a person enunciating the sound /a/ could be feeling (e.g. surprise, fear, pain). Afterwards, the children were called upon to suggest how /a/ can be called out in each of these cases, and how their facial expression would change. Based on their suggestions concerning the phonemes, the children created small collective stories which they then went on to present as skits. The same was done with the phonemes /o/ and /i/. At the end, each child chose one of the three letters, printed it on a piece of paper (in whatever size he wanted) and made a picture based on the story the group had created around this letter, or independent of the story.

In the second stage of the study, final-year pre-service preschool and primary school teachers were trained to use the activities.

During the third stage of the study, the trainees from the second stage used two TMA and two TAA with pre-schoolers or children in the first grade of primary school. There was thus the opportunity to repeatedly investigate isolated cases (Christensen, 2000). The time in which the activities were used was chosen to coincide with the time the particular subject would have been taught normally. The sessions were recorded and transcribed. Directly after the implementation of each activity, each of the trainee teachers wrote their notes in the form of a diary.

In the last stage, the trainee teachers answered a questionnaire devised for the purposes of this study. In it, they recorded their views of the activities.

In total, all the subjects of the sample using the activities submitted the transcription, diary, the work the children produced if this existed in a form that could be submitted (e. g. drawings), and the questionnaire for each of the activities.

Sample

The implementation of the activities was assigned to pre-service preschool and primary teachers. Fifty-seven students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Crete (3 groups of 18, 19 and 19 students, in the spring term of the 2009-10 academic year, and the winter and spring terms of the 2010-2011 academic year respectively) were trained to use the activities. The training was carried out as part of a seminar on "Arts in Education" which was conducted in the Department of Preschool Education of the University of Crete. The students in the sample used the activities with a total of 688 children in kindergarten and the first grade of primary school. The trainee teachers were not informed, until after the collection of the data, about the design differences between TMA and TAA, nor about the goals of the study.

Questionnaire

Following the completion of every activity, the implementers answered the questionnaire developed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 24 closed-ended questions and 24 open-ended questions. All the questions had to do with various qualitative characteristics in using each activity. In the closed-ended questions, the subjects were called upon to grade various aspects of the activity on a scale of 1-5 (Likert). Each of these closed-ended questions was accompanied by an open-ended question of “why”, in which the subjects were given the opportunity of arguing their assessment in words. While the questions could be organized along three axes (the goals, process and results of each activity that was used), in the questionnaire they appeared in a different order so that one answer was not influenced by a previous one. The content of some questions was similar, but worded so either the basic hypothesis of the study could be confirmed by the higher grading of an activity, or so that it could be confirmed by the lower grading.

Results

This presentation contains the results from the answers of the pre-service preschool and primary teachers to the closed-ended questions of the questionnaire. The results are organized and presented on 3 axes: those that have to do with the goals, the process and the outcomes of every activity. Based on this organization, a comparison is carried out between cases in which art is used as a teaching medium, and cases where art is used as a teaching approach. In the following bar charts, the first column indicates the answers that have to do with TMA, while the second indicates those that have to do with TAA.

In order to test if there are any significant differences of the means between the two sorts of activities, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test is used.

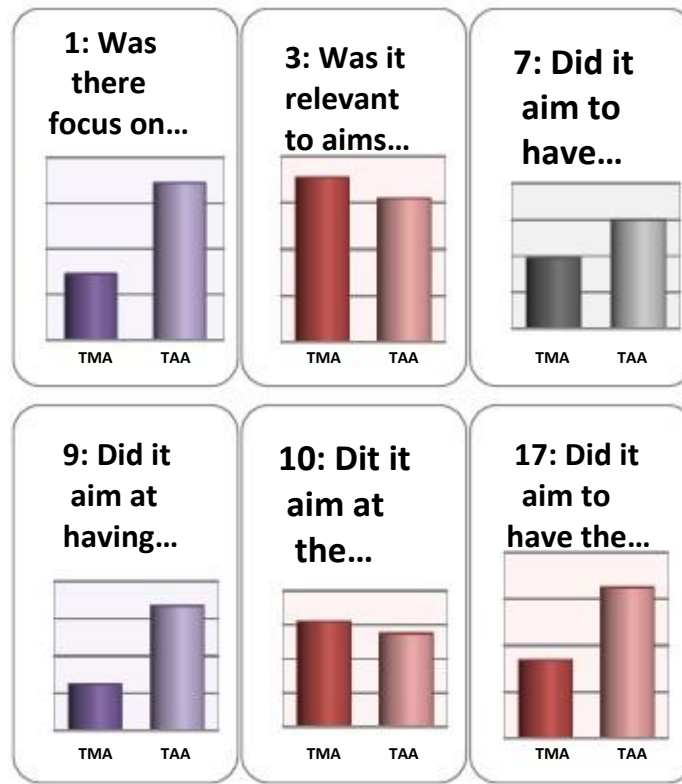
Results in terms of the objectives of the activities

The questions posed to examine the objectives of TMA and TAA were the following:

1. In using the activity, were you more focused on the aesthetic than the language objectives?
3. Was the activity relevant to a subject and aims that are included in the curriculum?
7. Did the activity aim to have the children interpret the subject they were taught?
9. Did the activity aim at having the children express themselves emotionally?
10. Did the activity aim at the children’s intellectual development?
17. Did the activity aim to have the children to function holistically (intellectually, emotionally and physically at the same time)?

The results from the comparison between TMA and TAA concerning these questions appear in Picture 1.

Picture 1: Barcharts on the objectives of the activities



As it seems, with a difference that is highly statistically significant, the subjects using the activities stated that when applying the TAA they were more focused on the aesthetic objectives than they were when using the TMA (question 1). They also believed that TAA aim more than TMA at the emotional (question 9) and holistic (question 17) development of the children. In fact, in all the three questions, they gave highly statistically significant higher scores to TAA. Furthermore, they believed that TAA aim to have children interpret the taught subject (question 7) at a statistically significant higher level than TMA. In terms of whether the activity was relevant to the subject and the goals included in the curriculum (question 3), and if the activity aims at the intellectual development of the children (question 10), both types of activities received high scores, but the TMA scores were marginally higher and not statistically significant as opposed to the TAA.

Results with regard to the procedure of the activities

The questions having to do with the characteristics of the procedure of the activities used as TMA and TAA were the following:

5. Did the activity give children opportunities to design and decide their own actions?
6. Did the activity constitute a creative process?
12. Were the children actively engaged during the activity?
13. Did the activity keep the children interested?
15. Did the activity elicit humor from the children?
16. Did the activity constitute an innovative process?

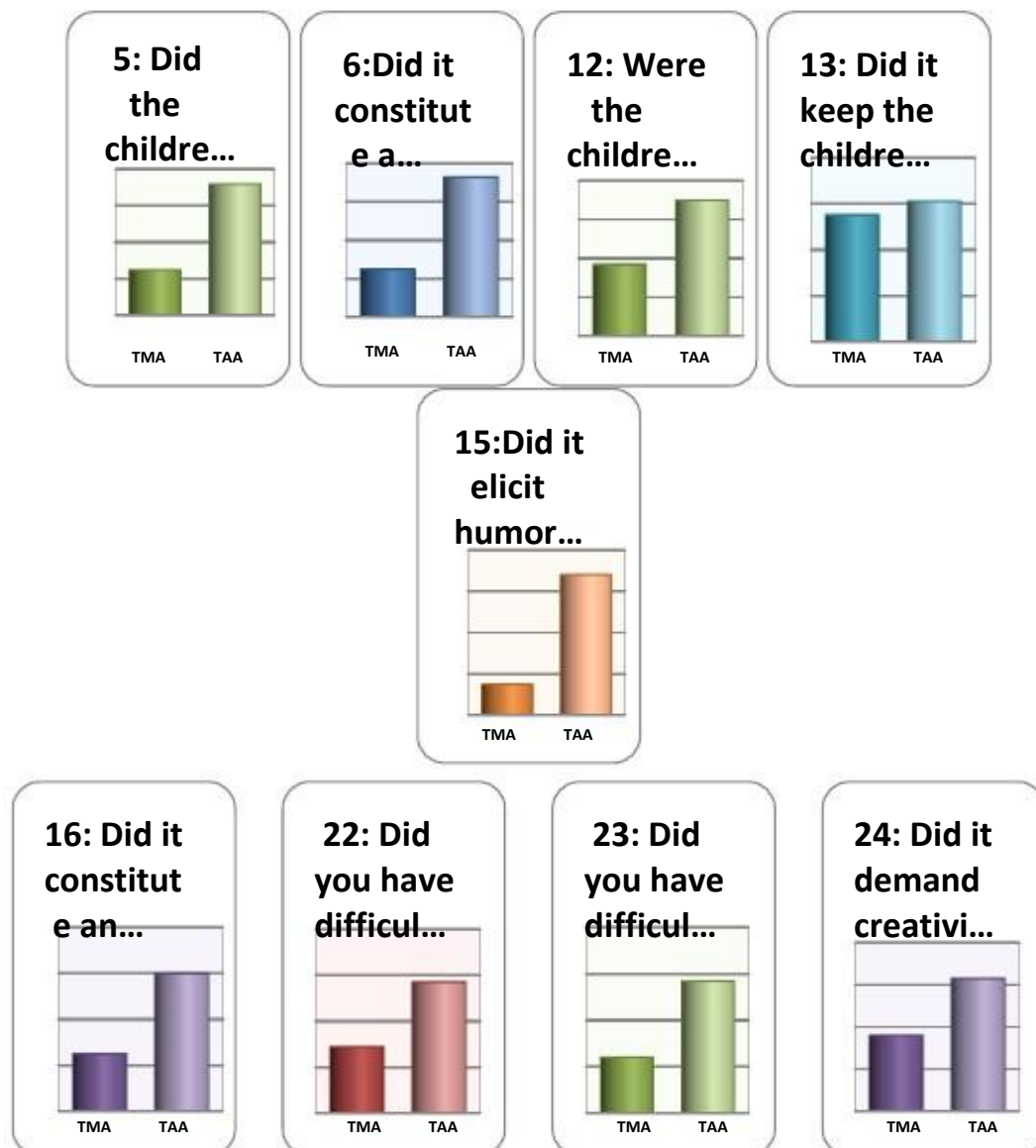
22. Did you have difficulty preparing the activity?

23. Did you have difficulty using the activity?

24. Did the activity demand creativity from you?

The results from the comparison between TMA and TAA concerning these questions appear in Picture 2.

Picture 2: Barcharts on the procedure of the activities



As can be seen by the bar charts representing the activities, the teachers deemed that in using TAA as compared to TMA, children decided on their own actions to a highly statistically significant degree (question 5), and that they were actively engaged most of the time (question 12). Also, the TAA with an equally great difference from the TMA, were

considered to constitute a creative (question 6), and innovative process (question 16) and elicited humor from the children (question 15). Also, both the preparation (question 22), as well as the implementation (question 23) of the TAA were difficult to a highly statistically significant degree for the teachers and required their own creative activation more (question 24) than the TMA. In contrast, there were no statistically significant differences between TMA and TAA in question 13, as the subjects indicated that both the TMA and TAA kept the children highly interested.

Results on the outcomes and learning results of the activities

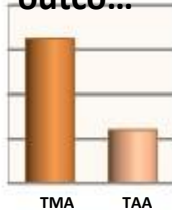
The questions posed as to the outcomes and the learning results of TMA and TAA were:

2. Did the activity lead to outcomes that were predetermined by you?
4. Did the activity lead to emerging outcomes on the taught subject?
8. Did the activity help children gain knowledge about the subject?
11. Did the activity bring about homogeneous outcomes?
14. Did the activity make the children create unusual/original outcomes with regard to the taught subject?
18. Did the activity cause the children to reproduce something given?
19. Did the activity cause the children to create some kind of artistic work?
20. Did the activity contribute to the children's aesthetic development?
21. Did the activity contribute to the children's intellectual development?

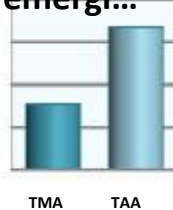
The results from the comparison between TMA and TAA concerning these questions appear in Picture 3.

Picture 3: Barcharts on the outcomes and learning results of the activities

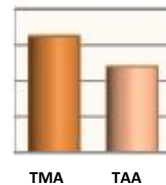
2: Did it lead to outco...



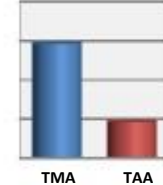
4: Did it lead to emergi...



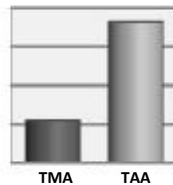
8: Did it help childre...



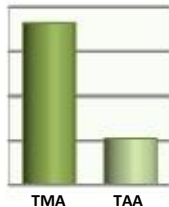
11: Did it bring about...



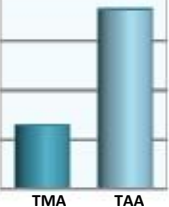
14: Did it make the...



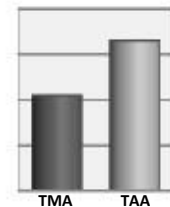
18: Did it cause the children...



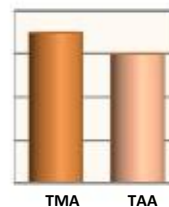
19: Did it cause the children...



20: Did it contribute to the...



21: Did it contribute to the...



After processing the questions in terms of the outcomes and learning results of TMA and TAA, it seems that according to the subjects, TMA with highly statistically significant differences brought about more predetermined (question 2) and homogeneous (question 11) outcomes with regard to the taught subject, as they caused the children to reproduce something given (question 18). In contrast, TAA were different by highly statistically significant means, as the subjects felt that the outcomes the children produced with regard to the taught subject were to a greater extent emergent (question 4), unusual/original (question 14) and constituted the creation of an artistic work (question 19). Furthermore, in their answers for the TAA, the subjects gave highly statistically significant means in terms of whether they contribute to the aesthetic development of children (question 20). Regarding the contribution to the intellectual development of the children (question 21), both types of activities received high scores.

Discussion



In the exploratory inquiry described above, the idea was examined that when the arts are integrated in the teaching process, they can be used in two ways, which lead to two different teaching situations. On the one hand, art can be used in the teaching of a curriculum subject as a teaching medium, constituting an attractive framework for children for the subject being taught. Activities referred to as TMA were used to study this case. On the other hand, the arts may function as a field for the aesthetic approach of a taught subject and give the children opportunities to discover the aesthetic dimension of this subject (Sotiropoulou, 2012). This case is the TAA used in the inquiry.

As the results show, these two cases lead to two teaching situations in which those who applied the activities, for the most part, observe highly statistically significant differences in terms of the goals (Picture 1), process (Picture 2) and results (Picture 3).

More specifically, the pre-service teachers who applied the TMA focused more on the subject they were teaching than on the aesthetic nature of the activity. Furthermore, they felt that TMA furthered the aims of the curriculum, attempted and succeeded in helping the children develop intellectually, prompted children to reproduce given works, and produced relatively more homogeneous outcomes. Also with regard to TMA, it is interesting that the trainees who applied them felt that they were simpler, both in terms of preparation, as well as in terms of application, and they stated that these activities do not require their creative participation to a great degree.

On the other hand, it seems that the subjects who applied them ascribed to the TAA more child-centered and creative characteristics. They felt that these activities were more focused on aesthetic-artistic goals. They also felt that TAA, much more so than TMA, encouraged the children to interpret the taught subject, to act holistically, to decide on their own actions, to function with humor, to create emerging and original outcomes with regard to the taught subject, and to develop aesthetically. The implementers also characterized TAA, to a greater degree than TMA, as creative and innovative. At the same time, they stated that TAA were more complex, both in preparation and utilization, and more demanding in terms of the educator's own creative ability.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that art has the ability to increase children's interest in the learning process as, in answering the relevant question, the subjects who applied the activities, gave high, and statistically non-differentiated scores to both TMA and TAA.

Given that in existing curricula educators are usually encouraged to use TMA, while TAA appear rarely, it is possible that TAA constitute the content of a new version of arts education, one with a vividly creative and aesthetic nature. Specifically, the results of the pilot implementations presented above argue in favor of the fact that TAA can lead to creative and aesthetic teaching of a taught subject, through which the children are given the opportunity to deal with it in an original manner and produce new knowledge about it. It seems that the condition created by TAA balances between "teaching arts" and "teaching through the arts", thus combining the benefits offered by both of these ways of using art in education. That is, with TAA children can experience the intrinsic value of the art, while they are also receiving the positive benefits of art on learning and academic achievement (Amadio, Truong, & Tschurennev, 2006). I suggest that this teaching situation be termed "aesthetic teaching" (Sotiropoulou, 2012; Sotiropoulou in press), based on the contents ascribed to this new term in recent literature (Granger, 2006; Macintyre Latta, 2004; Pike, 2004). Further research on the two categories of teaching through the arts activities studied is necessary. However, based on these pilot results, future research may take on a new orientation, as in "teaching through the arts" it is possible not only to implement curricula, but also to extend them.



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