Promotion of Inclusive Education and Wellbeing through Arts

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Abstract

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, schools are being forced to accelerate their digitalization process and implement e-learning practices at the best of their possibilities. A United Nations' report explains this crisis has exacerbated pre-existing educational disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth and adults to continue their learning [1]. The World Bank concludes that, worldwide, 25% more students may not achieve sufficient levels of proficiency needed to actively participate in society [2]. Moreover, the distance learning and lockdowns imposed in many countries have been causing mental health issues in several students, disadvantaged and not. Different studies show how switching to online education has caused behavioural problems in children and adolescents [3,4]. In response to these severe issues, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) calls for the adoption of inclusive education strategies addressing both learning and emotional issues [5]. In line with this proposition, recent research suggests that the teaching of arts, when referring to theoretically-based strategies addressing a wide range of students, can promote well-being, inclusive practices, cooperative learning, critical thinking and many more relevant skills [6,7]. In order to better illustrate the benefits of arts for inclusive education, this paper will provide a literature review on the topic and briefly present INclusive CREAtivity through Educational Art Making (InCrea+), a European project aiming to provide an innovative method of inclusive education and promotion of wellbeing through the implementation of arts educational content and practices.

Keywords: *Education, arts, inclusion, inclusive education, creativity through educational art, creative education.*
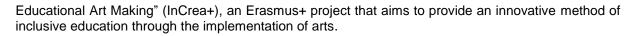
1. Introduction

Since the Salamanca Statement [8], the principle that schools should adjust their educational offer to the needs of every student has been reiterated many times by the EU. For instance, the European Pillar of social rights [9] claims that "*everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning […]*". Similarly, the strategic framework "Education and Training 2020" states [10] that *"education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners - including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants – complete their education, including, where appropriate, through* […] *the provision of more personalized learning"*.

However, after COVID-19 outbreak, the forced acceleration of schools' digitalization has often left behind the most vulnerable students [1], causing dramatic consequences for the inclusion and educational development of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) [11] and severe distress in all pupils [12]. Studies reported the emergence of mental health issues in numerous pupils from different countries. A survey conducted in Italy evidenced that over 50% of children showed mild mental issues, while around 20% manifested acute psychological problems [13]. Similar results have also been found in Spain, where 85% of parents reported similar observations to the one in Italy [3,4]. These factors contribute to the educational loss forecasted by the World Bank, which claims that 25% more students may not achieve adequate levels of proficiency to participate in society [2]. To counteract these negative effects, the OECD calls for the adoption of a holistic approach of inclusive education, addressing students' learning and emotional issues [5].

In line with this proposition, this paper aims to illustrate how the teaching of arts could support the implementation of such an approach. When infused with theoretically-based strategies, arts can effectively address students' mental issues [14], promote inclusive education, intercultural dialogue [15, 7], and the attainment of the "21st Century Skills" [16,17]:

This paper will present a literature review on the topic of arts teaching for inclusive education and mental health and it will illustrate the main aspects of the project "INclusive CREAtivity through

Educational Art Making" (InCrea+), an Erasmus+ project that aims to provide an innovative method of inclusive education through the implementation of arts.

2. The benefits of arts for the promotion of inclusive education

A research conducted by Šiauliai University (Lithuania) [18] identified four forms in which arts education is used within schools:
- **Arts-rich environment**, which incorporates through the offering of extracurricular activities;
- **Arts used as a pedagogical tool** to help students learn;
- **Arts integrated into non-arts courses** to facilitate the learning of non-arts subjects;
- **Direct instruction in the arts**, promoting both arts appreciation and artistic skills.

Arts-rich environments ensure a positive emotional atmosphere, providing spaces of psychological safety for every pupil, as well as tolerance, freedom of expression and communication. A pilot study conducted in 2017 [7] adopted arts to foster intercultural communication. The pupils involved were facing dynamics linked to the so-called "defence phase", in which they tended to avoid interactions with cultural differences. After engaging in the activities planned, many pupils transitioned from the "defence phase" to the "minimization phase", manifesting a stronger intercultural sensitivity.

Arts as a pedagogical tool can be used to "*practice cognitive, language, social, emotional, and motor skills*" [18]. This method can be supplemented with the adoption of **art therapy** practices. Although teachers are not therapists, when adequately trained, they can use art therapy methods for educational purposes. Hannigan et al. [6] advocate for the adoption of **creative arts therapies** to "*provide for the needs of students in their communities regardless of their abilities or disabilities*", impacting positively on pupils' sense of belonging and wellbeing. Creative arts therapies differ from art therapy, as they build on Edith Kramer's notion that it is "*the creative process itself that is healing*" [6]. According to the authors, this strategy promotes: (i) action-based learning, (ii) SEN education, (iii) self-esteem, (iv) positive communication, (v) conflict resolution, and (vi) student support.

Studies provide several examples on how the **integration of arts in non-arts courses** contribute to increasing proficiency in non-arts subjects. The **STEAM approach** is a perfect example of such practice, which integrates arts in the teaching of STEM subjects. Liao [19] presented a STEAM pilot, in which students worked in groups to create interactive 3-D story books to teach the concept of embracing difference. Results of this pilot suggest that the knowledge and skills acquired "*transcended*" the subjects involved. Robinson [20] also noted potentially positive effects for students with disabilities, such as increase in self-efficacy, self-regulating behaviours, and the use of learning strategies.

Finally, **direct instruction in the arts** has been found beneficial for the development of communication skills, critical thinking, positive values and pupils' interest in the arts. Musneckiene [18] evidences how arts encourage gifted children to "*research about their area of interest*". In traditional school settings, gifted students are prone to (i) lack of motivation, (ii) anxiety, and (iii) dissatisfaction with school [21]. When similar characteristics are found, sometimes they obtain lower academic results than expected. The stimulation of gifted students' creativity through arts play an important role in confronting them with their emotional issues, and support the development of problem-solving, logical reasoning and critical thinking [22].

3. InCrea+ Project

Starting from the considerations above, the Erasmus+ project, **InCrea+** (https://increaplus.eu/) aims to provide an innovative method of inclusive education and promotion of wellbeing through the adoption of arts based on theoretically based strategies. InCrea+ results will be based on different educational methodologies, such as **Positive Youth Development** [23], **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL) [24] and **Educational Art-Therapy** [15]. The goal is to establish a comprehensive arts curriculum (the InCrea+ Curriculum), that will effectively implement the holistic approach of inclusive education promoted by the OECD. This will be achieved through the development of three results:

1. The InCrea+ Methodological Material, which will explore the most suitable artistic means, practices, teaching methodologies and their effectiveness in the promotion of inclusive education, multicultural dialogue, wellbeing and the 21st Century Skills;

2. The InCrea+ Curriculum, which will establish proper activities, tools, teaching materials, resources and instructions on how to adopt them in school;

3. An online Open Educational Resource (OER) platform. This platform will serve as a host to the InCrea+ curriculum, which will be digitized, uploaded and freely available to everybody so that the project's results reach the widest public possible.

·**4. Conclusions**

The need for innovative teaching methods that promote inclusivity is more relevant than ever in the context of the digitization of education due to COVID-19. Education through art provides the perfect platform for engaging learning as it is a universal communication channel for all students regardless of their socio-economic, cultural status and/or disability. The InCrea+ project will actively promote the attainment of a holistic approach to inclusive education, by flexibly adopting arts practices based on the strategies emphasized in this paper, maximizing their potential for inclusivity and promotion of wellbeing.

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