THE ROLE OF ART TEACHERS IN RECOGNITION, PREVENTION AND THERAPY OF
TRAUMATISED CHILDREN

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Summary

The paper analyses “new roles” of art teachers which arose from cognitive, emotional, and moral needs of children and youths involved in the educational system in the Republic of Croatia.

Apart from the traditional role of art teachers which is based on systematic and planned fulfilment of goals and tasks from the school subject of art, i.e. providing conditions and designing strategies which stimulate, monitor and promote the individual artistic speech of a child, a “new role” of art teachers has been on the rise recently in recognition, prevention, and therapy of traumatised children. In the complex process of helping a traumatized child, the role of an art teacher is supportive (emotional and moral support), intermediary, (intermediary between sign and significance) and partly therapeutic (psychological help through the medium of visual language and expression as visual artistic therapeutic methods).

Therefore, it is necessary to additionally sensitise art teachers and enable them to acquire necessary competences through additional training, so that they could deal with prevention and therapy in the teaching process, and enable them to help children and young people who need such help through arts workshops.

Key words: art teacher, traumatised child, recognition, prevention, therapy

1. Introduction

Social, economical and political changes in a post war and transitional society which is becoming more and more multicultural, thus respecting differences and individuality of each person, are having an effect on the educational system as a whole and as a result teachers have to adapt and take on “new roles”. Actually these are not completely new roles but rather a shift of emphasis with the goal of achieving new qualities (standards and competences) which today’s modern elementary teachers should have. In our modern society, “the society of knowledge” or “the learning society”, the skills which teachers acquired in university are no longer enough, especially if ten or more years have elapsed since they received their degree. The most frequent reasons for our continuous search for knowledge and improvement of our professional skills are (according to Razdvešek – Pučko, 2005) new knowledge and discoveries concerning our profession, the day to day improvements in teaching methods, new technologies which are in fact a new source of information, more and more children with learning and behavioural disorders who require different teaching methods, and frequent new external methods of knowledge testing/assessment and school activity. The above mentioned author (Razdvešek – Pučko, 2005)
defines, sums up and categorizes these “new roles” as redirection teaching towards learning, being able to apply modern computer technologies, being qualified to work with various groups of children (different abilities, special needs, multicultural differences), the need for communication with other teachers, experts and parents, and the ability to self evaluate ones work.

Of all of the above mentioned reasons which stress the need for the improvement of a teacher’s professional skills and competences it is the “new roles” of art teachers which interest us the most. Thanks to new abilities, specific needs (cognitive, emotional, moral), different religious, cultural beliefs and customs of the children and youths that are a part of the Croatian elementary school program that the need for these new skills to be mastered has arisen.

2. The “new roles” of art teachers

The “new roles” that art teachers have to take on are a direct result of social changes that are also having an effect on schools, i.e. on the whole educational system. Classes in Croatian elementary schools are attended by both healthy children who have no development disorders and are not traumatized in any way and by children suffering from anxiety disorder, depressive children and youths (family violence, broken homes, sexual harassment, bullying…), children displaying aggressive behaviour (Keresteš, 2002), pupils with neurotic disorders (Koraj, 1999) and children with special needs such as problems with learning due to lower cognitive capabilities, specific learning disorder, and various behaviour disorders (Pinoza-Kukurin, 2003). Apart from traditional teaching skills, new ones have been identified, amongst which are some that are of special interest to us; such as: the integration of children with special needs, working with various groups of pupils as well as working with multicultural groups of children and resolving various conflicts and traumas (Eurydice study, 2003)

Traditional roles of art teachers are based on a systematic and planned achievement of set goals of the visual arts class, i.e. ensuring stimulative conditions and organizing strategies which encourage, monitor and improve a pupil’s expression through art. Nowadays a “new role” for art teachers has arisen and they are vital in the recognition, prevention and therapy of traumatized children.

The first time art teachers were involved in an organised attempt to help traumatised children through artistic expression was during and immediately after Croatia’s independence war (Project, 1992, 1994, 1997). Art teachers collaborated in interdisciplinary teams of experts with one goal: to focus on the professional capabilities, skills and creative powers and merge these with arts to offer psychological help and protection to the traumatized children.

3. Art expression in diagnostics, prevention and therapy

The language of art (visual art expression) is a means of non-verbal, visual communication, a manner of expressing one’s thoughts and feelings through creative games and activities using
artistic and composition elements made up of signs and meanings which send out a certain message.

Experts in various fields, especially psychologists (Nazor, 1998) and psychiatrists (De Zan, 1994), very often use a person’s artistic expression (drawing), as an indicator of one’s intellectual development and as a means of projection.

4. The role of art teacher in recognition, prevention and therapy of traumatized children

In this complex process of helping a traumatized child the art teacher plays an important stimulating role (stimulating experiencing and creativity) supporting role (emotional and moral support), mediatory role (mediator between “sign” and “meaning”) and to a certain degree a therapeutical role (psychological help via various visual arts media and artistic expression as a therapeutical method). Of course these various roles are intertwined, one complements the other starting from the humanistic view of the development of a person’s character according to which the essential motif for growth and development of an individual is the desire for self-realisation.

The preconditions which all “good” teachers must have are based on altruism and pedagogical delicacy (feeling of what is right). Specific competences, skills and knowledge combined with the mentioned preconditions are what characterise and distinguish each teacher. It is solely up to the teacher how and whether he will use these qualities to reach out to the pupils especially to the “unreachable” ones (Jensen, 2004). Children and youths with various disorders are in this group (learning disorders, motoric disorders, hyperactivity disorders, behaviour disorders, personality disorders, depression, chronic stress disorders…) and traumatized pupils (emotional trauma). Whilst some pupil’s achievement and behaviour is likely to improve thanks to the teacher’s recognition of the problem and the attending to these problems other pupils will have to receive therapeutical treatment and interdisciplinary help.

Experts such as psychologists, pedagogues and special teachers in schools and various psychotherapists who offer professional help to traumatised children and youths and those suffering from various disorders are all a part of this interdisciplinary help. Arts teachers play an important part in helping the pupil in need. They are the ones who organize specific activities and creative games thus invoking creative behaviour and development on a cognitive, emotional and social level. It is through these activities that a child re-lives different daily events of which some may be traumatic. In a modern art class the teacher learns the children how to observe (to comprehend their surroundings); how to feel (to co-exist with their surroundings); how to communicate (to share their feelings and what they have learned with others); how to handle personal problems and enrich their strategies for tackling these problems; how to plan, “sketch” and finally realise their “visions of the world” (aesthetic problems) through artistic, visual content; how to evaluate and appreciate their own work and the artistic work of others, adopting elementary criteria of social communication (within the class). Furthermore, art activities,
drawing, painting, sculpting which all includes working with various artistic techniques and materials all have an **educative and therapeutical value**. Art activities put children in touch with their emotions and very often represent “the bridge between an organ of sense and feeling, sensing” (Ouklander, 1988, 81). Not less important is the fact that art teachers are themselves “creative people” who are often open to searching for new, innovative pedagogical procedures and methods individually and in groups, be it in class or in an arts workshop. As there are no proscribed techniques which an art teacher should stick to when dealing with traumatized children, there are a few modern methodological methods which can help a child in need: **creative (symbolic) games and activities** which can help identify their traumatic experience, **working with factual events and emotions which are present, individual work, group activities** which may also involve family members - creative meetings (Project, 1992). Furthermore, modern psychological and counselling strategies and interventions use **multimedia approaches**, in which artistic activity is combined with bibliotherapeutical and musical therapy.

5. **New skills of art teachers**

The new modern competent art teacher is a result of contact and work with various groups of children. The new skills that are expected of him are the recognition, prevention and therapy of traumatized children. As these teachers have gained specific knowledge through: various practical, theoretical art and history lectures, psychological courses and various interdisciplinary methodological education it is necessary to raise their awareness of this subject to a higher level (seminars, courses, workshops…) and to make them eligible for educational and therapeutical work with those in need.

6. **Conclusion**

Traumatised, suffering from anxiety disorder, depressive children and youths (family violence, broken homes, sexual harassment, bullying…), children displaying aggressive behaviour, pupils with neurotic disorders and children with special needs all attend regular Croatian elementary schools. Their successful education, upbringing, socialization and integration depend on their teacher and the teacher’s readiness/willingness to understand them and implement appropriate teaching methods. In this process the role of art teacher is very important as it is through artistic communication that we can easily recognize a child that is content, but also an unhappy, neglected and abused individual. It is therefore important to raise the awareness of art teachers and help them acquire these new skills through additional education so that they may be a part of this therapeutic and preventive process helping needy children and youths through various arts workshops.

7. **References**
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