

# ENGAGING VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE ARTS

## Challenges and opportunities

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An education that focuses on the promotion of students' and teachers' well-being and emotional health emerges as a need in a time when educational stakeholders throughout the world, admit the failure of the educational systems as a whole to foster the inclusion of all children and young people and thereby to ensure with a view to educational and social justice. An indication of this is that in many European countries, early leaving from education and training by young people aged 18-24, who have already not completed compulsory schooling, remains a concern despite the political advances in its reduction (DGERT, 2014; Macedo, Araújo, Magalhães, & Rocha, 2015; Magalhães, Araújo, Macedo, & Rocha, 2015). Statistical data also show the extent of this problem (Eurostat, 2016). This phenomenon has been discussed at national and European level (CEU, 2013; COM, 2013; OJEU, 2012), knowing that it results from the differentiated articulation of factors at different macro (e.g. education system, labour market, broader society), meso (e.g. social institutions such as school, family, peers) and micro (e.g. individual levels). Early school leaving (ESL) is a process influenced by micro, meso and macro (Clycq, Nouwen, & Timmerman, 2013).

Even if there are many systemic constraints that inform life in schools and other educational institutions, which go beyond the possibilities of action, and which include economic and social inequality, lack of cultural recognition, and so forth, education inside and outside of school is challenged to go beyond the transmission of knowledge. It is hoped that education will promote the well-being of children, young adults and their teachers as well as the development of skills and competences that will allow students to be included in social life and, in particular, the so-called insertion in the labour market.

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This challenge becomes even more complex in contexts where educational institutions are to work with and support children and young adults who face situations of serious social and emotional vulnerability. These groups and individuals continue to run the risk of being excluded from the educational and social milieu since their emotional and mental states, sometimes resulting from trauma histories, are challenging. In the most extreme cases, young people are affected by situations of abuse and neglect in the family, abandonment due to economic migration, experiences of war and trafficking of human beings. There is evidence that there are high levels of suffering among the population attending in-school and out-of-school education, which is not alien to their living circumstances in the nearest and most distant environment.

The fulfilment of the ideal of democratisation of education, which includes reference to the institutional capacity to find adequate educational offers for all without falling into the error of contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities is another concern that emerges within political and social debates and that requires new educational responses. As a new key to face educational challenges. The education of young people through the arts can provide new pathways to address these educational challenges. Education through the arts involves a holistic, accessible and inclusive framework for the emotional and physical expression of the participants. Engagement in education through the arts also provides opportunities to develop essential knowledge and skills that are required in social life in and out of school. Visual arts, music and drama have proven to be important tools in teaching-learning processes. If they have a very specific role in themselves by promoting self-expression, creativity and the disciplinary knowledge they imply, they can also uphold a sense of balance and engagement that help build a disposition to learn.

Additionally one may say that the adoption of an approach focused on diversity and inclusion implies the ability of education professions including those with backgrounds in the creative arts to work together. Educational institutions are challenged to include other professionals, such as social service workers, social educators, psychologists, nurses, therapists, creative arts therapists and occupational guidance specialists in reducing ESL.

In this manner, children and youth in situations of vulnerability can find a response in the strengthening of the professional profiles of teachers, educators and trainers and in the creation of learning environments adapted to them. The quality of teaching and the skills of teachers, educators and trainers are decisive in their contribution to reducing ESL and promoting the well-being of young people in different educational contexts. By investing more broadly in their training in the framework of the social and emotional education and therapeutic practice traditions, teachers, educators, and trainers are better equipped to create learning environments that are effectively centred on students, based on emotional relationships, and that take into account their situations of greater or lesser vulnerability, leading to the provision of safety and learning

opportunities. The holistic approaches that can arise through the association of these disciplines can support the development of arts-centred methodologies within daily educational practices.

The common reflection on the articles presented in this special issue raises questions about *if* and *how* people can learn in a new key; and where the artistic and emotional dimensions in education are best placed. These articles provide a view of *possibility* in the educational intervention with children and young adults through the arts, in and out of school, and include studies/projects that capture promising multidisciplinary experiences that promote well-being and the educational and social inclusion of children and young adults.

The first set of articles constitutes reflections based on the LINK Project: «Learning in a new Key: Engaging Vulnerable People in School Education». The research articles that are presented rise within the action enquiry phase of a trans-European school-based project funded through ERASMUS+<sup>1</sup>.

To make clearer the umbrella ideas inherent to the construction of this special issue we present a brief reflection on the LINK Project. As the diverse articles will illustrate, the project brought teachers and music and arts-based therapists together to explore collaborations between their professional activities. The main concerns of the project are the continuing risks faced by vulnerable children and young adults, who are threatened with exclusion (and excluded) from educational and social milieus because of their challenging emotional and mental states that result from their trauma histories and current life experiences. While this applies in extremes for a relatively small percentage, there is evidence in the participant countries that high levels of psychological distress exist within school populations. For example the UNICEF league table of child wellbeing in developed countries found that each partner country has a similar and poor record, placing Portugal 15th, UK 16th, Poland 21st and Italy 22nd (UNICEF Office of Research, 2013). The seriousness of this situation has been increasingly recognised by the UN.

With these concerns, the head teachers and teachers in the registered partner schools for this project seek to extend their professional competences and repertoires as classroom-based educators who are skilled in therapeutic approaches that engage vulnerable young people as continuing learners and willing school attenders. Through developing themselves further within the humanistic traditions of social and emotional education and therapeutic practice, they aim

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to create learner centred, relationship-based, trauma-informed and evidence-focussed learning environments that provide safety and high quality learning opportunities for the vulnerable children and young adults who have been referred to them.

The holistic approaches that can emerge through the association of these related disciplines and professions become apparent in the joint construction of the scientific articles presented in this journal. By «Exploring teacher competences for relational health in schools», Nick Clough, Jane Tarr, Krzysztof Stachyra, Anna Rita Addressi and Katarzyna Maliszewska, in the first article of this journal focus on the new professional competences developed by teachers as they conjoin with music/arts therapists in face of young people who experience post-traumatic stress disorder or developmental trauma from earlier adverse childhood experiences. The article discusses how teachers from three schools in three different countries theorise educational pursuits in order to promote relational health in schools. The need to reassert social models of learning for teachers and young people alike as well as the consequences of reducing the range of disciplines that influence teacher education become apparent. New perspectives arise from the re-engagement of teachers at classroom level with significant cultural resources that are already being used by music and arts-based therapeutic health practitioners in other contexts.

The article «Inclusive practice in Italian schools: Body and music for listening and sharing without words» by Barbara Zanchi, Elena Bacarella, Luisa Bonfiglioli, Anna Rita Addressi, Elisabetta Colace and Francesca Quadrelli illustrates the work developed by the Italian partners in the LINK Project, in the implementation of specific teachers' training to promote inclusive teaching practice through music and expressive body languages. The paper discusses the theoretical principles and framework of expressive therapies like music therapy and dance movement therapy and how these ideas have informed the work of therapists in implementing a teacher-training programme. The latter were involved in a set of musical and expressive-body experiences so that they felt more equipped to elaborate new strategies and knowledge to promote empathic, relational and creative competences in their educational work. The paper matches up the diverse perspectives of the teachers, therapists and researchers that were involved.

In their paper «Journeys towards learning in a new key: Researching the challenge of introducing deep cultural and psychological resources in classrooms», Catherine Warner and Jane Tarr reflect upon the staged process to introduce musical listening and improvisation as a regular social, emotional and therapeutic experience in the classroom, within the LINK Project. The aim of this process was to shift cultural perspectives and practices in one partner school so that non-verbal forms of communication were valued. In order to do so, teachers engaged in a programme of professional development with music therapists and teacher trainers to enhance their teaching practice by introducing music-listening and music making with vulnerable young people. In line with participatory action research, data was gathered from narrative accounts

of practice in five different classrooms. Teachers were encouraged to engage in collaborative systematic reflection and to explore the process of listening to and making music away from the classroom.

The challenges teachers face and the pedagogical competences they develop in dealing with diversity and vulnerability in the construction of a play in the second chance school - Escola de Segunda Oportunidade Matosinhos, are explored by Eunice Macedo, Sofia A. Santos, Flora Torres and Poliksena Hardalova in the article «Revisiting the allegory of the cave through drama: Teachers' challenges and competences in the education of vulnerable young adults in Portugal».

Taking as main concerns the early school leaving and educational failure as well as the promotion of inclusive educational practices grounded on arts-based experience, the authors explore some competences teachers developed to respond to the educational and social contexts/interests of vulnerable young people and how they feel by doing so, as conditions for educational justice. The paper draws on the video analysis of the construction of a school musical play and on a set of interviews with teachers/therapists. Drama is included as part of the syllabus, a strategy to support the emotional states and young adults' will to stay in school. The authors' insights from video evidence include critical commentary on common strategies to promote students' engagement and learning and the identification of essential competences to deal with it.

The article by Jane Tarr and Anna Rita Addressi, entitled «Preparing to observe the impact of therapeutic teaching practices: From Flow to self-regulation and learning» concludes the set of articles produced within the LINK Project. With this paper, the authors outline a research process aimed at evidencing the impact of therapeutic teaching practice in a school for young people with social and emotional challenges resulting from adverse childhood experiences. The authors outline a new approach to supporting such vulnerable learners, which involved music therapists working with non-music specialist teachers to introduce musical listening and improvisation as a regular group therapeutic experience in the classroom. Music is seen as a «cultural reservoir that can be drawn on by teachers to soothe, nurture and potentially heal troubled and vulnerable young people». Building on the work of Csikszentmihalyi on Flow this tool is used to assess the optimal state of being. This paper shows how the Flow observation tool developed within the LINK Project.

The second set of articles addresses and analyses music and arts-based projects that share some of the concerns inherent to the LINK Project. These projects make resource to the arts as a strategy to engage vulnerable children and young adults in learning by means of music and body movement, to become empowered and more aware of the human rights, to promote creativity and self-assertion, and so forth.

Joana Louçã, in the article «Aprendíamos de forma diferente. Em vez de estarmos a ouvir, fazíamos». Aprendizagem através das artes numa escola básica: Um estudo de caso», analyses a case-study on a educational project developed by an artistic association with three classes of a public primary school in Mouraria, a Neighbourhood in Lisbon; a parish where the ageing and impoverishing of the population came together with a process of gentrification that changed the school population. The author reflects upon the project «The Body at School» that was developed for five years and which approached the curricular subjects by means of an active body posture of the children. They moved to learn. Exploring the interprofessional synergies such as in the LINK Project, the sessions were built jointly by artists and teachers, who made resource to diverse artistic methods and techniques in order to stimulate children's participation. Building on the voices of the participants, the author discusses the consequences of the project for students increased learning and to bridge the gap between children's culture and the school culture, with particular benefits for those who were not native speakers or who had learning problems. Moreover, as emphasized by the author, the participation in the project changed the professional *habitus* of teachers and artists.

The article «Citizenship and human rights education: Evaluation of an intervention project through the arts» by Maria João Oliveira, Ana Pérez, Isabel Pereira and Alina Santos brings to the fore the results of the «Citizenship and Human Rights Education» project, that was implemented at an elementary school in the Neighbourhood of Capalanga, in Luanda, Angola. By fostering the development of children's participation skills in the different dimensions of school, family and society affairs, the main goal of the project was to improve human rights and citizenship education among the student body. The work was organised through «Personal development sessions» and «open sessions» based on artistic expression, a methodologically innovative project in Angola. As shown by the longitudinal research that took place, the intervention project had positive impacts concerning students' autonomy, proactivity, participation and cooperation, valuing of civic participation, critical approach and awareness of human rights.

In their turn, Graziela Carla Trindade Mayer, Jose Roque Junges and Rosangela Barbiani, analyse the health conceptions and practices of youngsters in school, in dialogue with their expressions and musical identities, through Music Therapy, in the article «A contribuição da musicoterapia no contexto brasileiro: Dialogando com jovens sobre educação e saúde». Within a qualitative approach in line with action-research, the study used the Music Therapy methods of improvisation, composition, recreation and listening. The research involved 12 youngsters aged 13 to 18 years of a public school from São Leopoldo, in south Brazil. The results of the study suggest that the activities of the communitarian Music Therapy provided the youngsters with a powerful way to express and produce new knowledge(s) and practices. The study also showed that the youngsters ascribe different and contradictory meanings to health, which shift

from a hegemonic pattern of the biomedical conception and practices of health to a more enlarged view associated with participation and autonomy.

Last but not least, the article entitled «O potencial das atividades de sonorização de cinema na inclusão de crianças vulneráveis: Um estudo de caso múltiplo», by Susana Silva highlights the role of creativity as a way to strengthen self-identity and as a tool for inclusion as a result. To illustrate the possibilities brought about by the use of music to promote creativity and foster the assertion of the self, the author makes resource to the analysis of four intervention programmes developed with groups of 6 to 10 year-old, in situations of social deprivation and who attended public schools. The methodologies adopted in each project and the diversity of approaches enacted with a view to creativity and the rediscovery of meanings through sound are to be highlighted. As the authors emphasise the fact that not all musical practice at schools is associated with creativity, leads to the need to question and analyse the use of music as a vehicle for the inclusion of vulnerable children and youngsters. The authors argue that the multiple possibilities of musical practice at school, by means of the production of soundtracks for cinema may be seen as a privileged way to promote creativity and foster self-identity.

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