

Art-based role-play in early childhood education and teacher professional development

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Today's rapidly changing society, the global scale of crises and the imperatives of education often face a contradictory landscape: on the one hand, creativity and free expression are sacrificed on the altar of a competitive education of measurable learning outcomes, and on the other hand, they are regarded as more necessary than ever for the cultivation of 21st century skills. Within this context, play is often marginalized despite the more general acceptance of its value for the all-round development of each child. This paper focuses on role-playing and investigates its effect on the professional development of actions and future teachers in the context of theater-pedagogical workshops for the understanding of timeless social issues through works of art. The specificity of these theater-pedagogical workshops consists in the utilization of art works and museum-pedagogical practices for the development of creative, flexible and authentic situations of communication and learning. Considering teachers as the main designers and organisers of creative learning environments, we believe it is important that they themselves revive the role-play in a direct, unmediated and personal way. This revival of the role-play by the teachers themselves, is assumed that will ensure first-hand knowledge and experience them, in order for them to then dedicate the necessary space and time to their daily schedule at school for similar actions. The research participants are teachers of different levels of education and students of three university departments in the country (pre-school education, primary education, theatre studies). Our research used mixed methods and data collection tools such as questionnaires and reflective diaries. The analysis of the results of the research shows a clear shift in the way of participants' understanding and perception of the value and methodology of the play, focusing especially on role-play, alongside the strengthening of the interest in the use of art works and non-formal learning settings, such as museums. The revival of play by the teachers, as well as the artworks create an open, inclusive and multi-sensory learning condition, in the player (the playing teacher / child) is regarded as a creative and reflective person. In this context, the play, and especially role-play, as a process and as a product ensures avenues of understanding, multi-sensory communication and expression and, indeed, due to its safe context in which the player can freely "say and do whatever they want", a level of reflection and critical reflection, which goes beyond the commonly accepted, the expected, the familiar and the predictable.