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Art and Creativity for Disadvantaged Students: Data and Reflections from the Italian National Plan of Arts

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Art and Creativity for Disadvantaged Students: Data and Reflections from the Italian National Plan of Arts

Gabriella Taddeo

Abstract: This paper intends to propose some reflections on the role of art-based educational practices in promoting inclusion processes at school. The reflection starts from the analysis of some data coming from the monitoring of the National Plan of Arts: an educational policy, promoted at national level since 2017, which has allowed hundred of schools to implement practical and theoretical actions for the improvement of artistic skills. From the comparison between the projects dedicated to volunteer or gifted children, with the projects aimed at disadvantaged children, some lines of development emerge that are useful for understanding how art and creativity can be used in educational and inclusiveness processes. From the results, it emerges that emotional involvement, interartistic projects as well as social aspects as intergenerational relationships and connection with different significant adults (e.g. artists) have been considered the most relevant means to shape artistic education for inclusive goals. In addition, direct production, in connection with contemporary youth cultures and digital media practices, have been revealed as innovative practices that teachers have used to bridge a top-down and bottom-up idea of arts, thus opening up to a not normative and inclusive idea of creativity.

Keywords: art-based education; inclusion, creativity, diversity

Art in education

In recent years, the discussion and attention on the role of creativity in education systems has widely grown. Creativity has become part of an overall program aimed to empower capacities of individuals, not only for their emotional and cultural growth, but also for acquiring skills that enable them to face a society dominated by change, uncertainty and the continuous need for innovation. Furthering the development of creativity emerged, therefore, among the priority educational objectives of the most advanced countries, alongside a review of curricula, often judged too rigid and based on pure cognitive learning (Shaheen, 2010).

In fact, education in the creative arts involves children not only in the development of cognitive skills, but also in their emotional life, providing them with “strategies for exploring and expressing emotions (with a) emphasis on time for reflection and constructive feedback” (Ewing, 2010, p. 25). According to Mezirow (2003), the expression and emotional charge linked to the artistic experience produces a potential for “transformative learning” useful for students to experience structural and profound changes, which involve their attitudes and beliefs (Holloway & Krensky, 2001). Through the arts, students engage habits of mind that support thinking depth and complexity, as well as self and relational knowledge. According to Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2017), arts-based inquiry, in fact:

- Asks students to take part in perspective-taking;
- Engages affective domains in artist and audience;
- Calls for a distillation of themes and ideas into a specific work;
- Allows for problem-solving and interpretation;
- Encourages learning through multiple modalities and multiple literacies.

Research also shows that a creative education provides opportunities for less-motivated students to achieve academically in an enjoyable learning experience, as it centralizes strengths and intelligences otherwise often undervalued in standard academic paths (Felton et al., 2016).

Education in creativity and art, therefore, has assumed an increasingly role in courses dedicated to the inclusion of the most disadvantaged people (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). The concept of inclusion has evolved from an issue about children with special needs to a story about inclusive schools and inclusive learning environments, for children with all kinds of physical, cognitive and social backgrounds.

Starting from a critical position about the role of the school among the social devices of surveillance and punishment, Deleuze, for example, highlight how the arts are means through the educator can open to “a whole new pedagogy” aimed to “read the visual as well as hear the speech-act in a new way” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 237), and must engage in the act of thought, which,

for the author (1994), is a throw of the dice and a manner of experimentation. In this way, the arts make it possible to conceive of teaching as a means of expressive research, rather than of control and discipline. A path of discovery, rather than homologation.

Such an engagement offers an extraordinary inclusive potential, by orienting the educator towards difference as ordinary and something to be expected and even sought. Furthermore, the inclusive educator, engaging with the affordances of the aesthetic, may also become “capable of thinking the unthinkable” (Semetsky, 2004, p. 318) and of reinventing new forms of political action - on behalf of children, especially those who are disadvantaged by educational systems, structures and processes (Allan, 2014).

Moreover, the use of collaborative art-making for inclusion and intercultural education entails children’s collaborative work in order to achieve a common goal within their art group, while learning to share their thoughts (ie on stereotypes, diversity and democracy) and emotions, and use critical thought to go into the others’ emotions. Previous research has shown that children who face learning or language difficulties are able to participate, as the artistic approach is different from the oral approaches (Angelides & Michaelidou, 2009). Through collaboration, marginalized children may develop friendships and build trust with their art group.

Collaborative art-making proved to be efficient in assisting teachers to effectively transfer to students inclusive values like respect to the ‘other’ and acceptance of difference (Angelides & Michaelidou, 2009). Research has shown that as collaborative art-making can help students see things differently, certain power relations (economic, gendered and ethnic) can be altered (Cooper & Sjoström, 2006). Students can come closer to each other, understand each other’s emotions, see their peers from a human perspective and think deeper about their classmates regardless of race, ethnicity or social class (Rubin, 1997).

Collaborative art-making helps students not to simplify human emotions and behaviour, but to see their peers as human beings and, as a result, to begin trusting them (Fellen Fattal, 2014). Cooper and Sjoström (2006), argue that with collaborative art-making “students who normally sit on the sidelines find themselves on equal footing with their peers”.

According to these perspectives, the article will explore how the National Plan of Arts, an Italian policy aimed to promote art and creativity in the Italian schools, has been interpreted in its first year of implementation (2018-2019), and how, according to the projects and declarations of teachers, art and creativity education have actually lead to develop individual expression, diversity valorization and inclusiveness.

The main questions addressed in the paper are:

- How art and creativity have been interpreted as pedagogical tools by teachers in the National Plan of Arts?
- How art and creativity supported processes of inclusiveness and enhancement of diversity?

Methodology

In this article, some data and reflections, deriving from the first INDIRE monitoring of the Plan of the Arts, will be discussed, focusing on the specific actions and projects aimed at school inclusion goals. The National Plan of Arts, created through the legislative decree of 13 April 2017, n. 60, is the recent mean through which the Italian Ministry of Education intended to guarantee access to Italian culture and artistic heritage to all school pupils of all levels. In the 2018-2019 year school, the Plan involved 590 schools, 1696 teachers and 59756 students. The plan includes 9 measures aimed to implement both theoretical and practical activities on 4 artistic fields: visual arts, literature, music, theater and performative arts.

In the first year of the Plan, 2018-2019, two measures were financed:

- Measure E, related to the “Promotion of the participation of pupils in the paths of knowledge of the cultural and environmental heritage of Italy and of the intellectual and intellectual works of Made in Italy”
- Measure F, related to the “Enhancement of practical and historical-critical skills, relating to music, arts, cultural heritage, cinema, media for the production and dissemination of images and sounds”.

In support to the Plan, a specific monitoring and evaluation action is defined, for which INDIRE is responsible, and which produced a first report about the implementation of projects by the schools in 2018-2019 (Chellini et al., 2020).

Furthermore, descriptions and infographics of the projects are also published in a dedicated web portal¹, specially created not only to provide a quantitative picture of the educational practices, but also to display the outputs of the projects and to encourage networking processes in the variegated and often fragmented contexts of the actors who operate in the expressive artistic field (schools, academies, cultural associations, museums, professionals, artists and so on.)

Initially, the monitoring activity intended to make use of three research methods: questionnaires in a first phase, focus groups and in depth interviews, in a second phase. This methodology is part of the methodological approach called “mixed methods approach” (Creswell, 2015), which combines

¹ <http://pianodellearti.indire.it/monitoraggio/>

qualitative and quantitative methods. The initial plan has been changed, since during the activities, due to the precautionary measures related to Covid-19 emergence, it was no possible to collect data in site, through interviews. For this reason, we have modified the work plan integrating the analysis of quantitative data, related to the macro aspects of school projects, with the development of open questions to gather details about the context, the specific practices, methodologies and innovation aspects within individual projects. Other questions are related to the learning objectives that the teachers intended to pursue, presenting items about the development of disciplinary skills (art, music, literature), but also to soft skills and aspects of well-being that can be developed through the artistic practice.

The indicators for the creation of these latter questions have been developed starting from the extensive literature relating to the soft skills evaluation, from a socio-emotional (OECD, 2015), entrepreneurial (Bacigalupo et al., 2016), global citizenship (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2018) side.

The schools that benefited from the funding of the first year were asked to respond to two online questionnaires: one addressed to the school, concerning the overall information on the project, and one addressed to the teachers participating in the project, relating specifically to the educational aspects carried out by each teacher.

The data were collected between September 2019 and February 2020. The sample was of 318 schools responding to the project questionnaire (for a response rate of 87%) and 1,244 teachers (73% of the teachers involved in the projects).

Art to include disadvantaged children: the main detected strategies

The Plan of Arts has multiple goals: as already specified, the primary objective is to enhance creativity, artistic knowledge, skills and active cultural practices by the children. Taking into account such general objectives of the Plan, in this paragraph, it is possible to have a main picture of the choices which have been made in the first year of its implementation: that is, which Measures, Actions, and fields of creativity have been selected by schools.

First of all we note that the majority of the projects were carried out by first cycle schools (70%). Among the actions of greatest interest to schools, there is a prevalence of organization of visits, trips and shows, within Measure E; on the other hand, projects relating to the production of original works prevail over the actions of Measure F.

Fig. 1 - Percentage of action chosen by schools therein the Measure E (Data sampling: 318 projects. Multiple responses)

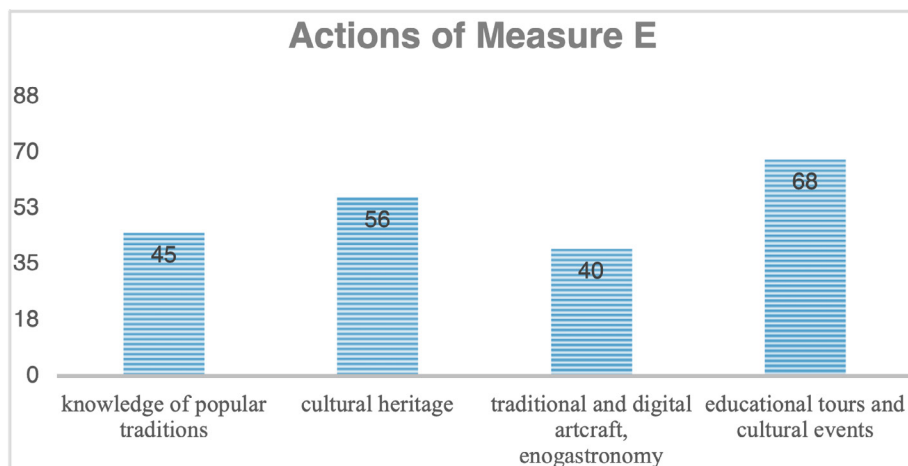
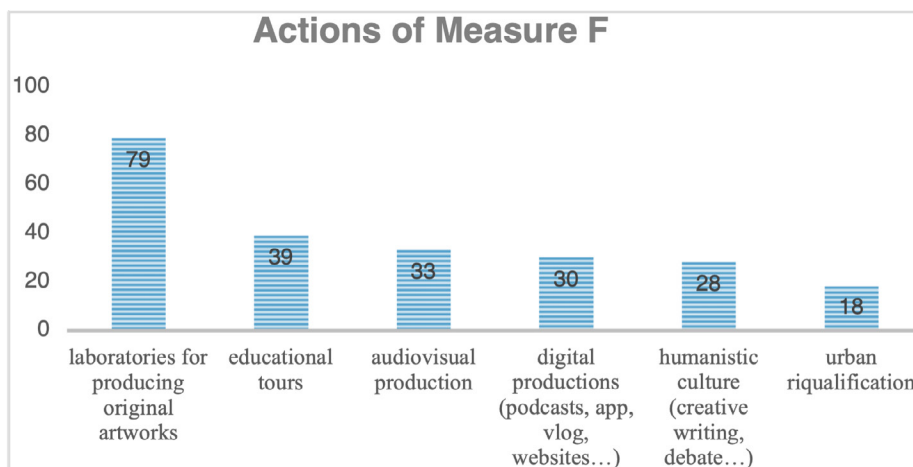


Fig. 2 - Percentage of action chosen by schools therein the Measure F (Data sampling: 318 projects. Multiple responses)



Generally speaking, therefore, the schools have focused on two main assets: on the one hand, artistic enjoyment with cultural heritage, managed through live encounters, and not just from books and theoretical approaches; on the other, the work on individual expressiveness and the autonomous ability of students to generate cultural artifacts.

As regards the chosen artistic fields, we note that the visual arts area prevails in all the types of schools, then, as a second option, music-choreutic

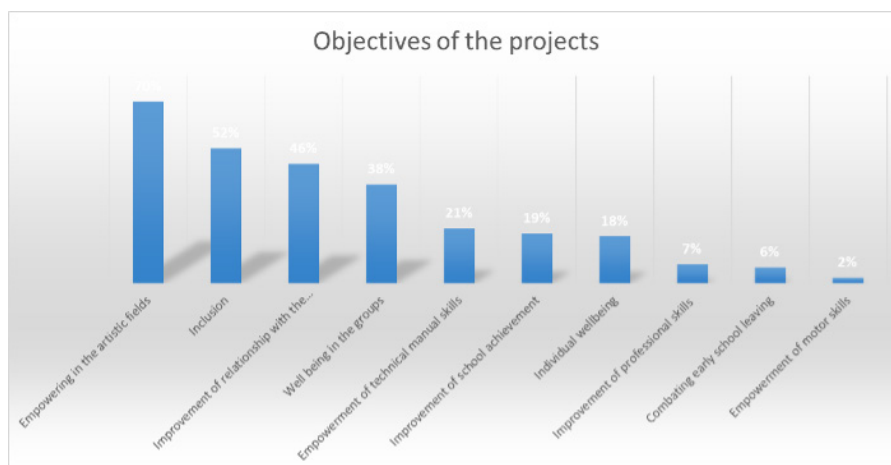
emerges for the primary schools, while for the lower and upper secondary school the performance and theater seem to slightly be preferred (Fig 3).

Fig 3 - Percentage of artistic fields involved by level fo school (Data sampling: 318 projects. Multiple responses)

Artistic field	Primary school	Lower and upper secondary school	Total of projects
Visual arts	68%	72%	69%
Language and creativity	37%	36%	37%
Music	51%	36%	46%
Theater and performance	41%	39%	40%

Regarding the aims of the projects, as shown in Fig. 4, in addition to the primary objective of acquiring / strengthening artistic skills in the various disciplines (music, theater, dance, literature), also various “secondary” objectives find space for experimentation by teachers, as the improvement of the classroom climate, the increase of motivation in students, the maturation of expressive, relational, civic soft skills. In particular, we note that 52% of teachers entails the inclusion of children in difficulty.

Fig 4 - Objectives of the projects. (Data sampling: 318 projects. Multiple responses)



In this direction, art and creativity not only have the meaning and role of a cultural enhancement in themselves, but also become tools to promote intrinsic motivation, communication and dialogue between adults and children, and among the children themselves, tools for the emergence and

enhancement of “unconventional” skills, not always recognized or valued within the school. With this in mind, education in arts and creative practices is experimented as a tool for inclusion: an approach aimed at connecting schools and disciplinary objectives to the interests and passions of children, their relational lives and creative impulses, in short, to connect formal and informal dimensions of their daily learning and, in this way, often, to create a bridge and a dialogue precisely with the children who are least able to find meaning in traditional school (Thomson et al., 2012).

This paragraph analyzes the projects dedicated precisely to such specific groups of students, to observe which are the thematic areas, strategies, methodological points of attention aimed at the inclusion and involvement of disadvantaged students and how, therefore, education processes in art and creativity can contribute to inclusion objectives. Focusing on the sample of the 146 projects that worked on specific groups and not on the whole class, we have distinguished the choices taken on projects with groups including special need students and/or students at risk of dispersion from characteristics of the projects dedicated to volunteer and / or excellent students. We note that the projects containing “in difficulty” students are 44%, compared to 56% of the projects dedicated to groups of volunteers and / or deserving students.

Fig. 5 - Distribution of projects by type of groups (Sampling: 146 cases)

Groups	N. Projects	%
Disadvantaged students (special needs, risk of early school leaving)	64	44%
Volunteers and/or gifted students	82	56%
Total	146	100%

We therefore notice that, although the objective of inclusion is the second among those declared by teachers (Fig 4), a large amount of the projects is addressed to the entire classes, and even if the classes are divided into groups, their composition gives more space to the criteria of voluntariness and merit (Fig 5).

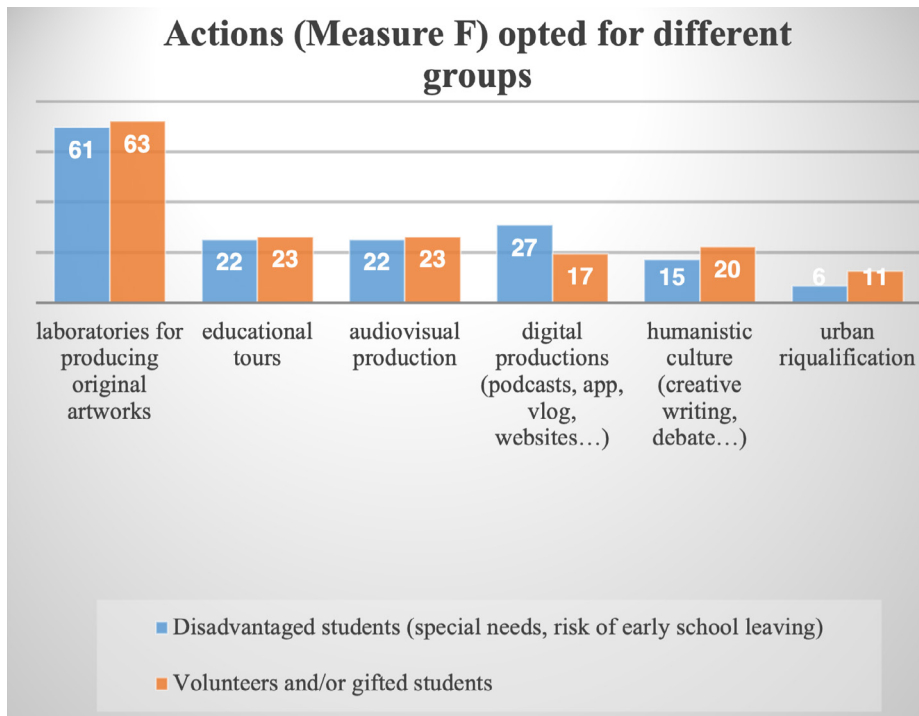
We also note that the percentage of projects aimed at groups of disadvantaged students decreases with the growth of the school order: in fact, 58% of primary school groups is related to such group of students, while, in lower secondary schools the share falls to 49% up to 40% in upper secondary schools. In this school grade, more room is given to groups based on voluntary choice or on deserving students (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Distribution of groups by level of schools (Sampling: 146 cases)

School Level	Disadvantaged students (special needs, risk of early school leaving)	Volunteers and/or gifted students	Total
Kindergarten School	50%	50%	14
Primary school	58%	42%	43
Lower Secondary School	49%	51%	89
Upper Secondary School	40%	60%	72
Total	64%	82%	146

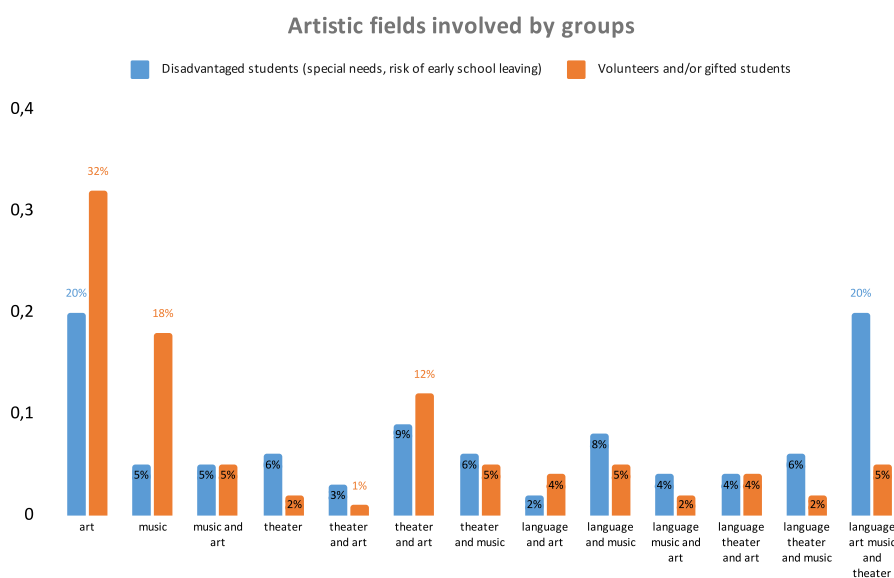
The preferred lines of development for disadvantaged children emerge from merging quantitative data with the qualitative responses and narrations given by teachers. We notice, hence, that similarly to projects addressed to volunteers and gifted students, a majority of projects aimed at disadvantaged students have carried out laboratory activities to produce original works (61%).

Fig. 7 - Activities chosen for different groups of students (Sampling: 146 cases. Multiple choices)



The possibility of putting young people at the center of the learning process, through forms of production and participation and not just aesthetic enjoyment, is declined, in projects dedicated to disadvantaged children, in different ways. In some projects, teachers provided the possibility for students to become co-designers of the training activity, thus going not only to “execute” the indications of adults and experts, but also to set, from the beginning, the agenda of the activity. For example, in the upper secondary school Majorana in San Lazzaro di Savena, the students independently choose places and monuments to focus on, designing not only “how”, but also “what” of the artistic and cultural heritage to cope with. Far from forms of tokenist participation (Arnstein, 1969), such process is intended to put teens on the line right up to the definition of the agenda of the priorities they want to give to cultural heritage, giving them confidence in their responsibility, critical and aesthetic sense. Also relating to the chosen artistic fields, it can be seen that there are no substantial differences between projects aimed at disadvantaged children compared to projects for other groups of students, except in the fact that, for disadvantaged students, a greater number of projects had a strong inter-artistic approach, involving all the arts: music, graphic arts, theater, language (fig. 8).

Fig. 8 Artistic fields of the projects, by groups (Sample: 146 projects. Multiple choices)



The inter-artistic approach, such as that of musicals, seems particularly effective in activating a global vision of art, as explained in the project by the school Frosinone 2 in Frosinone:

“To create a <<Global Theater>> capable of combining words, music, dance, sets, figurations and technological equipment for artistic purposes, addressing various issues such as: interculture, education for legality, education for peace, coexistence and respect for the environment as the source of life of the human being as a whole”

This approach allows the involvement of different arts and artistic experiences and helps to achieve a “passionate” dimension to the experience, thus able to involve children beyond the educational and didactic aspects of the activity, as described in the following notes by the teacher:

“In contrast to early school leaving, to provide a valid aid to integration, the project activities constitute an important opportunity for young people, materializing in the possibility of practicing, within the school structure, free of charge, the study of a music, choral, theatrical, choreutic activities and the artistic and scenographic workshop. The project of an artistic and therefore highly “human” nature also aims to spread the “passion” for music and the arts among the new generations of a territory (the Province of Frosinone) far from the major national circuits and with relevant and known sociocultural youth problems”.

In other cases, the artistic contamination is also an intergenerational contamination: in the school Sofo in Monopoli, for example, it was created:

“An intergenerational craft workshop of weaving and printing on fabric of decorative motifs, for the creation of artifacts: tapestries, scarves, etc ..., in continuity between primary school and lower secondary school and also in the presence of parents”.

The contact between students, local artisans, artists and parents allowed to work both on the acquisition of traditional knowledge, and on relational aspects such as strengthening the bond and trust between generations and, as the project itself mentions, the possibility to “live in the same place, where the values, aspirations and achievements of past and present generations are reflected”.

Observing artists and arts professionals was inspirational for young people because it enabled them to get in contact with new practices, to collaborate with the artists and to share their own work as a way of getting feedback as part of collaborative creativity (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015). In contact with artists, artisans and parents in the inedite role of teachers, teens can also experiment form of feedback and educational styles which are different from those they usually live at school, facing with more unstructured, open ended and interest driven learning models. Again, the contact between gen-

erations allows forms of “reverse pedagogies” in which the children themselves are carriers of skills and can activate informal skills such as learning to teach (Irwin & O’Donoghue, 2012).

Finally, in many cases, the connection, and often intertwining of art education and arcraft practices could also be linked to the idea to make art closer to the work market and offer, especially for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, a more concrete vision of the arts in relation to their life perspectives.

Furthermore, from Figure 7 it can be highlighted that the choice between the different sub-actions does not appear significantly different, for the different groups, except for the digital production front: in this case, in fact, it is noted that for the groups with children in difficulty the production of digital video content, podcasts, apps, vlogs constituted an important design option, affecting 27% of group projects, with a difference of 10 percentage points compared to the other group of students.

The teachers seem therefore aware of the role of technologies and media as levers of motivation and support, particularly effective precisely for children with less academic aptitudes (Jenkins et al. 2016). Despite this, the use of technologies appears, in the description of such projects, addressed above all to the dissemination and documentation of the projects, focusing more on the packaging of artistic outputs than to the creative processes.

In some, rarer examples, the technologies deeply enter the creative processes, as for example in the case of school Socrate Mallardo, from Marano, where the different musical notational and sequencing software programs have been used to support the compositional activities, or for the Istituto Magistrale Agnesi, in Milan, in which the collaboration with various external actors has led to an experimental use of digital languages, to assemble music, texts, and images and create a digitized storytelling.

An innovative approach, of particular interest to the target of “at risk” teens, concerned the project from school Copernico, from Carpeggiani of Ferrara, who based the activities on the use and production of rap music to merge civic issues (among them themes such as the mafia, bullying, white deaths, femicides) and artistic messages. Using a musical genre much appreciated by young people, the project adopted a connected learning approach (Sefton Green, 2013), able to link tastes and cultures of youngsters with school contents, making possible to shorten the distance between school and children, especially including those students who are difficult to involve through traditional curricular content.

In this same project, the use of technologies and social media also acquired a not purely instrumental role, denoting an updated and non-superficial knowledge of social media mechanisms. The performances were in fact filmed and uploaded to YouTube, and it was planned to monitor the earnings

coming from visualizations and then to donate them as charity to the families who were victims of femicide. This approach also shows the ability to connect youth interests and myths to media education practices, enabling students to know and master not only the aesthetic and fruitive dimensions of creativity, but also the productive and commercial rules of the new artistic digital expressions, thus addressing all the classical critical dimension of media literacy: representation, language, production and audience (Buckingham, 2007; 2017)

An “inclusive” use of social media that, by dialoguing with “myths” and youth cultural passions (the myth of the youtubers, for example), allows to reach groups of young people who are fascinated by these mechanisms, but often have few tools to master and to connect them to perspectives of individual and social growth.

The choice of this type of specific actions, linked to active laboratory production, practical experimentation and the use of media as creative support and accompaniment tools, confirms the idea, on the part of schools, that technologies and media are considered of particular support to increase the motivation and interest of the children most in difficulty, managing in some way to capture part of their world and their passions and practices of informal life.

Finally, it is emphasized the presence of some projects that involved children in difficulty not as a target but as designers, themselves, of solutions aimed at the weakest groups.

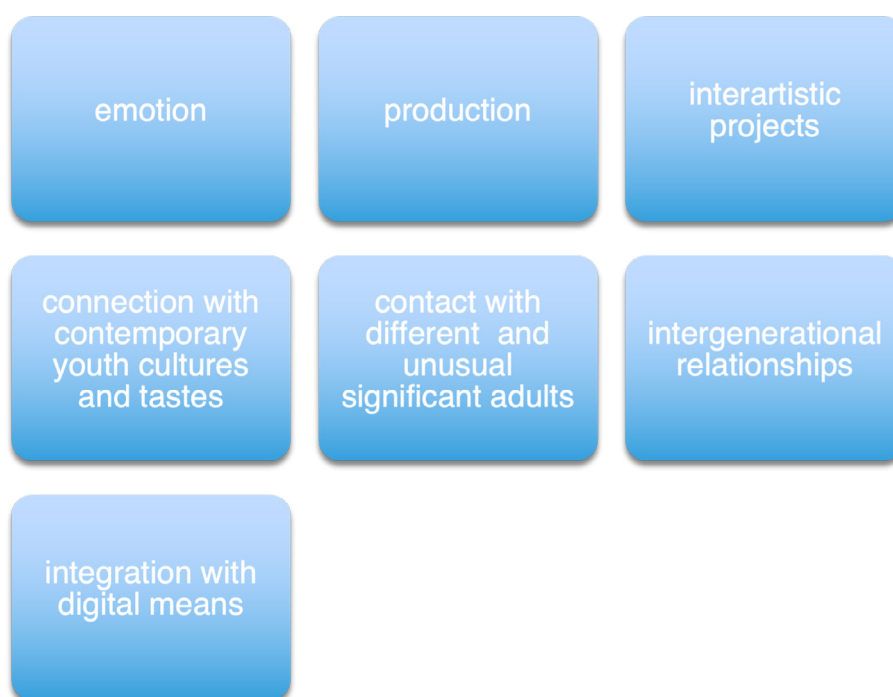
In the school school Capuana in Avola (SR), inclusiveness concerned the ability, for young people, to understand and work for inclusion, in a path with a strong meta-reflective value. It was therefore created: “An inclusive museum aimed at making the territory of belonging known to disabled students and usable by the citizens, in order to guarantee opportunities for cultural inclusion. The multimedia tactile museum, made with models of representative monuments, audio-stories, etc., become a meeting point, knowledge, awareness and information for all, implementing positive inclusive processes.” Other projects, from a less intense but nevertheless interesting perspective, have paid attention to the development of activities for a disabled public, introducing, for example, LIS language modules for music (school Pierluigi di Palestrina in Rome).

Conclusions

Starting from the monitoring of the first year of the National Plan of the Arts in Italian schools, the contribution has outlined artistic and expressive practices for the development and school integration of disadvantaged children.

From the quantitative analysis of the responses, it emerged how inclusion is considered one of the main goals behind the practice of art education at school: in fact, 52% of projects are related to such issue. Nevertheless, this attention for the less advantaged students is likely to decrease with the school grade, reaching the lowest level in the upper secondary schools, where arts are conceived more as “disciplinary” fields than as activities for nurturing well-being and social inclusion. From the textual analysis of the teachers’ responses and project descriptions presented in the findings, we can summarize in the scheme below (fig 9) some recurring aspects in projects aimed at groups of children in school difficulty.

Fig. 9 - Pivotal aspects of arts based education projects aimed at disadvantaged students



As we can observe from Figure 9, very different approaches can be highlighted, in terms of cultural vision and methodological issues: the aim of this contribution is thus not try to propose a common and general interpretation of the role of arts for the education and inclusion, since to precisely highlight how, from a cultural point of view, art can be interpreted in a wide, uneven but also rich and explorative way.

First of all, the preference for active and laboratory practices, compared to those of a theoretical and in-depth type. Although this action was gener-

ally the most opted one by all the schools, it emerges that this choice is particularly relevant precisely in projects that had, as a specific target, children in difficulty. The idea of involving young people not only as users, but also as active producers, therefore working on trust and protagonism as transversal motivation levers, does not seem surprising, placing it in the long tradition of the theory of the experience and pedagogical activism (Dewey 1934, Freinet 1977), as well as more recent approaches about the participatory digital cultures (Jenkins et al. 2010), that all see workshop making as one of the main levers of learning and motivation, especially for less motivated students.

A second point concerns the use of technologies in connection with the new youth languages. This element also appears in line with the recent transmedia learning theories that aim precisely to connect the informal digital dimensions of children's lives with formal learning objectives (Taddeo and Tirocchi 2019).

A third point appears to be the emphasis on the social dimension of projects, the desire to place children, through art, within meaningful social networks, building experiences of new intergenerational socialization, and of widening adult references to a wider basin of experiences, value models, points of view. The possibility, therefore, for children to use art to explore the otherness, and to find space for inspiration and trust in adults.

Finally, the creation of inter-artistic paths stands out as an inclusive strategy that allows the enhancement of the different expressive attitudes, involving children according to different roles (singer, dancer, writer, sound technician, set designer) and a multifaceted view of talent and expression. Inter-artistic strategies enable also the construction of paths with high emotional involvement, capable of putting emotion at the center of the educational processes, therefore, of integrating the issues of rationality, economy and efficiency that often regulate the teaching routine at school.

Many aspects remain to be investigated and, unfortunately, also given the limits due to the covid-19 emergency, many reflections deriving from an ethnographic and cultural analysis of the practices, cannot enrich this picture.

Some elements that this study intends to take into consideration, in future, concern the possibility of analyzing, for example, the different relationship strategies that teachers have put in place during the practices, if and how these strategies have been adapted to several young people, if indeed the artistic practice was interpreted by the teachers as an opportunity to enhance diversity or if, on the other hand, labeling and social reproduction dynamics were activated.

From the study of Howard (2020), for example, it emerges that teachers tend to shape artistic-expressive teaching practices according to a "training" and normative style towards children considered to be less gifted at

school, and to stimulate instead a vision of open, unstructured, empowering and confident artistic practice towards the children considered gifted. In this sense, artistic and expressive education, for less gifted children, is seen more as an action of “containment”, a filler and a fun diversion to “keep children at school”, rather than a space for researching the own talent, meta-reflection, freedom and identity expression.

For young people entering the projects under deficit labels their experience of art education can become an instrumentalised and ‘targeted’ approach predominantly concerned with behaviour modification, rather than a universal programme for cultural and intellectual development. It will also be interesting to observe if art education conducted by external actors, artists, for example, is able to bring different approaches and points of view to the vision of art at school, unhinging consolidated models and also, often, obligatory routines, in the teaching profession. Faced with these hypotheses, future research could concern the more qualitative aspects of the monitoring, in order to grasp the intangible aspects, the pragmatics and proxemics of the interactions, perceptions and attitudes of the various actors. In fact, only through an analysis of this type it will be possible to fully catch the role of artistic practices as “activators of possibilities” in children, and their potential as tools for individual growth aimed not at homologating efficiency, but at enhancing uniqueness, diversity and unpredictable beauty.

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