



THE SOFT TOYS AS A CONSOLATION PLAY-OBJECT IN SCHOOL AFTER THE COVID PERIOD. THE "TEDDY BEAR PROJECT" IN PRIMARY ART CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

Right after the post-COVID era, first-grade primary school children not only had to adapt to the school environment but also to make up for the social and emotional isolation they had experienced in the previous two years. Pupils experienced great difficulties in terms of their emotional response to the relational social networks that develop during their integration into primary school. This need, created the "Teddy bear project", a project that was shared with all first-grade classes in an experimental primary school in Greece. The project was carried out in three phases, during which, the students worked with their teddy bears in the art workshop. The transitional soft toys provided the children with feelings of comfort, companionship and intimacy. The children had the opportunity to observe themselves through their dolls and their classmates through their own dolls. Children developed empathy for others and made connections through their play-objects to themselves, their classmates and the school environment.

Keywords: teddy bear, play object, emotional development, joy & art, holistic learning

1. Introduction

The 2021-22 school year was marked by an enormous difficulty, unprecedented by school standards. Students returned to schools after a long period of distance education and were called upon to adjust to a reconfigured school normality by continuing their education. The biggest problem was found in the younger children in the first grade of primary school. These children had a huge gap which was created by their lack of attendance at kindergarten. In addition to the practical and functional part of their new daily routine, the pupils had to manage what this brought about in their emotional development. The management of meeting new friends and classmates, as well as the barrage of different teachers overwhelmed the young students' daily life.

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In Greek primary schools, the first-grade student sees seven different teachers a week, the teacher of visual arts, music, theatre, gymnastics, computer science, English and his teacher in the basic subjects. The young students suddenly had to manage complex relational networks between classmates, friends, teachers and the rest of the school staff. What was observed was that along with the functional difficulties that the pupils had to cope with, they had various psychological fluctuations during their stay at the school, both in the classroom and during breaks and in their adjustment to the different lessons in the timetable. This led to negative emotions, for instance, the children did not feel confident about what would happen to them during the day, they questioned anxiously and did not feel equally safe in all lessons.

This state of anxiety, lack of confidence and constant dissatisfaction gave birth to the idea of the 'Teddy Bear Project'. The realization that the students' insecurity did not allow them to adapt to the new circumstances of their lives created the need to invent tools and methods in a short time to help the children adapt and fill the emotional gaps that had resulted from their confinement during the quarantine period due to the pandemic. The central idea was for the students to bring something of their own from home, to feel joy, confidence and happiness when they have it with them, a kind of comfort. So, their most immediate and closest object could be a favorite stuffed animal and used as a transitional object, in their separation from home to school. Of course, this separation would logically have occurred when some years ago most of these children went to kindergarten or even nursery school, but the repetition of this process may have been necessary after two years of confinement inside the home, under pressure and fear of the pandemic and with the absence of socialization in the new school setting.

2. Literature review

2.1 The importance of play-based learning

Research shows that negative life experiences have an impact on learning and development, just as determination and a positive outlook improve our ability to manage stress and challenges (Donaldson, Dollwet, Rao, 2014). The Lego Foundation White Paper (Zosh, et al., 2017) states that joy is associated with increased levels of dopamine which play a role in improving memory, attention, sustained movement, creativity and motivation. The latest research tells us that it's no surprise that children who are more playful are more creative. Through the art of play, children develop the motivation to follow rules, behave and pay attention. They also recognize the ability to influence, manipulate, recognize opportunities, and make choices about their lives (Clapp, Ross, Ryan, & Tishman, 2016). When children play, they are responsible, construct and deconstruct rules, and decide how and when to comply, when to deviate or deviate, and when to lead or follow. Playful learning engages children in exploring and understanding the world while developing self-regulation (Mardell, et al., 2016), also can be a tremendous source of creativity and a great opportunity to develop thinking and learning skills. Natural curiosity gives children the courage to ask questions, identify

problems, imagine new possibilities, find solutions, and form new connections between people, ideas in the world (Bateson & Martin, 2013).

2.2 Social learning and empathy through play and art

Play, like learning, is a social interaction. Through the processes of sharing, one's own mind, understanding others, and communicating ideas, children not only enjoy being with others but also build deeper understanding and stronger relationships (Zosh, et al., 2017). They unconsciously monitor their own reactions to the behaviors of others, understanding themselves and their unique characteristics, reaching self-awareness. As children enter primary school, peers become increasingly important and the contribution of play to social learning builds the foundation of social life. Children learn to read and understand signs, listen and take the perspective of others, all key aspects for developing empathy and sympathy as well. Students share ideas, express themselves, negotiate and reach compromises (Morisson, 2014). In play they learn to balance autonomy and interdependence, learning the skills and dispositions of cooperation (Mardell, et al., 2016). In fact, social partners are the core for learning from our early life. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory focuses on the idea that learning occurs through social partners, who are not just a support for learning, but may actually be the key to learning. Pourkos (2009:86) says that art at a complex and higher level systematizes and organizes social emotions, offering relief, for example through play. The activities of the art of play and storytelling, perceived and transformed in practice, contribute to the development of social motivation to understand the behaviour of others and to communicate with each other. Art, play and storytelling are activities oriented to the wholeness of the human being touching his/her existence as a whole an existence that is at the same time physical mental and spiritual or in other words eco-physical experiential (Pourkos, 2009:32).

The integration of creative activities into educational programs is recommended as a means of developing children's empathy, since research has established positive relationships between creativity and emotional-social development (Carlozzi et al., 1995). Art activities that incorporate hands-on and group interactive approaches allow children to learn from their peers, while when done in a group context, art activities can help build social bonds, supporting identity formation (Ishaq, 2006).

2.3 The role of the doll in the child life

Many may think that children don't need dolls because playing with them means withdrawal or escape from reality, but what ultimately happens is that dolls become the vehicles for young children to experience and understand reality in a more accessible and engaging way. The feeling of closeness of such a friend helps children alleviate feelings of danger and loneliness. The doll often becomes a companion and comfort to help children face their real and imagined fears. In the majority of cases, friends of this kind are soft character toys such as teddy bears, cats, dogs and, of course, dolls. Children's soft friends become special at difficult times in their lives when they feel lonely and need help

and protection, for example before going to bed, when they are sick or when they are in an unfamiliar situation (Smirnova, 2011).

Such a soft toy is much more than a toy, it is a communication partner, a partner in life, a friend. Many children have favorite toys that they never want to part with: they talk to them, share good things and thoughts with them, sleep and eat with them, take them for walks and bring them to kindergarten. Starting from infancy, children respond to the face of a doll by distinguishing human characteristics in it. Smirnova (2011) tells us that children talk to their doll, ask and answer questions on its behalf, reproducing situations from their own lives, in other words, they "objectify" their own experiences. The children put their words and thoughts into the dolls' mouths and in this way, the dolls become expressive symbols of their inner world. This self-expression can be considered a form of involuntary play, through which children begin to understand themselves by re-enacting events in their lives or by embodying different characters by representing their distinct voices. For young children, dolls and soft toys become an 'alternative self'. This mechanism helps the child to step back from a situation to better understand it. According to Vygotsky (1966), a child can learn the self in play by creating imaginary points of identification and relating to them, thanks to the fact that children can go beyond the boundaries of a perceived situation and build imaginary spaces.

The child feels through the doll, shares and feels it, communicates with it with questions and it answers them, and has it as a friend. The doll is a substitute for the ideal friend, who is understanding and does not hold a grudge. Children need character toys, toys that play the role of a companion or partner. In Vygotsky's (1999) words, the young child has the ability to define as a doll any object to which he attributes a meaning, to function according to his or her wishes and needs. For the sake of play, the child has the ability to use a piece of wood and play symbolically (Vygotsky, 1994). It is observed that young children often speak in their games in whispers or out loud, make statements, make requests or ask questions to which they then answer themselves. In addition, they attribute their feelings and experiences to their toys. Children seem to put themselves into the body of their toy and this body then becomes the personification of their self, we could say that the doll-toy becomes another self, an alter ego. Thus, the conversation with an object-doll-toy is a conversation of a child with his "other self" personified in a material object, in this sense, character toys can undoubtedly be considered as psychological tools (Smirnova, 2011).

The phenomenon of personification and animation of objects of nature is called animism. The child psychologist Jean Piaget (1951) considers that animism appears in children during the preschool stage. The doll is an inanimate object, but in the hands of the animator it can be used as an object of art when animated. Also, the phenomenon of animism is also found in children when they draw, that is, they can be heard talking with the drawings or constructions they have created.

As Garvey (1990) states, children play or represent their knowledge of the social and material world which they cannot express verbally or in a clear and explicit way. Thus, through these experiments, children acquire the ability to relate their own personal

experiences to the behaviors and situations of other persons. Children may imitate their parents while other times children may, through their role play, release emotional areas that are not otherwise expressed, such as showing how they think some people feel towards others or how they wish people would treat them. Doll toys usually reflect adults' worldviews, tastes, fashion, technological developments, and therefore contribute to children's social and everyday perceptions and familiarize them with the patterns of social and family life. In the modern world, the need for a doll seems to be the same for girls and boys, according to Magouliotis (2009), the child through playing with the doll constructs and experiences his/her racial role from an early age. Nevertheless, when boys and girls play with the same toy, it has been observed that they use it with different motivations. The girl usually plays the mother by taking care of the little doll, feeding, washing and dressing her and seems to be concerned with interpersonal relationships while boys give the toys the identity of a toy hero and identify with him by re-enacting a battle or fight (Eaton & Von Bargen, 1981).

3. Research method

The teddy bear project was implemented in the first semester of the first grade at a primary school in a suburb of Athens. About seventy first-grade students participated. The teddy bears came to the school after an invitation was sent to the parents and stayed at the school for as many days as needed; the parents of the children gave permission for the participation of their minor children in the program. During the two months, three activities were carried out in the visual arts class.

This project was based on the method of "Educational research-action", where the teacher becomes a researcher at the same time. Project Based Learning (PBL) was applied as a teaching method and the emergent design of the project according to the student-centered system of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, et al., 1998) was applied, highlighting the moments in which the objectives and practices had to shift towards the interests and potentials of the students. Qualitative research tools such as observation and critical reflection dialogues were used to collect data. Project data included the results of the workshop activities with photographic material, recordings from small and informal open discussions, participant observation and research diary keeping. Thematic analysis is the method chosen to analyze the project's self-report data; it was considered to be the most appropriate for the process of identifying themes or patterns within the qualitative data collected (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This method provides access to collective ways of making meaning.

4. Research questions

- 1) If students will feel more at home in the school by bringing a toy object that represents the security they feel at home

- 2) If the students through this transitional object, the soft toy will create emotional bridges from home to school
- 3) If students through the projection of themselves on the soft toy are going to identify in some ways with their peers and cultivate empathy

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Phases of the Project - Results & Evaluation

1st activity: "Portraits of the teddy bears"

In the first activity, the students chose a favorite teddy bear and after bringing it to school, it was presented to the rest of the class. That is, the students told a short story about their teddy bear and then were invited to create a portrait of it by placing it in front of them and drawing it as they see it.

Results and evaluation of the first activity: the children elaborated on the features of their soft friend, as well as its clothes or body. Some children smelled their own soft bears and their friends and discussed or named the bears' distinctive smells. The students then created an imaginary space in the background of the portrait with a plain background or a patterned background. We then took the teddy bear and photographed it and its portrait, the students helped set up the backdrop and then we all looked at our teddy bear pictures together. Later I took all the photos and formed the video below: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob8mF3iRSNA&t=62s>. The students after watching the video commented on the fact that they saw other teddy bears that were not of their classmates and then I explained that this short video featured all the teddy bears that all seventy students in our first-grade class brought in. This made them wonder about the large number of children in this school, but also about the fact that all the students have the same teacher who teaches the art class, so in a way the students are connected to each other. Generally, the imprinting of the soft toy seemed to be relatively easy for a first-grade child. Some students created an imaginary space for their teddy bear, others a representation of the reality where the teddy bear could live and others an abstract space with geometric shapes and colors (Figure 1).

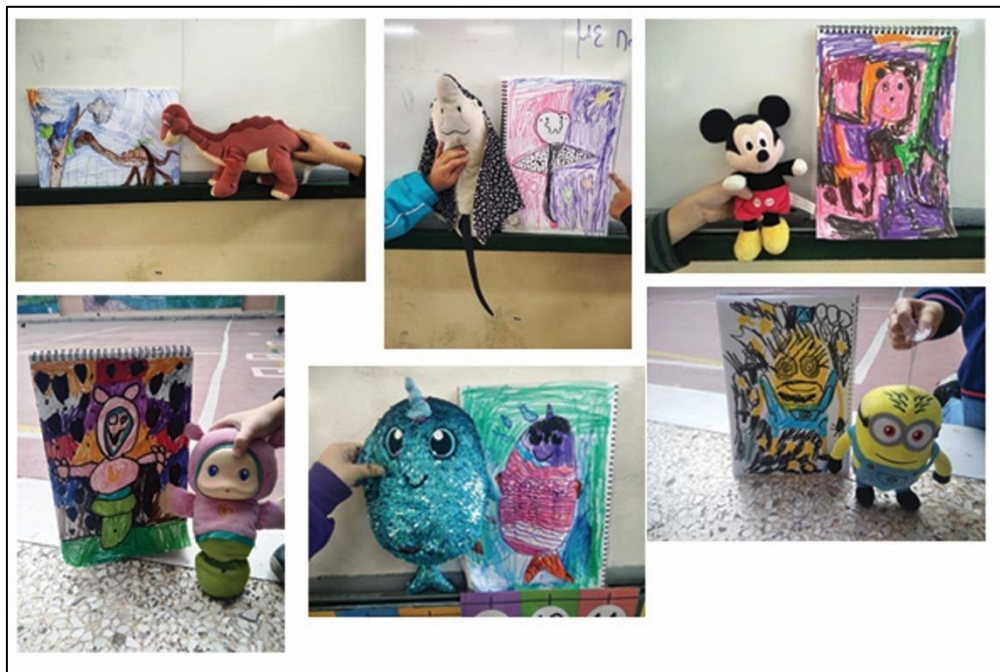


Figure 1

The children did not change methods and practices they carried on with the skills they already had, for example, a child who had not previously used his imagination did not do so even with his teddy bear (Figure 2), yet he brought it, shaped it and demanded his work to be included in the video, in short, he showed an eagerness for the activity that had not been present in the previous lessons.



Figure 2

2nd activity: "Teddy bears go for a trip"

In the second activity, the students would take their teddy bears on a trip with their neighbor's teddy bear. Each student decided on the place where the two bears were going on a trip and then took a souvenir photo of them, so they had to make a drawing of the place they went and the name of the location. In addition, for this activity, each student had a passport card on which they had to fill in the details of their bear, such as name,

age, origin, so that the bear could travel freely around the world. We also formed a suitcase with the clothes he could take with him.

Results and evaluation of the second activity: In this activity, the students were excited to go on a trip with their neighbor's teddy bear and the fact that they didn't have to choose who to go with was a great comfort to them. In part, this is an individual project, but it accommodates the classmate element (Figure 3). They chose to go to places around the world and in most cases, they allotted the same space on their block for their host bear, except in a few cases where they drew their own bear very large and the guest bear small or narrow, but these examples were few and far between.



Figure 3

The children designed clothes according to the place where the teddy bears were going to travel, for example, if they were going to the sea, they made clothes for the beach and if they were going to the mountains, they prepared equipment for winter activities such as skiing. The simulation of the journey through the object-play helped the students to imagine themselves outside the boundaries of their school and home, to become travelers of places and ideas, together with a companion, the alter ego of their classmate. The students also learned to prepare for a process and on a formal level, they learned the use of their passports and personal details. The children used the soft toy's name or attribute for its first name and their own last name for their little friend's last name. They understood very well that only the teddy bear's head was to be put in the passport photo (Fig. 4). So, some of them were comfortable with putting the teddy bear's head in front

and others profiled it. Some children paid particular attention to the design of their teddy bear's clothing, which should resemble the shape of their body or even the color or texture of their skin.

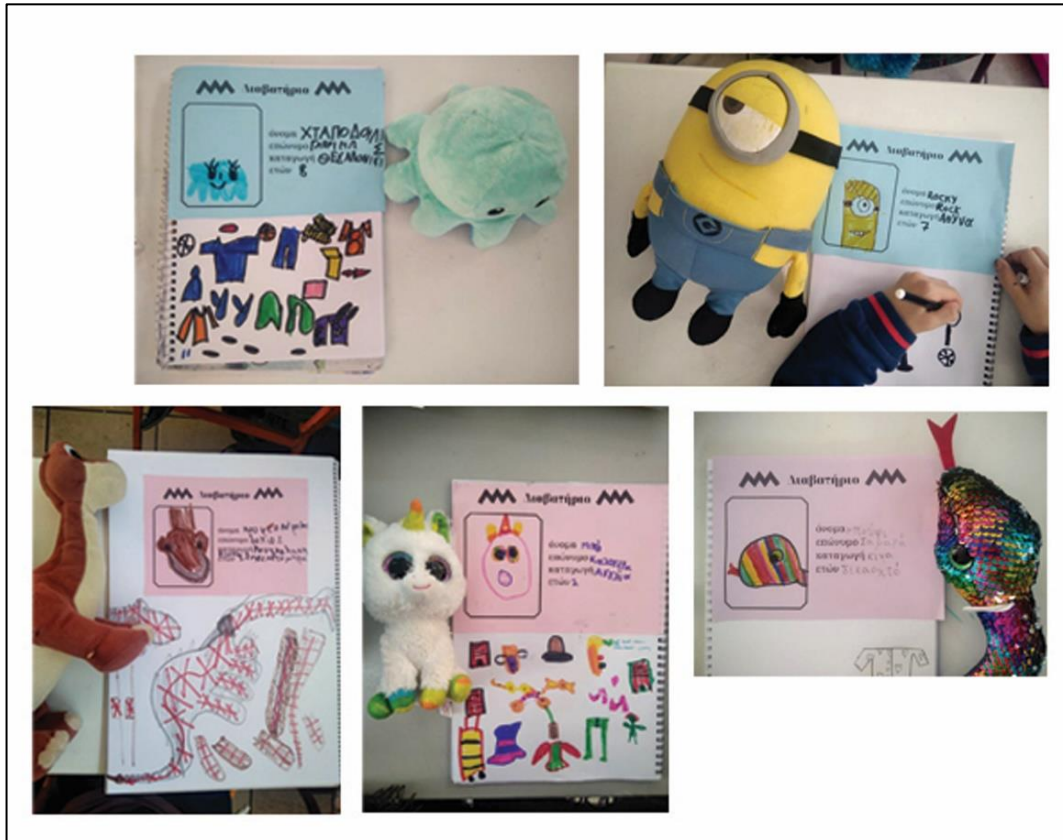


Figure 4

3rd activity: “Shaping the teddy bears”

In this activity, the students worked with their kinesthetic perception as well as their spatial perception. The students in an attempt to form geometric shapes had to coordinate their movements with the set of toys all as a team. The students, placed their teddy bears side by side double to complete a shape, and in this way symbolically represented the cooperation of all members to achieve a goal, in this case, to form the geometric shapes.

Results and evaluation of the third activity: The students discovered the space around them as a team, how much space do they need to see a shape clearly? That is, while at first, they all gathered very close together then they had to move away to make the shape clear. Also, some children had to move further away in some cases like for example when they were forming the square and they were at the corners. In this kinesthetic activity, the pupils came alongside each other and through their objects – toys they worked together for a common purpose (Figure 5).



Figure 5

6. Conclusion

During the project the students were more than happy and seemed emotionally covered for having their teddy bears with them during the school day, it was like having an ally or a very good friend with them. The children anxiously were asking the teachers if they could take their teddy bears with them at break time. Finally, they were very happy to play with their classmates' toys in the schoolyard as if they were communicating their feelings to each other in a way of their own through the dolls, projecting their need to build relationships (Figure 6). The activities were an occasion for the student population to connect with each other, the children began to discover the personality, interests and feelings of their peers through play, cultivating empathy. Students discovered new parts of themselves and sometimes even accepted unpleasant events such as rejection from some children who preferred a different company for their teddy bear. Such events were certainly understood; however, the "loss" now was softer because the rejection never happened directly to a person but only through their play.

Children through the playful learning process became more creative. They showed their abilities and potential to develop skills in the visual arts subject without any difficulties. The joyful and fun atmosphere that was created in the lesson made children to show confidence and to let themselves go into a new and unknown process.

Group learning was very efficient in this project. The children were challenged to work together in slow and steady steps, from the first individual portrait task, then moving to the group of two and later moving on to the final activity where they had to work with the whole class. The steady flow of cooperative learning from individual to group format around a playful purpose made the students feel the need for further connection with each other. As well as to understand the diversity of their peers through the various choices and the way the other children in the class moved through the activities. The children were introduced to new creative ways offered by their classmates through working together for a common purpose and a common game.

The children’s response to the project and their enthusiasm for it surprised most of the teachers in the school. In addition, the response of the parents in preparing the dolls each time we invited them to school was very important for the children to understand that we are all a network and we all communicate with each other. As well as the involvement of the different teacher disciplines in creative projects of each individual discipline, so that the activities were identical in some respects, thus creating the framework for holistic and global learning. This social context of mutual help and learning formed by different parties not only connected the children to each other but also encouraged the teachers and parents to create a fun and playful learning atmosphere for the children.

This experimental project was born out of the imperative need for the children’s school adaptation after the COVID period to the school environment, yet it offered so many positives that it could be repeated every year as a practice for emotional development and group bonding.



Figure 6

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Katerina Kokkinaki is a graduate of the Department of Visual and Applied Arts of the School of Fine Arts of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (2008) with a degree in painting and an Integrated Master’s degree from the same school. She is a graduate of

the Interior Architecture Department of the School of Graphic Arts and Artistic Studies of TEI of Athens (2000). She is a PhD candidate from 2021 at the Department of Interior Architecture, School of Applied Arts and Culture, PADA. She is a member of the auxiliary teaching staff of the same school while she teaches the visual arts course at Ralleia Experimental Primary Schools, is in charge of the Visual Arts Group for students and the educational training for young art teachers in the visual arts course (Mentoring), while at the same time, she carries out her experimental applications in the same school. She has been teaching in primary and secondary schools for the last thirteen years the subjects of Visual Arts, Drawing and Art History, and has been a lecturer in Art & Design colleges and schools in the subjects of Decorative Applications, Perspective Drawing & Sketch and Color in Space. She has implemented pilot projects, innovative school projects and European projects, many of them with a focus on the use of digital environments. In addition, she has presented and coordinated experiential workshops on educational topics at conferences and her research work has been presented in scientific journals. As a visual artist, she has held three solo exhibitions, and has participated in numerous group exhibitions, international art fairs and experimental festivals.

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