



'GOOD THINGS HAPPEN HERE AS WELL'

Arts activities for social transformation amongst children and adolescents –a case study in Buenos Aires

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This report is a revised version of my Master thesis within the course Communication for Development (Malmö University, Sweden, 2004). Its baseline is that culture is arts activities, which in certain contexts can be a means of communication. Participation is the word that is praised in development studies and in communication for development contexts. One sort of participation is the active engagement in an arts activity, where it is not only the participation itself which is important, but also the fact that it is arts that is the activity. It should not, according to this belief that art itself has a value, be the same to participate in football training. Arts generate something more. My focus is the attitude to, and believed impact of, arts activity on young people. Arts activities are here seen as a participatory way to communicate development or social change.

INTRODUCTION

How do *art and culture for development* work? The British Council uses three categories: conveying information or a “message”; directly exploring issues with the stakeholder communities through participatory arts activity; or indirectly addressing issues through working with marginalised groups. The third type is the focus of this report.

Intergovernmental institutions such as the United Nations, UNESCO, The Council of Europe and the World Bank have recognised the role of culture in sustainable development (Cliche, 2001). They have emphasised a concept of culture which -also going beyond artistic creation- is seen as the foundation of our creativity and progress. This includes economic, political, intellectual and social development.

The objectives in my study are connected to culture in the sense of “the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams, 1988). To make the distinction easier, the active participation in cultural activities will be called here *arts activities*.

This study is placed in Argentina, and there are several reasons for

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this. First, Argentina is a former rich country, with a complex and troubled history, which has recently been balancing on the edge of poverty. Many people have become poor, or poorer, in Argentina during the last three to ten years, even though there has always been a big gap between rich and poor. Second, poverty and social exclusion are two factors of enormous relevance in this country –but also the tradition of arts and cultural activities. Third, since the master course in Communication for Development is an international course, to strengthen the networks and relationships between participants in the course, I felt it was important to choose to develop my field work in a country where two of my fellow course participants live their everyday life.

The purpose of my qualitative study was to investigate the way in which different forms of art-activities are used and perceived by the young participants of a small non-governmental organisation's activities in sub-urban Argentina. In particular, why the participatory use of arts (and culture) for the social change of young people?

My objectives were:

1. To investigate the children's and young people's attitudes and experience of the art activities within the organisation's framework.
2. To determine the consequences of the young participants' active involvement in the art activities according to themselves.
3. To find out which the perspectives of the adults working in the organisation were regarding the young participants' experience.
4. To investigate if –according to the children and the adults– the activities are participatory.

Under the conceptual umbrella of “development arts and development in practice”, I will introduce the organisation *Crear Vale la Pena*, which was the focus of my field work. The qualitative method used was mainly interviews. My results are based on interviews with six adults, plus boys and girls between aged 14-18 years. They all lived with their families, relatively close to the organization, and participated in classes in *Crear Vale la Pena*'s cultural centres. They all went to school at the moment in which the interviews took place. The adults were working within the organisation.

CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENTS PARTICIPATION

According to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), a child is every person below the age of 18 years. It is important to understand why in this report I have chosen the children's perspective, as well as that of the adults. The struggle to change development institutions to take account of children is only beginning. Adults value children highly in emotional terms, but when it comes to more formal contexts, they are considered more or less useless: their contribution to work and production is excluded from any measurements, and they are made

invisible in statistics, debate and policy-making. Also, adults do not really seem to create societies in which children can genuinely flourish. Michael Edwards (1996) refers to figures by *Save the Children* and UNICEF showing that both child poverty and violence towards children are increasing in all types of societies, be them industrialised, transitional or developing, and that poverty among children often increases at a faster rate than poverty among adults.

Edwards mentions three reasons for believing that societies are missing out a lot when children's needs and voices are marginalised: children (1) are the future and will have a permanent effect on society's capacity to develop, (2) they are not a minority, and (3) they have specific needs and interests which often differ from the needs and interests of adults.

Development that marginalises children cannot be said to be development.

It is important that children and adolescents, as well as adults, are participatory members of community and communication projects. The heads of State and Government and representatives of States participating in the special session of the General Assembly on children (United Nation Resolution 2002) emphasised that members of society should listen to children and ensure their participation. Their right to express themselves and to participate in all matters affecting them, in accordance with their age and maturity, must be respected.

YOUTH IN ARGENTINA

Recent years of economic meltdown in Argentina made an already bad situation worse. Inflation has been extremely strong, and unemployment increased dramatically. Gaudin refers to figures that state that in 2002 18 million Argentines were living under the poverty line. In the Federal Capital and Greater Buenos Aires, 53,1 percent of children lived in poverty. Of the area's 2,8 million children, 1,5 million belonged to families without the possibility to afford the minimal necessary level of food and basic services. School drop-outs have also increased. In the beginning of the century, of the over 9 million young people between 15 and 29 years, 21,6 percent are unemployed, 13,2 percent do not work nor study, and 31,3 percent are poor.

THEORY AND BACKGROUND

Participation, culture, arts and social transformation

During the 1990s, there was a big tendency within developing research and thinking towards culture and development. In 1992, the independent World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) was established in co-operation between UNESCO and the United Nations. According to UNESCO, "the World Commission on Culture and Development has highlighted culture as the "last frontier" of development".

In 1995, the commission's report, *Our Creative Diversity*, was presented to the General Conference of UNESCO and the General Assembly of the United Nations. In the introduction, two main views on development are pointed out. One view refers to development as a process of economic growth, a rapid expansion of production, productivity and income per head. The other view sees development as a process that enhances the effective freedom of the people involved to pursue whatever they have reason to value.

“This view of human development (in contrast to narrowly economic development) is a culturally conditioned view of economic and social progress. Poverty of a life, in this view, implies not only lack of essential goods and services, but also a lack of opportunities to choose a fuller, more satisfying, more valuable and valued existence.” (UNESCO, 1995)

The report does not think that culture can be reduced to being a promoter of economic growth. Instead, it is important to acknowledge the important instrumental function of culture in development, but also recognise that it is not all there is to culture and development: “There is, in addition, the role of culture as a desirable end in itself, as giving meaning to our existence.” (UNESCO, 1995)

When it comes to culture and development, the report points out that culture connects people with one, another and makes the development of the individual possible. Culture also defines how people relate to nature and the environment, to the earth and the cosmos, and through it people express their attitudes to and beliefs in other forms of life. In this sense, all forms of development are ultimately determined by cultural factors. “Culture then is not a means to material progress: it is the end and aim of “development” seen as the flourishing of human existence in all its forms and as a whole.” (UNESCO, 1995)

François Matarasso (2001) writes that culture is far more than entertainment. Through culture we begin to understand our experience, hopes, desires and fears - it is the means by which we can begin to understand. And through culture we can see these emotions and thoughts in the context of society, from family to nation and world. We build identity through culture, and we communicate our ideas, feelings, insights, our very selves, to others. So culture allows us to learn and develop as people, and its relevance for us is so fundamental that it is not possible to imagine a person, or a human society, without culture.

Culture and social capital

Helen Gould writes about culture and social capital. She quotes the World Bank as saying that social capital is not just the sum of institutions which carries a society; it is even the glue that holds them together. Social capital measures the wealth of the community, not in financial but in human terms. Its core is relationships, networks and local partnership. Exchanges within this system create trust, reciprocity and sustainable improvements

to quality of life.

With more connections between individuals and community organisations, the probability of further transactions is more likely. That fact enhances the quality of relationships and makes further transactions probable. Culture is a social operating system about relationships, beliefs, values and motivations. Culture can also be about heritage and cultural products –arts, crafts, music, textiles and so on– and the ideas, talent and creativity which produce them. These are assets that contribute to the wealth of a community and that improve its social landscape.

When discussing culture and the development of social capital, Gould looks into three bigger categories: culture as enabling environment; trust, partnerships and networking; and new skills and capacities. Where culture is respected and understood, it can become an enabling environment for development. Because the community's life is largely determined by cultural factors, it is hardly possible to intervene in its development without taking into account the cultural aspects: cultural beliefs, rituals, traditional power structures, modes of expression, concepts of time, ways of visualising, attitudes to health and nutrition, relationships to the environment, and so on. Gould refers to Gittell & Vidal, who have shown that one of the critical benefits of social capital is the way it increases connections between people. To participate in culture can have a transformative effect on individuals by inspiring growth, self-esteem and respect among peers, family and the community. And the fact that individuals change and grow might have an effect in the wider community.

Creativity, arts and transformation

The British Council defines Art and Culture for Development as “any kind of arts activity which facilitates or leads to social change” (The British Council, 2003). All art forms are and can be used to contribute to development and social change. Arts and culture are meaningful development tools for many reasons. Amongst other things, they are essential elements of the identity of the individual and the community, and can improve self-esteem, empowerment and community cohesion, have the ability to communicate and explore complex concepts and ideas, and stimulate imaginative thinking and creative problem-solving.

In a review about *The Arts and Social Exclusion* prepared for the Arts Council of England, Helen Jermyn (2001) presents a list of claimed impacts of the arts: it develops self-confidence and self-esteem, increases creativity and thinking skills, improves skills in planning and organising activities, improves communication of ideas and information, develops community identity, activates social change, raises public awareness of an issue, enhances mental and physical health and well-being, contributes to urban regeneration, alleviates the impact of poverty and increases the employability of individuals. The list suggests that the impacts work on different levels. There are impacts on the individual, for example, when increased self confidence is often suggested as an outcome of arts

participation. It has also been suggested that participants develop both creative and non-creative skills, such as communication and organisational skills. That could also lead to social inclusion outcomes, such as employment or education.

Matarasso (in Jermyn, 2001) suggested that in many cases questions of confidence went beyond the arts: 'where people became involved in the organisation of events they spoke of a new found confidence in their abilities to make things happen in the community'. Development in people's education, skills and attributes can contribute to their personal or collective effectiveness. That, writes Jermyn, is the core idea behind the notion of human capital.

Communication for Development

Over the decades, development thinking has gone from a top-down attitude to considering partnership and participation. The perspectives on communication have followed a similar route. What has happened in the communication for development field in the last decades could be described as follows: "The former hierarchical, bureaucratic, and sender-oriented communication model was replaced by a more horizontal, participative, and receiver-oriented approach. The present vision is based fundamentally on interactive, participatory, and two-way communication at all levels of society." (Servaes, 1999)

When it comes to participatory communication, there are two major approaches: one is the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire; the other concerns the ideas of access, participation, and self-management which were outspoken in debates in the UNESCO in the 1970s. Servaes writes that that "every communication project that calls itself participatory accepts these principles of democratic communication" and concludes: "In essence, participatory development involves the strengthening of democratic processes and institutions at the community level and the redistribution of power. Participation aims at redistributing the elites' power, so that a community can become a full-fledged democratic one. As such, it directly threatens those whose position and/or very existence depends on power and its control over others. Reactions to such threats are sometimes overt, but most often are manifested as a less visible, yet steady and continuous resistance to change in the status quo." (Servaes, 1999).

Alfonso Gumucio Dragon (2001) writes that the questions and the answers on the communication initiatives have to be figured out in co-operation with the community. Dragon points out that participatory communication is not easily defined because it cannot be considered a unified model of communication. Some of the characteristics that according to Dragon distinguish participatory communication from other development communication strategies in search of social changes are: horizontal vs. vertical, process vs. campaign, long term vs. short term, with vs. for, specific vs. massive, people's needs vs. donors' musts, ownership vs.

ARTS AND DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE

The organisation

My study focused on the arts-activity within the organisation *Crear Vale la Pena*. That means that what is described below as basic formation program within education is the focus of my questions and thoughts.

Crear Vale la Pena is a non-governmental organisation which has worked and developed a program on social inclusion in Argentina since 1993. The organisation claims that art is a vital need such as food, education and work, because it is a transforming strength linked to the building of social sense and citizenship. This transformation can allow self-recognition, respect and a sense of life (*Crear Vale la Pena's* web-page). "Before the crisis of institutional spaces and the models of socialization, the young people try alternatives constructing relations and social codes that escape hegemonic control. Beyond the social, cultural, ethnic and generic differences, what joins them are the interest of a generation, the building of significance, symbols and symbolism, because of that we choose the art as our working tool" (*Crear Vale la Pena*, c).

The experiences of *Crear Vale la Pena* aim to show that art is an opportunity that gives dignity to people's lives. Art is described as the engine of culture:

"...the way you are going to relate to each other, the way you are going to relate with nature, with God, your values, all these decisions is culture. Art is like the trigger or the engine of these decisions, because art mixes the emotional thing with the irrational thing, and mainly art dreams when awake" (Ines Sanguinetti, president of *Crear Vale la Pena*)

The problems that *Crear Vale la Pena* works on are, in short, poverty and exclusion: "Poverty is an economic problem but exclusion is an individual and social state that exceeds material aspects, because it wears away little by little all the bases where a socially valued identity is supported, until the person turns into an excluded identity who has lost her/his reputation or prestige. The Argentinean crises has weakened the role of culture as a motivation power of social life, while the official institutions devoted to promote art are devalued as vanguard spaces for economic and social development. Culture creates and supports citizenship" (p. 5, *Crear Vale la Pena*, c).

The organisation's main tool is called the "Art + Social Organization Program". The program works on three areas: education, artistic production and social organisation. The target group is the population aged 12-20 years (*Crear Vale la Pena*, c).

- Education is divided into two areas: basic formation, and professional

formation. The focus of the Basic Formation Program is general and introductory training in music, fine arts and drama. This includes musical instruments workshops, singing workshops, workshops for the production of musical composition, audio, musical ensemble, musical language, and didactics workshops. It also includes sound operator training, arts and comics workshop, contemporary and urban dance, aerobics, march, body expression, choreographic games, acrobatics, physical training, choreographic composition, didactics, drama, cinema and stage design, make-up, and lighting workshops. The Professional Formation Program works with students more advanced in each subject interested in becoming teachers, artists and art technicians.

- The activities mainly take place in the three Cultural Community Centers located in different areas in the northern suburbs of the province of Buenos Aires. "They have the aim to become "the place" for meeting, participation, creation and individual projection. They are institutional spaces for empowering disadvantaged people" (Crear Vale la Pena c, p. 12). The aim is also for the centers to be managed by the neighbours autonomously. People are trained as social and cultural promoters. In the Cultural Community Centers, *Crear Vale la Pena* encourages people to recover art and culture as a motivation for social life, and to improve the life quality of those who live outside poor neighbourhoods, and through that, to contribute to building a more equitable and democratic society.

SOME FINDINGS

This abbreviated presentation of my findings is organised in three main sections: attitudes towards and experiences of arts activities, their consequences and impact, and the level of participation. These sections follow in a way the objectives of my research.

* *Attitudes towards and experiences of the arts activities*

The young ones...

Many of the interviewees expressed that coming to the Cultural Community Centres was the first time they started doing arts activities. Those with previous experience had often been encouraged by their parents, doing activities together with them at home. Some of the young ones come once a week, twice, or thrice, depending on how often they have lessons. Others go every day and spend many hours, also far beyond lessons and workshop hours.

"I didn't know that the centre was just around the corner. Then I went with my brother to a small football pitch nearby, but I didn't want to play. So I found out some.. then one day I went here, and I stayed." Girl, 15.

"I found my space here, it has everything, I found good friends, good people." Boy, 15.

"I feel supported, here I can think of my problems and have fun." Girl, 16.

When doing arts, there are thoughts about wanting to do it, and continue wanting to do it –to keep studying, and to keep learning. Thoughts about arts seem to be present a lot, even outside lessons and the cultural centres where it all takes place. Feelings connected to dance are overwhelmingly positive. However, anger might appear first:

“Sometimes I get angry when I don’t manage to do what I am practising, when it is not like I am learning something new / .../ And once you succeed, you feel great.” Boy, 18.

Feeling well, happy and good are emotions being described by the young ones. Feeling good is also connected to being in a group with people one knows, and with a familiar teacher:

“Dance is my soul. It is very much, something I have in the blood, I enjoy it a lot, it is like a drug, I can’t stop doing it.” Boy, 15.

The adults...

There is –not unexpectedly- a strong and very positive belief in arts activities amongst the interviewed adults. It is not always easy to separate the space from the activities. There are different reasons why the children and young ones visit the centres in the first place. Highly stressed are: wanting to do arts, and to socialize. Having fun might come as a part of that:

“ I think that some people are really interested in art, there are others that are really interested in being with others and have something in common with others. That is also a really important reason to be in Crear. It is not just art.”

These activities are also fulfilling deeper needs:

“I think it is that they find in the centres they have a place to express themselves, and that they feel comfortable there. /.../ ... sometimes it is like an escapism from their realities..”

Arts are a way of gripping creativity, to change people, to communicate, for expression and pleasure. Arts make it possible for one to create a social identity. Arts also give you something to create your self and to change the way things are.

“... things are the way they are. You awake and say things are like this. But they have this other chance, they can be different.”

** Consequences/impact of the arts activities*

The young ones...

Most of the young ones think they have changed since they started doing arts activities. Some of the changes mentioned are directly connected to the arts activities: being better at dancing, more assertive, or playing the guitar a lot better, and developing a technique. Other changes go beyond the pure arts:

“Being with my friends has changed /.../ Before, maybe, I didn’t get together a lot, or talked. I didn’t make jokes with them, all that. And now I am used to it, and I am more with friends as well.” Boy, 14.

“Yes, physically. I was 13 years old and weighed 85 kilos. And my mood changed. Before I was always at home with my mother and I cried for everything. I never went out and I had no friends.” Girl, 16.

Life has changed since the young ones started with the arts activities. To begin with, they have more friends, and they get attention since they know something that others might want. Also, the person’s own idea of what life would be like, now or in the future, has changed:

“Yes, when I am grown up maybe I can have a music group, a band. I’ve got thoughts, with some friends who are also playing, to put together a band.” Boy, 14.

“I was really closed before, shy, and this has opened me a lot.” Boy 15.

Most of the young ones think differently since they started taking part in plays, dancing, drawing and so on. Some say they don’t. It might only be some situations that are affected, but the changes are there:

“Especially me, when I started coming here the only thing I said was “hello”, and went to my class and then went home. No I talk to everybody, I am much more social.” Girl, 15.

“Being here has put me in so many different situations and that has taught me about people. Some people that I really thought were my friends, turned out not to be my friends. Appearance is tricky. It is not always what it looks like.” Boy, 15.

The arts activities have inspired all of the young ones to do other things: a different arts activity, or a wish to teach other people to, for example, dance and choreograph. Others have been inspired to start playing basketball or football.

“To look for more, find my own style.” Boy, 15.

“I dream about mixing... for example dropping dead in contemporary dance and then just rise and make some tango moves.” Boy, 15.

Everybody wants something with their future. There are no answers referring to that there are no plans, no future.

“I want to be the best choreographer in the world, and I would like to die on stage. I want to die dancing.” Boy, 15.

Adults...

The impacts of the arts activities on the young ones are strong, all the adults agree on that. However, they mention few concrete examples of this. Following is the core of the more theoretical suggestions:

Being seen, being visible, by society and by others.

Discovering your personality.

Working with emotions, ideas and bodies.

Working out possibilities.

Feeling dignity and seeing possibilities.

Performing in important places.

Absence of violence.

Having a common goal.

An example of reasoning: “They speak in an other way, they are constructing their language in an other way, so they are probably constructing their thoughts in an other way, being able to speak, propose, being able to say no, disagree, all these things are signs of transformation.”

** Participation*

The young ones...

Who decides things, who has the power. These are not easy questions to answer. “Decide what?”, was the answer many of the young ones gave, when asked “who decides here”. Most of the children/adolescents suggest that the co-ordinators of the centres decide, or the directors of *Crear*. A couple of persons also refer to the neighbourhood-team. Others feel a bit disappointed or maybe not so interested really:

“I feel that young people come with ideas, but no one listens.” Girl, 16.

“Maybe if they want me to have an opinion, I might be able to.” Boy, 14.

The adults...

Participation is very important. *Crear* is a place to participate, and without participation there is no social life. And yes, the young ones participate in the centres:

“Yes, all the time.../.../but young people are part of the movement of the centre and they are the heart of the centre, so what is happening always has to do with what they demand or what they want or what they don't.”

One important way to participate is to join the neighbourhood team. It is also pointed out that many of the students might not know about the fact that the centres are supposed to be run by the neighbourhood. But there are other ways to participate:

“When someone participates, you modify the meaning of things. So, those who go to a class, a workshop, or participate in a production, or play, doing what they want, they are going to influence things one way or another.”

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken with many restrictions, and its scope remains limited. However, the opinions and experiences shared by these people are valuable.

“Good things happen here as well” said the banner over the entrance to one of *Crear Vale la Pena*'s cultural community centres in the northern suburbs of the province of Buenos Aires.

The feeling I often had after while doing the interviews was that the arts activities might be a way of creating hope. In analysing the interviews, I did not experience the same sensation. But I think it is there anyway, although expressed slightly differently. As said by young and adults, the arts activities will in one way or another open ways forward, make them see new possible futures.

The young ones have a very positive attitude to the arts. At first, many were presented with active arts activities in the cultural centres, and they keep coming back to learn more, feel joy, meet friends and experience a sense of belonging. Thoughts of arts activities follow the young participants outside the lessons and the cultural centres. Doing arts make the young ones feel strong and strive to move forwards. Being on stage is something which you think seems incredible, and something you could not even dream of before it happened.

The joint attitudes described by the young ones very much resemble what the literature says. For example, Jermyn (2001) describes that pupils studying art, music, drama and dance had benefits like heightened enjoyment and a therapeutic release of tensions. As Matarasso (2001) says, culture is far more than entertainment. But the joy of entertainment is obviously strong among the young ones. The adults' view is more or less coincident with that of the young ones, although described in slightly different ways. Arts are like the engine of change, says someone. Arts can make things different; things do not have to be exactly the same as you think when you wake up in the morning.

The believed impact of the arts activities is also strong among the young ones. New friends, physical and psychological changes, pride of realising that one has really developed skills in dance, theatre or whatever it might be. Becoming more friendly and open, learning how to interact with older people, to express yourself in another way, and being inspired to find ones own style and have plans for the future. This is how the young ones experience it.

Many of the features mentioned by Jermyn can be recognised in this study. For example, that arts can develop self-esteem and self-confidence, increase creativity and thinking skills, activate social change and so on. Also, as the British Council (2003) states, arts and culture can offer excluded or marginalised communities the opportunity to be visible and to have a voice. The young ones refer to this indirectly, for example through

talking about the pride of being on stage. The adults mention the possibility of being visible and connecting with people and actors (for example, places and organisations) outside the neighbourhood as an important consequence. This is seen by the British Council as especially relevant for communities that are perceived, by others or by themselves, to have a low status.

Gould (2001) points out that participating in culture can have a transformative effect on individuals through inspiring growth, self-esteem and respect among other peers. This is also expressed by many of the young ones in the cultural centres. And, according to Gould, when individuals change and grow, it might have an effect on the wider community. It is clear as from the interviews that friends and family often support the activities, and that the young ones get a lot of attention for doing arts activities. This might be an indicator of the building of social capital in a wider sense.

The issue of participation is a tricky one. The questions asked might not have been the right ones. Among the adults, there is no doubt that they think that the young ones are being very participative in their activities. The young ones rather seem to think that, yes, it is alright to have an opinion, but influence, power, planning –that is someone else's business (i.e. adults' business). However, they are without a doubt all participating in an activity. When making a comparison with some of Dragon's (2001) elements that distinguish participatory communication from other development communication, the following observations could be made.

This form of communication for social change is indeed horizontal rather than vertical. People are active in their arts activities, and pretty much in control of the tools and contents: if you don't like something, you can always quit. Most of the young ones also express an open relationship with the teachers. On the other hand, they do not seem to have much contact with other adults in the organisation, and that is a pretty vertical situation. This is not a top-down process, but rather a process of finding out for oneself, and something most are doing for years and years. In other words, it is a long term process. The participation in arts activities must also be seen as a consciousness-raising endeavour, at least consciousness about who you are as a person, and of the fact that you as a person have many possibilities inside of you.

The consequences for the future for the young people are impossible to measure, but wanting a future and having skills and a sense of belonging is not a bad base-line. However, what happens politically and financially, in the world, and in Argentina, will of course also have a huge impact on many of these people's lives.

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