

**Zips and pockets vs. flowers and ribbons?
Contemporary Art and the Construction
of the Concept of Gender in Infant Education**

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Introduction

Contemporary Art and the Construction of Identity in Infant Education. A Study of the Use of Contemporary Art and the Construction of Cultural Identity in the Green Group of the Alquería School is the title of a Doctoral Dissertation submitted at the University of Granada (Spain) in 2007. This paper supports the idea that the use of Contemporary Art in infant schools contributes to the construction of the child's identity, particularly reinforcing the development of his/her cultural identity. There are several reasons to support this argument:

1. Contemporary works of art are potentially capable of creating experiences for the child. These experiences, which are considered vital because they respond to the child's interests and needs, stimulate the creation of affection, generate emotions and develop reflective thinking, all of which aspects are related to identity.
2. Contemporary Art is a means to better understand a culture and a way to improve the development of children's aesthetical sensitivity, as contemporary culture and its plastic and visual resources are very close to them, since they belong to their own culture.
3. Working with Contemporary Art also provides an ideal atmosphere to initiate the development of children's critical skills for two reasons: On the one hand, because of the multiple interpretations a work of art can have. On the other hand, because of the creative processes themselves that contemporary artists go through. These processes, which on occasion may be highly controversial, playful, ironic or even spectacular, bring the work of art and the statements it inspires, closer to the child's world.

The present research took place in 2006 in the *Alquería* School in Granada with 3rd level Infant Education children (5-6 year olds), which we called *Clase Verde* (Green Group). The main objective was to analyse the extent to which the introduction of Contemporary Art in the infant classroom benefited the construction of the children's cultural identity.

The selection of the works of art to be used in the projects was made with the help of the three teachers in charge of the Infant Level at the *Alquería* School. The works of art were selected using a Triangulation Method. A set of 15 items were chosen as a base for the development of the projects.

Further to the selection of the works of art, we liaised with the teacher of the specific group (Green Group) in order to finalise the design and implementation of nine micro-projects where Contemporary Art was the main player. In this paper we will analyse situations of these micro-projects where working with Contemporary Art allowed the children to question certain conceptions associated to their ideas of gender.

1. Contemporary Art as a means to building the social and cultural identity of children in their gender relationships

As Teresa de Lauretis points out, gender does not translate as biological sex: *"although a child does have a sex from "nature", it isn't until it becomes (i.e. until it is signified as) a boy (...) or a girl (...) that it acquires a gender"* (2000:38). Therefore, when we talk about gender, not only do we refer to the differential character between male and female, but we also talk about the *"representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the conceptual and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes. This conceptual structure is what feminist social scientists have designated the sex-gender system"* (2000:38).

The sex/ gender system is a system of representations which has an influence on how an individual sees himself/ herself, others and how others see him/her. The meanings of the representations within this system have an influence on the way the individual establishes his/ her structure of values, status, reputation, etc., establishing different social standpoints which are rooted to a biological sexual origin.

In the following section we will analyse the symbols and constructions which, during the course of the project, have been handled by the children in the Green Group in order to set up the said representations.

1.1 Through physical appearance

Althusser calls “interpellation” the process through which an individual acknowledges, subscribes and assumes an imaginary social representation and makes it his/her own to the extent that he/she understands it as a fact.

The children in the Green Group went through their interpellation process, where they recognised representations of male and female symbols. In a first session children were asked to observe work of art *No!* (2001) by artist Liliana Porter. Javier Z. then detects a white glimpse on the hair of the figure of a woman represented in this piece and this reminds him of the flowers girls wear as ornaments (probably remembering the flowers women wear on their hair when they dress up for the local festivals). Javier thus decides to explain that *“the girl seems to have a flower on her hair”* (transcription 1: 705- 709).

From these children’s point of view, the hair and its ornaments seemed to be a determining symbol in terms of gender identification. In fact, we could confirm that for this group, the hair and the hairstyle were one of the clearest-or most visible- physical references to determine a difference between boys and girls. Clothes could be similar for boys and girls, facial features were in both cases infantilised, but boys did not wear the hairpins and hairstyles that girls did. This factor was interiorised by the boys of Green Group and then reflected on their contributions.

In the same way, together with the referred ornaments, this group also associated long hair with girls. As explained by Teresa de Lauretis, the cultural conceptions of male and female are treated as *“two complementary yet mutually exclusive categories into which all human beings are placed”* (2000:38). However, children were also used to see Tomás, a male teacher in the school, wearing long hair and they saw this circumstance as normal. This fact did not prove a contradiction but an example of the amount of nuances that meanings can have in our pool of conceptions, depending on the contexts in which they are expressed and the personal experiences with which they are made to relate.

1.2 Through the patterns of behaviour that are culturally attached to each gender

The above described situations test a type of “gender ideology” that is present in the pool of conceptions of the children. We understand ideology as *“not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations which they live and govern their existence”* (Althusser, 1971:165 in Lauretis, 2000). De Lauretis talks about “gender ideology” by explaining that it helps constitute “individuals” (as “subjects”) as “men and women” (specific and real).

One of the predominant ideas within this context established a clear association between male, strength and the practice of sports (and by extension, an association between female and weakness). This position was debated and questioned by the children during the third session. The multiple interpretations made on John Bock’s work of art was the trigger to question the predominant cultural discourses on gender behaviour. The children debated and took positions giving their opinions, learning, constructing and deconstructing meanings about gender. We can see this from the comment made by Álvaro as a response to Manuel’s contribution that *“men practice sports and women don’t”*.

1037 - Álvaro:

1038 Rosi, my cousin plays basketball...

(Álvaro. 3rd session. Transcription 6: 1037-1038).

Álvaro was contrasting imaginary constructions against his own experience. His “ideology about gender” was acquiring fundamentals by way of associating the behaviours he had culturally assumed and the facts of his surroundings.

1.3 Using symbols in order to identify themselves with their social male or female roles

During the third session we worked on the construction of the idea of gender and the relationship of the child with his peers by means of a game consisting of “playing the part of another classmate”. In order to do this we asked them to come to school dressed in their favourite clothes to then exchange it with those of another child in order to “play the part” of that other child. Some of these children forgot to bring in these special clothes. It was the case of Regina, for example, who explained the following:

470 - Rosi:

473 (...) *What would you have brought in had you*

474 *remembered? Which one of your dresses? Which? Tell us what it is*

475 *like.*

476 - Regina:

477 *One with little ribbons...*

(Regina. 3rd session. Transcription 1: 470-477).

As we can see ribbons, together with flowers, are elements typical of the female iconography Regina knows and wants. Her favourite dress has “ribbons”, a sign she interprets as representative of the group with which she identifies herself. Regina liked this dress because when she wears it she is (is seen and feels) even “more like a girl”.

It is interesting to see that while the children of the Green Group understood flowers and ribbons as being typical items of clothing of the social female role, zips and pockets were seen as belonging to the male role. “Zips and pockets” against “flowers and ribbons” are two metaphors defining the gender identity of our society.

Conclusions

The analysis of the documents extracted during the implementation of the project –a summary of which has been shown in the above points- leads us to think that the use of Contemporary Art in Infant Education constitutes an interesting tool to be used by well prepared teachers in order to aid the construction of the child’s identity in their gender relationships for several reasons:

1. The introduction of Contemporary Art in Infant Education enables the identification and enhancement of the cultural pools of conceptions that are already rooted in children of this age. Cultural conventions associated to the idea of gender were questioned and even contradicted by the children, helping to develop a less topical and more open view on the subjects in front of them.
2. The use of Contemporary Art in Infant Education helps develop a point of view based on relativity and the acceptance of the subjectivity of the interpretations children make of the works of art. It also makes it possible for the children to compare cultural constructions with their real experience, aiding to the emergence of vital experiences with which to understand themselves and the world. As we have seen, the work with Contemporary works of Art triggered debates where different points of view were expressed on the use of identification attributes associated to the male and female roles.
3. Additionally, the introduction of Contemporary Art in the classroom makes it possible for children to behave as active individuals, constructing their own discourse, practising reflective thinking, testing their emotions and associating their personal and cultural contexts. The cases described above show how their critical opinion is developed and how they question certain behaviours that are culturally ascribed to the male and female social roles, putting them against the reality of their own experiences and the reference of their own cultural context.

Bibliography

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