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Transforming Preschool Teachers' Practice and Understanding of Early Art viewing: Ideas from an Experimental Art Museum-based Professional Development Workshop

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*Abstract: An experimental professional development workshop on the paintings and drawings of Zoran Mušič (1909–2005) from Slovenian public and private collections, temporarily exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, was designed for preschool teachers. The training aimed at reflecting current preschool art education and practice, which is centred principally on art-making activities, with an obvious lack of art appreciation. Mušič's landscapes, portraits and the series *We are not the Last* (an extraordinary portrayal of concentration-camp life) as well as the artist's style, served as a challenging tool to discuss the pedagogy of early art viewing. Having little experience with visual art objects in museums, preschool teachers engaged in artwork in new and different ways through personally meaningful and peer collaborative activities. This paper demonstrates how the complexity of teacher learning in a specific professional development context can be addressed.*

Keywords: Professional Development, Preschool Teachers, Early Art Viewing, Art Museum Pedagogy, Zoran Mušič Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana

Introduction

ENGAGING WITH ARTISTS' work can be an important and rich way of learning for young children. In Slovenia, in spite of curriculum recommendations that art experiences for children include art appreciation (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999), meaningful art viewing experiences are not a regular part of children's interactions with visual arts. As our research (discussed later in the paper) has shown, preschool teachers who encourage visits to authentic spaces of art (most notably museums and galleries) to introduce children to works of art are largely outnumbered by preschool teachers who centre early childhood visual art education principally on art-making activities. What factors inform such preschool art education? Teachers' perceptions of preschool art education and practice, (limited) knowledge of art and confidence in teaching art are likely to be the most influential factors.

This paper explores the aims, methods, structure and, to a lesser extent, outcomes of an experimental professional development workshop for preschool teachers, focusing on some pedagogical issues when engaging preschool children in art viewing experiences. The workshop was conducted at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana early in 2010 as part of the professional training for practitioners for the purpose of implementing elements of special pedagogical principles of the Reggio Emilia concept in the field of preschool educa-

tion, coordinated by the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana.¹ The training was designed with paintings and drawings of Zoran Mušič (1909–2005), temporarily exhibited at the museum. Mušič's landscapes, portraits (including self-portraits and double portraits of himself and his wife), and the series *We are not the Last* (an extraordinary portrayal of concentration camp life), as well as the artist's style, served as a tool to explore the pedagogy of early art viewing. By focusing on the training approach and contents, the paper demonstrates how the complexity of teacher learning in a specific professional development context can be addressed.

Contextual Frameworks for the Workshop

After more than fifty years of existence, the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education still has a significant international influence. The child-centred educational approach, emphasizing children's symbolic languages in the context of a project-oriented curriculum, parental involvement, teachers' co-learning role and the pedagogical value of the physical environment (Malaguzzi 1994) is currently being critically and selectively adopted in Slovenian (public) preschools (Devjak and Berčnik 2009). There has been considerable support within the theory of education to integrate the Reggio Emilia's understanding of the role of the arts in child's development and learning (Kroflič 2010).

The museum-based professional development workshop presented here is founded on our previously conducted research into selected curriculum-based art teaching practices in Slovenian preschools, taken from the perspective of the Reggio Emilia approach. The research into art teaching practices was framed by theories such as children's "meaningful" visual representation (Matthews 2003), art as children's "symbolic language" (Malaguzzi 1994), "children's competency" in terms of expressive autonomy (Vecchi 1998) and "relational pedagogy" in early childhood art education (Rinaldi 2006). The research was roughly divided into two parts. The first part focused on the use of art materials and open resources to support children's creativity (Thronton and Brunton 2007), giving opportunities for multisensory experiences (Matthews 2003, Thronton and Brunton 2007), enabling art-viewing experiences, fostering holistic experiences by combining visual art with non-visual art activities, and respecting children's individual needs in learning about the arts (Forman 1994; Prentice, Matthews and Taylor 2003). The second part of the research focused on the use of the outdoor environment for art activities (Thronton and Brunton 2007), visits to museums and galleries as authentic places of art (Vecchi and Giudici 2004), and cooperation with professional artists. We also looked at the role of the adult, specifically at the involvement of parents in visual art activities. In view of the art viewing experience, (the theme of this paper), the research showed that preschool teachers who encourage visits to authentic spaces of art to introduce children to works of art are largely outnumbered by preschool teachers who centre

¹ The project "Professional training for practitioners for the purpose of implementing elements of special pedagogical principles of the Reggio Emilia concept in the field of preschool education 2008–2013" is supported by the European Social Fund and Slovenia's Ministry of Education and Sport. In its second and third year, the project included several training modules for the participating preschool teachers and their assistants, covering pedagogical ideas and practice of Reggio Emilia approach, such as "the child as protagonist, collaborator and communicator", "the environment as third teacher", "the teacher as partner, provocateur, nurturer and guide", "the teacher as researcher", "the documentation as communication", "the parent as partner", "the educational value of the arts". The one-day training session described in this paper focused on certain aspects of visual art education. It was delivered three times (early in 2010) and involved in total approx. 100 preschool teachers.

early childhood visual art education principally on art-making activities, along with no statistically relevant difference between preschools in urban, suburban and rural environments, regarding museum and gallery visiting (Podobnik and Bračun Sova 2010, Podobnik and Bračun Sova 2011). The findings of the research, initially done with respect to the Reggio Emilia approach, supported the belief that preschool teachers are the critical component in improving Slovenian preschool education and that high-quality professional development is an essential component of changing educational practices.

The nature of the active role that the preschool teacher plays in engaging and motivating children to view art varies according to early childhood education and visual art education perspectives and philosophies. Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja Peklaj (2008) discuss different theories and postmodern concepts of early childhood education (including the Reggio Emilia approach), which are rooted in American and European education ideologies, and the way they shape the role of the preschool teacher. In the framework of the implementation of Reggio Emilia's educational philosophy into Slovenian preschool curriculum, it has to be said that Reggio Emilia's pedagogical principles related to the roles of a child, a teacher and a parent are similar or perhaps conceptually equal to the pedagogical principles of Slovenian preschool curriculum (and indeed any other democratic curriculum),² but it also needs to be said that there exist culturally-based particularities which differentiate Slovenian preschools from Reggio Emilia on both the curricular level (educational aims, contents and methods) and the institutional level (organisational aspects and length of activities).³ As other examples also show (for example, Efland's (1990) historically-based identification of expressionist, reconstructionist and scientific rationalist streams in visual art education), several views on visual art education have been developed and they all shape an educator's role in a different way. (Beliefs about the role of the teacher are sometimes even opposing, for example, interventionist versus non-interventionist). In the view of this paper, it must be stated that different approaches to early childhood education as well as different art education philosophies call for specific roles of preschool teachers.

Art experiences for children, which comprise art making and responding to art, pose a number of challenges to preschool teachers. Since artists normally do not create artworks for children, questions about the appropriateness and inappropriateness of works of art in terms of content and presentation, and the teaching strategies used for early art viewing experiences are at the heart of early art appreciation theory and practice. Despite the various research done in this field, such as children's understanding of the representational nature

² Slovenia has established an integrated approach to preschool education, combining care and education. The *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999) is open, flexible and defines six areas of activity: movement, language, art, science, society and mathematics. There is a special emphasis on the role of play for a child's development and learning and on the interplay of different fields of activity within the daily routine. The role of adults in the process of pursuing different goals is also highlighted. The goals set in individual areas of activity provide the framework for the selection of contents and activities by preschool teachers and are designed separately for the first and second age period of children. Preschools also implement enriching (e.g. attending workshops and performances, visiting libraries and museums, playing sports) and additional activities (e.g. learning a foreign language). (Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja Peklaj 2010)

³ Regarding curricular and institutional differences in art education (and not only art education), one of the greatest differences between Reggio Emilia preschools and Slovenian preschools is the *atelierista*, a specialist trained in the visual arts, who is hired for each Reggio Emilia preschool and, using the *atelier* (workshop/studio area in the school), with its tools and art materials, works with the other teachers and children to develop projects summarizing learning experiences (Edwards et al. 1998).

of art and their ability to appreciate artworks (for example, Cox 2005) and teaching strategies during art viewing experiences (for example, Eckhoff 2008), as well as various theoretical models of art viewing developed, art viewing remains an overlooked component of preschool art education, with many pedagogical issues. Some of pedagogical challenges and dilemmas are likely to be more effectively addressed by museums and galleries than (pre)schools and universities. In museums and galleries, under-fives are a significant audience. "There are strong educational as well social arguments for the importance of starting young with the museum experience, and also in beginning to deal with stereotypes and prejudices before they become firmly established." (Reeve 2006: 48) Reeve continues with implications and strategies to meet children's and families' needs.

In the following section, the workshop for preschool teachers at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana will be described, showing which pedagogical issues related to art viewing experiences were addressed and explored with participants and how this was done. In relation to Reggio Emilia's pedagogical principles and distinctive practices in the field of visual arts, particularly the integrated practice of the art-specialist (*atelierista*), it was important to "bring art" to teachers, non-art specialists. The Zoran Mušič exhibition was used to stimulate learning. The specific professional development context offered teachers the opportunity to develop understanding of subject-specific practices of teaching as well as to increase subject-matter knowledge. As contemporary research in teacher learning from professional development shows, a training model has to offer teachers learning about both content and teaching the content (see for example, Wilson et al. 2006).

The Zoran Mušič Project

Zoran Mušič (1909–2005), an artist of Slovenian origin, was a master of modern art. His first encounters with art were in the 1920s, in Vienna with the style of the Secession and in Prague with Impressionism. From 1930 to 1934, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb. After graduating, he went on a study trip to Spain. Making copies after Goya in the Prado and frequent extended painterly excursions to Dalmatia between 1934 and 1940 were crucial for Mušič's artistic development. The experience of World War II marked his life: in Venice he was arrested by the Gestapo and interned at Dachau from 1944 to 1945. There he made a series of shocking drawings which later, in the early 1970s, spurred him to produce his globally renowned series of oil paintings and prints: *We are not the Last*. After the war, he lived in Venice and Paris. His first works were water colours and gouaches of Venice and paintings of the Sienese countryside. In the mid-1950s and the 1960s, he underwent a period of crisis because of the pressures placed on his natural inclination towards representation by the dominance of the abstraction of the École de Paris. In his work of this period, he returned to the themes of the 1940s. He returned decisively to his origins as a figurative artist in a painful meditation on the terror of Dachau. It was followed by such series as *Rocky Landscapes* (from 1976), views of Venice (the Giudecca and the Dogana) in 1981, and *Church Interiors* in 1984. After 1985, he worked intensely on expressive self-portraits and double portraits of himself and his wife. (See the exhibition catalogue (Ilich Klančnik and Soban 2009) for the latest bibliographic references about the artist's life and work.)

Figure 1: Zoran Mušič in Public and Private Collections in Slovenia, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 24 November 2009–28 February 2010 (the gallery with the pictorial series *We are not the Last*, a few drawings from Dachau and some of the portraits). Courtesy Moderna galerija/Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (author: Dejan Habicht).

The exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art featured over 140 of artist's works from Slovenian public and private collections. They were displayed in six galleries, "presenting his entire creative arch, a veritable retrospective cross-section of his oeuvre" (Ilich Klančnik 2009). The display was arranged somewhere between the chronological and the thematic approach, with the pictorial series *We are not the Last*, drawings from Dachau and some of the portraits at the symbolical and physical centre of it (Figure 1). Works in other galleries included Maribor scenes, Castilian landscape, Dalmatian motifs (*Rocky Landscapes*, *Little Horses*, *Dalmatian Earths*, etc.), views of Venice, interiors and facades of Venetian churches, and portraits (see Figures 2–5).

Figure 2: Zoran Mušič, *Castilian Landscape*, 1935. Courtesy Moderna galerija/Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (author: Matija Pavlovec)

The artist's work and its interpretive display informed the training workshop, whose participants had general and no specialist art knowledge. The workshop offered them opportunities to engage with artworks on their own terms rather than as teachers; they were encouraged to challenge their assumptions about pedagogical approaches to early art viewing experiences and about the practice of using artists' work in preschools. Teachers' learning from the professional development was encouraged through discussion, reflection and participation.

One of the specific aims of the workshop was to facilitate preschool teachers' ability to understand art; it was believed that preschool teachers' lack of experience with visual arts is one of the factors that contribute to scant attention to viewing art in early childhood education. Since participating teachers had no specialist art knowledge, the workshop started with an introduction to the artist and his work in a form of a guided tour through the exhibition. Learning about the art itself ("the content") was the starting point for participants to engage with artists' work and ideas and formed a platform for further reflection of pedagogy related to the use of works of art with children ("teaching the content"). The training was based on personally meaningful and peer collaborative activities: after the tour, participants were asked to individually observe the artworks and respond personally to them by choosing their favourite and least favourite ones, writing down their responses and discussing these

in pairs, and actively participating in group reflections by shifting from looking at the selected Mušič's artworks to discussing the pedagogical issues those artworks or particular galleries stimulated. The exhibits, which framed the discussion, were largely selected by participants themselves, so the whole training approach was based on the principle of both personal and intellectual engagement.

Figure 3: Zoran Mušič, City at Night (Aleksandrova Street), 1939. Courtesy Moderna galerija / Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (authors: Lado Mlekuž and Matija Pavlovec)

Figure 4: Zoran Mušič, *Simple Fence*, 1960. Courtesy Moderna galerija / Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (authors: Lado Mlekuz and Matija Pavlovec)

Figure 5: Zoran Mušič, *We are not the Last*, 1970. Courtesy Moderna galerija/Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (Authors: Lado Mlekuz and Matija Pavlovec)

Mušič's artworks particularly stimulated the discussion of themes related to content (for example, the suitability or non-suitability of a work of art) and presentation (for example, the language of figurative and abstract art). In the galleries with Spanish, Maribor and Dalmatian motifs from pre-war times, where the majority of participants found their favourite artwork, the language of representational art and the developmental phases of art appreciation with particular emphasis on young children's idiosyncratic responses to art and the way they use their knowledge of the world, derived from their primary experiences, to develop such responses were discussed. Teachers liked the paintings because of visual elements in them (they most often commented colour and composition) and their subject matter, with which they often made personal associations – for example, a teacher living in Maribor liked the painting *City at Night (Aleksandrova Street)*. They also showed an interest in a technique. Teachers tended to relate the works of art more to their personal everyday experience than to their knowledge of art, and used limited vocabulary to describe paintings and find their messages.

The gallery with the series *We are not the Last*, drawings from Dachau and expressive portraits (self-portraits and double portraits of himself and his wife) was not teachers' favourite at first; it was in this gallery that the majority of teachers found the exhibit they liked the least. As the curator of the exhibition wrote, the artworks show feelings of hopelessness and focus on transience and mortality: "The few surviving drawings from Dachau, which the

artist had kept in a drawer in his studio, and a quarter century of suppressed memories of hell found a stirring echo in a series of graphic prints and oil paintings of piles of the Dachau dead. The more recent tragic events that produced new dead belied the former camp prisoners' hope that Dachau had been the last stop in the history of human insanity, terror, and violence." (Ilich Klančnik 2009) The main question that was posed by the trainer was: Can this horror be shown to preschool children? Would children understand these paintings? Furthermore: What defines a developmentally appropriate artwork that children can be introduced to? It was interesting to see that teachers, after they had been introduced to this gallery, engaged with the Dachau motifs and gained some knowledge and understanding of Mušič's art, commenting that "children should learn about both good and bad sides of human's life". The trainer opened the debate about the adult artwork-child viewer relationship and the appropriateness/inappropriateness of artworks for young children, with particular reference to the socio-cultural context of the art and children's ability/inability to interpret it in view of their meaning-making strategies. It was argued that there are substantial differences between certain "similar" subjects of the works of art and the scenes depicted, nudity/love on one hand and eroticism on the other hand, or violence and death, to state two examples, as well as different approaches to explore them. This pedagogical issue remains open in the context of art curriculum, and preschool teachers cited a lack of expertise in this area.

The final discussion focused on teaching strategies for art viewing experiences and was framed by Mušič's semi-abstract artworks (motifs from Dalmatia, views of Venice, church facades and interiors). According to the museum educator who co-conducted the workshop these were the artworks that young visitors of the Mušič's exhibition liked the most. Few workshop participants found their favourite artwork in these galleries, however. Although Mušič never really moved from representation to abstraction, his paintings, "verging on abstraction" (Ilich Klančnik 2009), allow for a great deal of imagination and wondering. In these galleries, the debate focused on verbal and practical techniques that teachers can use to engage children in meaningful interactions during the process of responding to art. The museum's activities for children and youth were demonstrated to the teachers, and participants could actively engage with one of them: reading Mušič's personal narratives, written on small pieces of paper, and then looking for their visual expressions in artist's paintings.

Conclusion

Children's art viewing experiences are largely shaped by adults. This paper reported on a specific professional development context, which aimed at transforming preschool teachers' practice and understanding of early art viewing. An experimental art-museum based workshop was designed, where modern art was used as a discursive tool to facilitate teachers' learning about subject-specific practices of teaching as well as subject-matter knowledge in the field of early art viewing. Having few experiences with visual art objects in museums and galleries, preschool teachers engaged in artworks in new and different ways through personally meaningful and peer collaborative activities.

Participants demonstrated both compliant and resistant behaviour in response to the anticipated professional change. For example, at a certain point of the workshop one of the teachers commented that "children are not interested in art", thus refusing to make substantial changes in her instructional practice by examining and transforming her core beliefs, knowledge, and habits. The Zoran Mušič project was a challenging way of developing

preschool teachers' confidence in working with visual art as a teaching and learning resource for children. The training approach can be critically assessed for potential replication in other professional development contexts. In addition, assessing whether such professional development has an impact on teachers and students (children), would be an important step further in this growing and challenging area.

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Rajka Bračun Sova is currently a PhD candidate and a part-time collaborator within the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana. In academic year 2008–2009 she delivered lectures and seminars in art history at the Department of Visual Arts Education, and she stayed with the department for another academic year. In 2009 she joined the project Professional Training for Practitioners for the purpose of implementing elements of special pedagogical principles of the Reggio Emilia concept in the field of preschool education 2008–2013, co-ordinated by the Department of Preschool Education. Her work experiences and research interests focus on museum education (including lifelong learning in museums), with particular reference to education in art museums and galleries. She is also interested in museum accessibility and accessibility of public art in the context of social inclusion. Rajka Bračun Sova graduated in art history at the University of Ljubljana (2005), and obtained her master degree in museum and gallery management from the City University London (2006). During both studies and beyond she gained experience in art museum education (National Gallery of Slovenia, National Portrait Gallery, London).

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Online presentations can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

Publishing

The Arts Community enables members to publish through three media. First by participating in the Arts Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. [The International Journal of the Arts in Society](#) provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series [The Arts in Society](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Arts in Society Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the arts. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
SUSTAINABILITY The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com	TECHNOLOGY The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: www.Technology-Journal.com
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/	UNIVERSITIES Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: www.Universities-Journal.com

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