



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

*With the support of the Jean Monnet Programme of the European Union*

### European Conference in Timisoara, Romania - Social and Emotional Education: the arts as a foundation for a healthy personal development in childhood.

*“I like to draw because when I draw my heart beats”*  
- 5 year-old girl, Sao Paulo, Brazil

On the eve of Europe Day - 8th May - over 200 people from more than 20 countries participated in a wide-ranging, one-day conference on Social and Emotional Education, focusing on the arts as a foundation for healthy personal development in childhood.

#### Key Conference Highlights:

- In Romania, children who suffer from HIV, disabled children, abandoned children and Roma children fare less well and have fewer opportunities in the areas of health-care and education.
- 'Looked-after' children in Romania have little voice, few rights and sometimes no recognised identity.
- In 2007 alone, 300,000 Romanian children - the **strawberry orphans** - were left behind by their parents (Soros Foundation report **Effects of migration: Children left at home. Risks and solutions**, 2008) who had emigrated in order to find work. Consequences: tangible economic gains to the families but social disarray, social and emotional problems and the traumatising of children.
- In parts of the country, there is a shortage of early childhood provision with limited access to school in some rural districts.
- Mobile facilities in education (buses, etc) are often a solution for reaching rural and disadvantaged areas.
- In the learning process, the creative-expressive, aesthetic dimension must have a place alongside the dynamics of the data-driven, knowledge-based global society, because the **arts provide a bridge that promotes the inner and outer health and well-being of the individual**.
- The arts provide a series of pathways into the culture at large: an **everyday practicality**; not something special, or extra, but an intrinsic human and educational activity. Art can be an important influence on all aspects of education. The ability to think with an open mind and to be able to ponder, or be imaginative in the face of questions and problems is of benefit in all disciplines.
- Recognising that imagination and picturing are an ever-present continuous **activity of cognition**. In this sense, the arts need and

deserve place and time in the school day and curriculum.

- Art is practiced **in relationship with and to the 'other'**. In art, the concept of 'the other' has to be construed. The arts create languages, give people voices, lend people ears and opens channels to communicate. There is a certain pressure at large which seeks to segregate and compartmentalise the world from an early age. The 3 year-old who expresses orange 'as a colour that loves' offers an example of the urge to connect, not separate, and a resistance to attempts to make simple categories of identification - for example, by imprisoning colours in simple, crude compartments.
- Through art, **empathy** can flourish in relationship to nature, the world and the cosmos.
- Art takes time, because it is a process, providing, as it does, a space. Artistic expression allows for an experience of time and space in new forms and languages.
- Artistic activity forges **new ways of relating** (non verbal communication), often improving behaviours among pupils and increased learning motivation.
- The art process in several projects showed the following tangible effects: young children became immersed in their activities; their faces relaxed and they were able, by their own creativity and effort, to leave their life-problems behind for a while, thereby reducing their violence and aggression.
- Art is healing and restorative, helping people to meet and come to terms with pain, suffering and trauma in a **therapeutic** sense.
- Improvements in behaviour and learning motivation continue after art sessions.

#### REPORT

The conference took place at the Philharmonic Hall in Timisoara, in the west of Romania. The event was staged by a partnership comprising the *European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE)*, the *Romanian Waldorf Schools Federation* and the *Rudolf Steiner Foundation, Timisoara*. The conference was financially supported by the *Jean Monnet Programme of the European Union*. An impressive exhibition of children's art work adorned the walls of the Philharmonic Hall, while the conference proceedings were translated simultaneously in Romanian and English.

The Chief Inspector for Schools in the Timis

Region - **Sandor Golcea** - and the Communications Director and Representative of the Mayor of Timisoara - **Violete Mihalache** - welcomed us to the conference. The programme included seven presentations, two question and answer sessions and a lunchtime press conference. The speakers came from Austria, Britain, Germany, Moldova and Romania and offered their comments from areas of expertise spanning psychology, art therapy, education and the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

**The conference opened with two key questions:**

**Martina Leibovici-Muehlberger** (ARGE-Erziehungskunst, Austria) raised the question: *Why is it considered that the arts & creativity play an essential role in the psychological well-being of the young human being?*

**Christopher Clouder** (ECSWE) asked: *Why is it that the arts, although widely promoted in all sorts of education, often occupy a minor place in the daily lives of children and schools?*

**Diana Nistorescu**, Executive Director of the Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations for Children in Romania gave a sobering account of the problems

surrounding child protection and child-care in parts of the Romanian system. In 2004, new laws on adoption and children's rights were passed. They are fine as pieces of legislation, yet difficult to apply in practice. There is no system for monitoring child welfare and no juvenile courts. Serious funding problems abound, while certain groups of children do suffer from discrimination. Children who suffer from HIV, disabled children, abandoned children and Roma children have less welfare and fewer opportunities in the areas of health-care and education. While lots of children live in poverty, 'looked-after' children have little voice, few rights and sometimes no identity. The problem of street-children suffering sexual exploitation provides a further challenge to Romania's public services. In 2007, a report from the *Soros Foundation* calculated that 300,000 Romanian children - the *strawberry orphans* - have been left behind by parents who have taken jobs as migrant workers in other countries. Such a situation may well bring tangible economic gains to the families but threaten to cause social disarray, prompted by a range of social and emotional problems and the traumatising of children. In parts of the country, there is a shortage of early childhood provision with limited access to school in some rural districts.

**Elena Cretu**, a specialist educator in the plastic arts from NGO *Friends of the Children* based in Moldova, reported on art therapy projects in 6 children's homes, where the parents are also involved. Sewing, acrylic painting, wet painting and oil painting; painting with hands and feathers and drawing with wax are among the media used. Mobile facilities - buses - are deployed to outlying districts where there are no children's homes or centres.

Another presentation was offered by **Mirela Navligu** from the first centre of art therapy in Romania. Currently, the centre offers therapy through art to 80 children, some with emotional problems, autism or deafness and a number of abandoned children from Timisoara and surrounding areas.

**Carmen Anghelescu** from the *Step by Step Association in Romania* referred to the UN Declaration of 2000 that called for a world fit for children. This was followed by the EU Barcelona Declaration of 2002, calling for access to day-care for all young children in Europe. Carmen then went on to speak about a small EU-funded project which has brought healing and restoration through the medium of children's theatre. In one instance, illiterate street children were given the opportunity to play themselves in a script written by a playwright from St. Petersburg. The outcomes of the project provided conditions in which the children went back to school, learnt to read and subsequently left school and came off the streets.



**Annette Wiecken and Ulrika Eller-Rueter** reported on a *Comenius Project* in which the *Rosia Waldorf School, Sibiu* and *Alanus Hochschule* are working together to bring help to a community of Roma children living in social and cultural deprivation. The school has been running for 11 years and the 150 pupils come from the nearby 'valley' to the school 'on the hill'. Shortly after opening, the school developed an agricultural focus, with a fundamental objective to integrate these children from impoverished and difficult circumstances into Romanian society. The school and the community face a number of problems arising out of the challenging context and environment. Physical violence is a feature in the families and local community; large, extended families live in cramped huts in very rustic conditions. In the school, there is a high turnover of teachers and it is difficult to find a coherent, consistent faculty of colleagues. Into this terrain, in October 2008, a group of 20 students from Alanus Hochschule arrived in the district with the aim and task of enlivening the school artistically, hence the name *Kusch* ('Kunst Schule' - art school). Specifically, the aims of the project are to promote inter-cultural dialogue and cooperation between different peoples; to use art as a means to enhance social perception; to enable pupils and young people to create their own living and working space and to bring help to children living in social and cultural deprivation. After working with the whole school for 3 hours a day over a 14-day period, the art process showed tangible effects: the young children became immersed in the activities; their faces relaxed and they were able, by their own creativity and effort, to leave their life-problems behind for a while. The results of the project will be published in 2010. The interim findings point to the following:

- Art takes time, because it is a process, providing, as it does, a space. Artistic expression allows for an experience of time and space in new forms and languages. Concretely, the whole school has been redecorated - through painting and mosaics - by students and pupils using largely non-verbal communication and forging new ways of relating. Colleagues in the school noticed improved behaviour and learning motivation both during and after the project.

The *Kusch Project* has partner schools in Hungary and Belgium and with the intercultural school in Mannheim. A second phase of the Project will take place in the coming months.

#### Keynotes Sounded:

- **Martina Leibovici-Muehlberger** argued that in the learning process, the creative-expressive, aesthetic dimension must have a place alongside the dynamics of the data-driven, knowledge-based global society, because the arts provide a bridge that connects the inner and outer health and well-being of human beings.
- **Christopher Clouder** described how the arts provide a series of pathways into the culture at large:
  1. The Arts should be an **everyday practicality**; not something special, or extra,

but an intrinsic human and educational activity. As Sandor Golcea, the Chief Inspector for Schools reflected, art can be an important influence in all aspects of education. The ability to think with an open mind and to be able to ponder, or dream in the face of questions and problems can be of benefit in all disciplines

2. Recognising that imagination and picturing are an ever-present continuous **activity of cognition**. In this sense, the arts need and deserve a place and a time in the school day and curriculum.
3. Art is done in **relationship with and to the other**. In art, the concept of 'the other' has to be construed. The arts create languages, give people voices, lend people ears, open channels to communicate. There is a certain pressure at large which seeks to segregate and compartmentalise the world from an early age. The 3 year-old who expresses orange '*as a colour that loves*' offers an example of the urge to connect, not separate, and a resistance to attempts to make simple categories of identification - for example, by imprisoning colours in simple, crude compartments, without consideration of hue and tone.
4. Through art, **empathy** can flourish in relationship to nature, the world and the cosmos
5. Art is healing and restorative, helping people to meet and come to terms with pain, suffering and trauma in a **therapeutic** sense.
6. Although it may be 'common sense' that the arts are fundamental, necessary, meaningful and uplifting to human beings, it is nonetheless the case that we live in an era that demands evidence-based outcomes. Research conducted across a range of disciplines - neurology, biology, physiology, psychology and education - suggests and increasingly demonstrates robust evidence of the healing & therapeutic value of art and creativity. For children who have been deprived, who suffer mental health problems stemming from marginalisation, disengagement and poverty of many different kinds, the arts can help restore and assuage their disappointment in a world that they imagined might be so, but, for these children, is not.

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(Conference Rapporteur)

Note: The sole responsibility of the report lies with the Author

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