

Cultural and Arts Education - Project Benčić Youth Council

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Abstract: This article will provide an overview of the local project with international support - Benčić Youth Council, which works to promote cultural and arts education for children and young people, creating a platform for participation in social change and connection with a wider socio-cultural environment (libraries, theatres, museums, cultural centres ...). The article will give the overview of theory and research findings concerned with culture and arts education that will in the second part be complemented with overview of Benčić Youth Councils practical experience, its emergence, local context and methodology of work.

Key words: Benčić Youth Council, culture and arts education, cultural heritage education, non-formal education, leisure time.

Educación cultural y artística - Proyecto Benčić Youth Council

Resumen: Este artículo presenta una visión de conjunto del proyecto Consejo Juvenil de Benčić, un proyecto local con apoyo internacional que persigue la promoción de la educación cultural y artística para niños y jóvenes, creando una plataforma para su participación en el cambio social y la conexión con un ambiente sociocultural más amplio (bibliotecas, teatros, museos, centros culturales...). El artículo muestra una visión global de la teoría y de los hallazgos de investigación relacionados con la educación cultural y artística, los cuales se complementarán, en la segunda parte, con el resumen de la experiencia práctica del Consejo Juvenil de Benčić, su aparición, contexto local y metodología de trabajo.

Palabras clave: Consejo Juvenil de Benčić, educación cultural y artística, educación sobre el patrimonio cultural, educación no formal, ocio.

Introduction

In the world of technology, computerization, industrialization and globalization, culture and arts education must gain as much space as possible in human life. Every man has a creative potential and considering that it is our duty to develop it and form it through education in order to enable the formation of a coherent personality in children and young people. Using and including local cultural resources, tangible and intangible heritage in education can help young people to strengthen their identity and social cohesion as well as develop intercultural understanding, respect for cultural diversity and culture of peace (United Nations Youth, 2013).

Cultural and artistic education should be an integral part of education programmes at the formal level, but in

many countries, formal educational systems are still not given sufficient importance. This is where working with young people through non-formal and informal forms of education appears as a so-called corrective mechanism that compensates for what the formal system, because of its rigidity and inadequacy, is unable to offer to young people (Kovačić, Ćulum, 2015). In the context of culture and arts education, it is precisely the non-formal education programmes that can serve as means of bridging the gap between the separate spheres of education and arts and culture.

Arts and culture education

Vidulin-Orbanić (2008) recognizes four basic needs of young people in today's notion of leisure time: the need for

entertainment, the need for rest, the need for recreation and the need for cultural aspects of leisure time.

The cultural aspect of leisure time is probably the most important aspect in the context of education. Psychologists and anthropologists point to the need of culture and arts education from an early age and indicate its importance throughout the life of a person. They talk about the aesthetic nature of man as a reflection and manifestation of all other parts of human personality (Kermek, Sredanović, 1991). Culture is an area from which we can find out what young people really think, feel, value, hope for and what can be applied in their lives, language, music, fashion or idols. Therefore, by all accounts, the cultural aspect would need to have a central place in the research of leisure time because of its extremely close relation with educational activities (Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 1999, Leburić and Relja, 1999, according to Vidulin-Orbanić, 2008). On the other side education can play a valuable role in "safeguarding" - *ensuring the viability of cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission* cultural heritage. (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003).

There is an overwhelmingly low percentage of young people who spend their leisure time engaging in cultural and artistic activities. Why is that so? Young people need education about the culture of spending leisure time. It takes a new approach to artistic and cultural education. There must have been some examples of well-designed programmes for the implementation of this type of education, but it became apparent that the theoretical assumption is not sufficient for a necessary breakthrough in practice. It is necessary to start with the realization, which requires a range of components, from the involvement of the wider social environment, a specific place and time for performing the activities, equipment and most importantly, creating a network of various professional associates who will unite their expertise in various areas in order to offer adequate programmes.

Constant social changes and the emergence of new circumstances dictate the need to develop new and more effective approaches to education with the aim of facilitating the ongoing development of cognitive, social, emotional and work-action competencies of children and young people (Mikanović, 2015). It is precisely art that can serve as training grounds where children and youth can experience an active involvement in the experience, processes and the development of creativity.

Many researches have confirmed that the involvement of students in the artistic process and the inclusion of culture in education contributes to the development of a sense of creativity and initiative, fertile imagination, emotional intelligence and a moral "compass", a capacity for critical reflection, a sense of autonomy, and freedom of thought and action (UNESCO, 2006).

UNESCO's document, the Road Map for Arts Education (2006) brings recommendations for educators, parents, artists, school principals and educational institutions (UNESCO, 2006) and discusses the contribution of arts education to education and preparing young people to meet the challenges of the 21st century, describing it as a process that combines physical, intellectual and creative abilities and enables a more dynamic and fruitful relations between education, culture and art.

Nowadays, the transmission of cultural traditions and artistic practices within the family environment is becoming more difficult, especially in urban areas (UNESCO, 2006), and there is a need for creating educational platforms that will inhibit the creative potential of a modern child torn from the cultural tradition of their environment that used to be the main basis of education in former conditions of traditional education.

This paper will provide an overview of the local project with international support - Benčić Youth Council, which works to promote cultural and arts education for children and young people, creating a platform for participation in social change and connection with a wider socio-cultural environment.

The vision of work with youth in the Benčić Youth Council is very well described by the Costello Report, which states that the role of youth work is to empower young people and allow them to develop from a state of dependency in order to enable them to know, feel and believe that they have the ability to control and influence intentionally on what happens to them and their community (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984; according to Kovačić and Čulum, 2015).

The mission of the Benčić Youth Council is cooperation and empowerment of children to learn, influence and create different forms of art and culture in their city. An important part of this process is the creation of opportunities for the expression of views, opinions and content produced by children.

Project in the making

Benčić Youth Council is a project that originated from good experiences and the artistic project *Preuzmimo Benčić* (Take Back Benčić), which used the former factory Rikard Benčić in Rijeka, Croatia, as a setting and a thematic background. Althea Thauburger, the Canadian artist and author of the artistic project, found the inspiration for her experimental film in the abandoned factory complex with history full of turmoil and changes.

To understand both projects it is necessary to know the context in which they developed. The city of Rijeka is the third biggest city in the Republic of Croatia and currently the biggest port. It has approximately 130.000 residents and it obtained the title of the European Capital of Culture for the year 2020 (www.rijeka2020.eu). Its advantageous geographical position on the seacoast but incised in the

Kvarner bay make it a safe port, close to central Europe, and provided Rijeka with the leading position in the 18th and 19th century for economic investments. That is why Rijeka became an industrial city, which influenced greatly on the urbanistic development, socio-economic picture and aesthetics of the city (Aničić, 2011).

The Rikard Benčić Factory, often called just “Benčić”, was one of the biggest industrial complexes in the 18th and 19th century, and although it was not relevant in size in the 20th century, it still remained influential regarding its economic value. This complex was situated here in 1750 by the decision of the Queen Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II, rulers of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy of which the territory of Croatia was a part of, when they decided to start up the sugar refining business. They issued a tender for interested parties from Netherlands, Belgium and Great Britain, of which a Dutch company Proly and Arnoldt sent a bid and founded the Principal Commercial Company of Trieste and Rijeka. The sugar business grew quickly because the state ensured many benefits and tax releases. What remained of that era is the Sugar Palace, restored in 1875, that was used for administration and residence. The factory closed in 1814 after the production of sugar switched from sugar cane to sugar beet.

The complex did not remain empty after the factory had closed. First it was used as a state military base, and in 1851, again in accordance with state decision, a Tobacco Factory was founded and placed inside the complex. The complex still has the aesthetics and facilities that were built for the purpose of tobacco treatment and processing. The most important buildings constructed at the time were the T-object, which housed the Virginia cigar production plant, and H-object, which was used for warehousing and processing (Matejčić, 1988). A very important urbanistic change, for the factory and for the city, was the levelling of the shore in front of the factory, where a road was built first, and then the railroad with the main station. At the beginning of the 20th century, the factory was at its peak, but it was closed in 1944, after the economic crisis, wars and a few large strikes (Magaš, 2002).

After the foundation of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the end of World War II, in 1947 to be precise, the process of reorganization of economy and industry in the state started (Dmitrović, 1997). One of the newly founded companies was Rikard Benčić, named after the folk hero born in Rijeka. The Rikard Benčić factory produced ship scuttles, skylights, gaskets, ship telegraphs, and other metal products (Bjelica 1988). The production grew almost until the end of the 1980s, when Yugoslavia was affected by an economic crisis and Croatia began with its secession from the confederation. During the entire time of its operation, the area of the factory was surrounded by a high wall and little was invested in infrastructure. The original purpose of the main buildings was changed. At the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence in 1991, the workers were laid off in stages, and finally the factory closed down permanently (Majer, Puhmajer, 2008).

Owing to its historical significance and value, the City of Rijeka bought the complex in 2000. Although at first its purpose was supposed to be touristic, the City decided to use it in order to solve the lack of space and inadequate spatial solutions of the several biggest cultural institutions in the city: the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the City Museum of Rijeka and Rijeka City Library, by forming a museum quarter (Cuculić, 2015). Unfortunately, the plans were not realized due to political changes on the state and municipal level and the lack of financial means. The plan to apply for the European Union structural funds has been made, and the conversion of the Benčić complex is one of the strategic goals of the City of Rijeka Department of Culture, as well as the key point of the programme for the European Capital of Culture in 2020 (<http://www.novolist.hr/Vijesti/Rijeka/Raspisaninatjecaji-za-projekte-kompleksa-Rikard-Bencic>). The newest proposal to the projects, announced in the spring 2014, is the modification of the so called “brick” building (the former drier house of the Tobacco Factory) into a Children’s House where the Rijeka City Library, the Art Cinema Croatia and the Rijeka Puppet Theatre (with several small partners) would organize programmes for children and youth. By allocating the brick building to all institutions but for a specific use, the City of Rijeka, in a way, required the institutions to collaborate and to have programmes adjusted to children and youth. In addition, they have set out the direction that they want to advocate – establishing institutions with programmes that educate the audience from an early age (<http://www.rijeka.hr/GradskaKnjiznica>).

All this was the inspiration for the artist Althea Thauberger, who decided to deal with seemingly complicated situation by involving more than 70 children from the age 6 to 13 from Rijeka area, to make an experimental documentary movie – explaining the development of the complex from their point of view, also involving the discussion about artist/worker position (Firth-Eagland, 2015). During the preparation, but also the filming, Natali Bosić and Ivana Golob Mihić, with more than 20 collaborators, organized workshops using various methods; applied theatre, dancing, storytelling, debate etc. In this way the children themselves, because they spent time in the space, created an emotional connection with the space and its history, as well as opinions about its future development, presented in dialogues in the film. The director took upon herself to create dynamics, rhythm, goals and general direction of the film.

Since this approach had such results, the Art Foundation Musagetes, that funded the artistic project, decided to continue and invest in a project that involved children and youth. The Musagetes is a Canadian foundation and it has a long term relationship with the city of Rijeka.

The name “Benčić Youth Council” came to be because of several reasons. “Benčić” as a location in the city is going to become very relevant for children and youth from the city of Rijeka, but it is also a place where the methodology was created. Naming the project after the fallen factory represents a homage to industry that closed its doors and fellow citizens

that lived from it. This keeps alive the name that marked the city district for more than 150 years and aims to retain the memory of the space that hosted the project. A youth council represents a way for children and young people to express their opinion and influence decisions in their community. Youth councils can be established on different levels, local, regional, state or national, and can be tied to different entities, for example government, NGOs or schools. This project did not want to focus on the political aspect of a youth council, primarily on the candidacy and election process. The project wanted to keep the aspect of a youth council that considers, discusses and provides opinions on current issues, focusing on art and culture in the city of Rijeka. By giving children a voice and a way to reach the public, the children directly affect the cultural dynamics of their city and take on the role of its active participants, creators and commentators.

The project and its principles

Benčić Youth Council Project is a framework for non-formal and informal learning in culture and arts that balances research, work, play, and socializing. The project is funded by the Art Foundation Musagetes and supported by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka. It is designed for children and young people, developing their relationship with culture, cultural heritage, cultural production and cultural institutions in the city. As mentioned before, and recognized by UNESCO already in 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and pointed out through the years (World Heritage Committee, 2002, 2007) the promotion and education about cultural heritage is the best way to preserve it for the future.

The main objective of this project is to bring culture and heritage closer to children and young people as future consumers and carriers of that culture. Benčić Youth Council is an opportunity for children and young people to learn more about the resources that are necessary for the production of the cultural content and to familiarize themselves with cultural institutions and venues. In addition, it is an opportunity for workers in culture and cultural spaces to adapt, learn to respond and design content suited for children – to encourage them to think about their programmes and policies that have to be adjusted accordingly. This project is designed for children and for cultural institutions so they would recognize the power and importance of children within the cultural dynamics of the city.

The mission of the Benčić Youth Council is cooperation with and empowerment of children to learn, influence and create different forms of art and culture in their city. An important part of this process is the creation of opportunities for the expression of views, opinions and content produced by children.

The project aims to be an example and inspire other cultural stakeholders to cooperate and network so they could offer

children a stimulating and high quality educational programs in culture and the arts through their unity and synergy.

It includes organizing monthly workshops that cover a current topic from the cultural life of the city of Rijeka, the country or the world.

Categorization of topics we have covered so far:

- Cultural heritage (material and intangible heritage, cultural institutions);
- Performing arts (applied theatre, contemporary dance, circus);
- Visual arts (street art, painting, VJ, sculpture, new media);
- Cultural diversity (intercultural dialogue, international collaboration);
- Music (activist choir, jazz, recycled instruments).

Each month, the project gathers twenty children who participate free of charge in various group activities. The goal of the Council is to introduce children to various art forms, to include them in the operation of cultural institutions, but also to raise children's awareness about their hometown history, to strengthen their sense of belonging and caring for the past, as well as getting them to deliberate on their hometown's/ county's future.

Benčić Youth Council's key principles are based on the social constructivist paradigm which maintains the social nature of knowledge and considers that knowledge is the result of social interaction and language usage, and thus is a shared, rather than an individual, experience (Prawatt & Floden, 1994).

According to Vygotsky (1978), social constructivism and sociocultural theories describe learning and development as being embedded within social events and occurring as a learner interacts with other people, objects, and events in the collaborative environment.

Although the methodology of the project is built on the foundations of social constructivism, it is important to note that it has not been taken and implemented as a previously existing model, but is rather a living organism that is constantly being evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of learners.

Key principles of the project can be summarised as:

Experiential learning is the principle that was first implemented in the project. Since this project aims to be a platform for non-formal and informal learning, the objective was to take children away from a formal classroom environment and atmosphere. The focus is on the participative approach – providing children with a chance to be in real life situations, so they can feel responsible and that their decisions and actions have an actual effect. By giving them practical work, they learn by doing. Reading a children's book by a Croatian author in the very library where it was written, looking at the original lock of the city gate from the 16th century or talking directly with a ship's captain in his quarters makes learning much easier.

Closely connected to this principle is the following one – **place based learning**. Although they overlap, the place based learning is accentuated because the tendency is not only to cover certain topic, but to spend time during the workshop on a location in the city that is closely connected to that same topic. This affects children but also the spaces that they visit. Visiting a ship that has strict security regulations, visiting a museum depot or a famous student club influenced the spaces and the people working there, opening them up for further collaboration. That brings us to the next key principle – **partnership**. To cover this wide range of topics it is essential to be willing to collaborate with different people, institutions and the NGO sector. Through the project, during two and a half years and 26 workshops, there have been more than 12 partner institutions and more than 40 associates, private persons and NGOs. With this the project encourages service learning and community engagement. By spending time with people and on site, children develop emotional connections – they develop the ability of **emotional learning**. This affects and strengthens their sense of belonging and identity. Furthermore, by nourishing reflective practice children are more empowered and confident in forming their opinions. All mentioned principles contribute to the last one – supporting and encouraging **children to become active citizens**. By targeting this project to children we are increasing the chances of having conscious adults in the future who will not be afraid to rethink, criticize, imagine and create. The project is creating opportunities that allow individuals to see themselves in the role of active agents, who play a significant role in improving their own lives and lives of others and art and culture is serving as a training ground where children and youth can experience active involvement in the experience, processes and the development of creativity.

Concluding remarks

The overview of theory and research findings concerned with culture and arts education provided in this article supports the belief that culture and arts education has an important role in developing social, personal and cognitive skills of children and young people. Regarding the emergence and methodology of work of the Benčić Youth Council, it complements the theoretical knowledge of cultural and artistic education through specific examples and locally grown experience that comes directly from practice. Cultural and artistic education has a powerful potential to promote change, but often lacks information about how it actually works in practice, especially in the non-formal sector. If we, cultural practitioners and educators, want to promote change and progress in the field of culture and art education, we need to share methods, models and practices. According to UNESCO's Recommendations for Educators, Parents, Artists, and Directors of Schools and Educational Institutions (UNESCO, 2006), by recognizing a value and documenting successful locally-developed, culturally-relevant culture and art education practices and projects, we create opportunities for future projects to replicate successful practices. With this article, Benčić Youth

Council hopes to encourage other cultural stakeholders and practitioners to cooperate and network in order to create a database that will contain examples of local practices and models of cultural and artistic education from different countries so as to enable the transmission of knowledge and creation of better opportunities and environment for culture and arts education. The authors hope that the example of Benčić Youth Council practice can provide support for ongoing practice and future research in the field of culture and arts education.

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