Potentials of Arts Education in Fostering Critical Cultural Literacy: A Case Study from Slovenian School and Local Community

Maja Zadel

Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia

Educating for Belonging: Experiential and Art-Based Pathways in Migration and Inclusion

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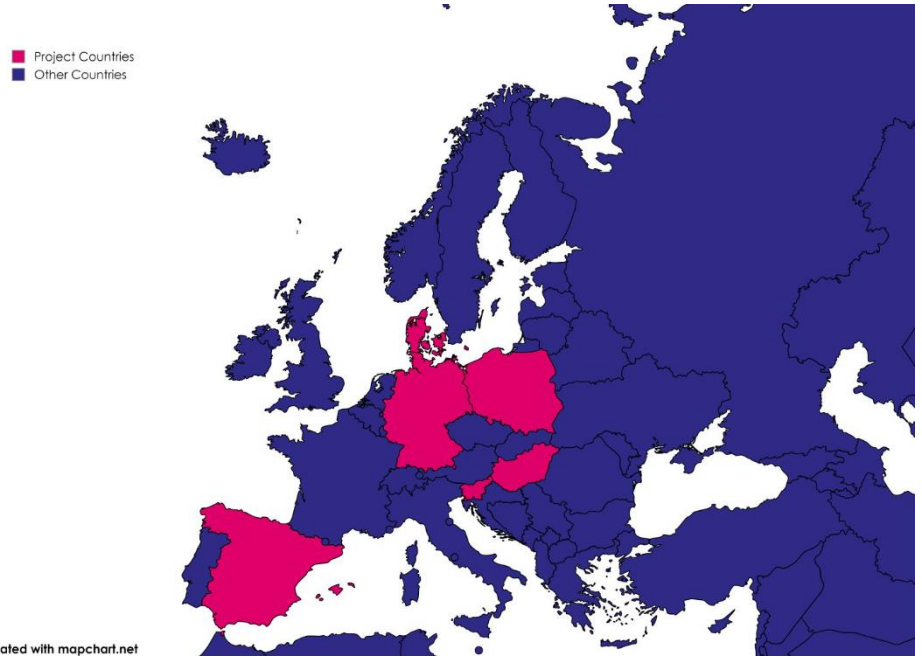
Introduction

EXPECT_Art (EPLoring and Educating Cultural literacy Through Art) project, Horizon Europe, January 2024-December 2026



The aim of EXPECT_Art is to identify current barriers and potentials for promoting critical cultural literacy through education through art

ARTS EDUCATION

EDUCATION THROUGH ARTS

USES OF ARTS IN EDUCATION

Aim of the presentation = present the insights from a Slovenian case study (out of 2) regarding the role of arts-based practices in fostering children's & (young) people's participation and cultural expression

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LITERACY

LITERACY

SSKJ [Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language 2023] = recognize signs for sounds and link them into words

The ability to decode (=„read“) a system that conveys meaning

CULTURE

British cultural studies

A dynamic, everyday practice where meanings are created, shared, and contested within power structures

→ encompassing everything from art and media to social rituals and group identities

Stuart Hall (1997):
“Cultural turn”: emphasis to the importance of meaning to the definition of culture → Culture ≠ not a thing or a set of things (TV programme, novel, painting …)

but A PROCESS, a SET OF PRACTICES.

“Things in themselves do not have meaning” (1997, 2).

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Hall, Stuart. 1997. Introduction. In: Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Stuart Hall (ed.): 1–11. Sage.

CULTURE + LITERACY

CULTURAL LITERACY — the ability to decode, understand, and use signs within culture(s)

Original concept = Eric Hirsch („culture = a set of knowledge to acquire)

→ Woodhouse: »the world is a text to be interpreted, criticised and reinterpreted" (1989, 98)

→ but culture is also created (British Cultural Studies)

→ Schools as institutions of cultural (re)production (Bourdieu, Althusser, Giroux, ...)

→ within the project the focus = on the art forms, aesthetic pleasure and discomfort

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, LEARNING & *BILDUNG*

Hirsch, Eric Donald (2002): The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know. Houghton Mifflin Company.
Woodhouse, Howard R. (1989): Critical Reflections on Hirsch and Cultural Literacy. Interchange 20, 80–89. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01807175
Giroux, H. A. (1988): Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey.
Althusser, Louis (2000): Izbrani spisi. Ljubljana: Založba /*cf.

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CRITICAL

„approach that explicitly sets out to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations in order to foster social change“ (Palmer & Caldas 2015 for Critical ethnography)

It can be defined as an attitude of questioning commonly accepted ideas by demonstrating a sceptical attitude towards colonial, Eurocentric frameworks and discourses and their assumed legitimacy (see also EXPECT_Art D2.1, 19)

CRITICAL

↓

Critical Pedagogy (CPed) →

Transformative character, encouraging action & social justice → revealing the ruling, oppressing ideology to the oppressed

Dialogic (Freire 2005 [1970])

Freire, Paulo. 2005. Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York, London: Continuum.
Palmer, Deborah & Caldas, Blanca. 2015. Critical Ethnography. In: King, K., Lai, YJ., May, S. (eds) Research Methods in Language and Education. Encyclopedia of Language and Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02329-8_28-1

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CRITICAL CULTURAL LITERACY

Decoding systems of meanings in a sceptical attitude towards currently dominant frameworks of power relations

Lähdesmäki et al. (2022) conceptual framework → cultural literacy as a social practice in which children participate as cultural agents, using creativity to **foster more inclusive attitudes toward cultural diversity**. Cultural literacy is thus not merely knowledge to be acquired, but an ability to "read" the culture one inhabits, and the cultures that people, as cultural beings, already have.

The CCL framework attends to power relations & conceptualises cultural literacy as dialogic, relational, and situated, meaning that it emerges through interaction rather than as an individual skill (see also Cooke, 2023; Maine et al., 2019).

+ include **visual, digital, gestural, spatial, and other artistic forms**, and **emphasises education** as the development of the capacity to navigate and interpret cultural contexts critically and self-reflectively

Maine, F., Cook, V. & Lähdesmäki, T., (2019) "Reconceptualizing cultural literacy as a dialogic practice", London Review of Education 17(3), 3 https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.17.3.12

Cooke, N. A. (2011, August 11). Tell me sweet little lies: Racism as a form of persistent malinformation. Project Information Literacy Provocation Series, (4), Project Information Literacy Research Institute, https://projectinfolit.org/pubs/provocation-series/essays/tell-me-sweet-little-lies.html.

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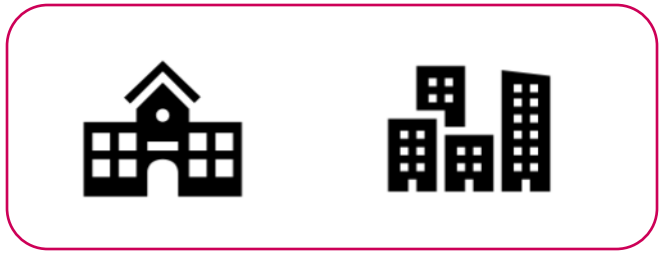
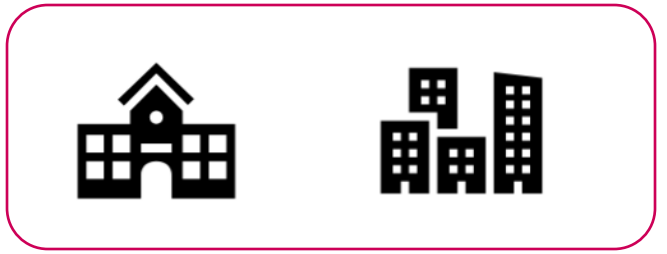
Methodology

2 schools in Slovenia and their local environments



School and local environment 1



School and local environment 2

1) Observations and field diaries
2) Surveys
3) Interviews with
    1) children (in schools)
    2) teachers (in school)
    3) youth and adults (in local community)

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School: Learning about human rights

Context: **Ethics class,** December 2024 & January 2025 – observations of implementation of a series of workshops on the Convention on the Rights of the Child & Declaration of Human Rights. The activities are graded with partial grades.

One workshop: in groups of four find different viewpoints to two assigned statements (e. g.: “It is natural, that men have more money and freedom than women.”, „People should have the freedom to do what they want without restrictions.“, „If a woman is robbed or murdered in a place known to be dangerous, it is her own fault.“), linked to specific human rights. Presenting them to the class and at the end, other learners can add their own perspectives, gaining a partial grade.

Another workshop: a (theatre) play on the topic of discrimination. Two groups: girls & boys. The learners had one week to prepare in their free time to implement the play in the next ethics lessons.

The boys prepared a simple play on stuttering in employment interviews

The girls prepared a play on class discrimination („homeless person“) in the restaurant, gender pay gap and religious („headscarf“ at the dentist)

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School: Learning about human rights

Some learners emphasised their active role and the possibility to contribute with their experiences, while others had reservations because it was not implemented and taken seriously.

Responses from learners

1. Female, 7th grade, had the activity the year of the interview:

I: Yes. We had to find which article is for this situation and how we would react to this situation if we think it is right that this person did something. What is wrong and write everything on a piece of paper and then present it.

R: And how did you think that was?

I: Good, because we had... The group presented, then the others gave their opinions and if you opened up a new perspective on the situation, you got a plus, and it raised your grade. Let's say I had a 3 [happily emphasized] at the end.

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School: Learning about human rights

2. Female, 14 years old, 8th grade, had the activity a year before:

R: And even then, a performance was made, at least this year they did. This is, for example, the integration of theatre into classes. If we say so.

I1: Yes, yes, let's say it that way [a bit undermining tone]

R: Just comment.

I1: I don't know, because I'm not saying that there was no integration [of art practices into education], but ... That is, if we look at it in percentage terms, once in eight years, when we had the opportunity to do something like that. That's one thing. Second, it was a 10-second performance, we came and said it. Third, no one took it seriously. They mostly joked around; it wasn't done seriously enough to be taken as something important.

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Local community - Library

Observation: Local community 1, Library, **Fairytale-educational workshop about the sea**, August 26, 2025



P: Tina Škrokov Cotič

Workshop: reading a fairy-tale, watching a cartoon, crafting activities

Children continuously exchanged knowledge: shared stories from family trips, explained ecological concepts, and empathically interpreted each other's speech.

M. (boy), the oldest child, offered insights about marine animals, and at one point even teaching the adult facilitator something new.: "Teacher, when the clams get filled with dust, then they sneeze". Facilitator T. candid admission, "I didn't know that" transformed the learning moment into a shared discovery.

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Local community - Library

From fieldnotes:

Now they start talking about recycling.

Someone: “Or from an old car they make a new car.”

Librarian/workshop leader: “Yes, that is a very good recycling.”

Someone: “Clothes.”

A girl: “I have two [female] cousins, when the oldest doesn’t need the clothes anymore, she gives them to her sister and when she doesn’t need them anymore, she gives them to me. And when I don’t need them anymore, I give them to my sister.”



P: Tina Škrokov Cotič

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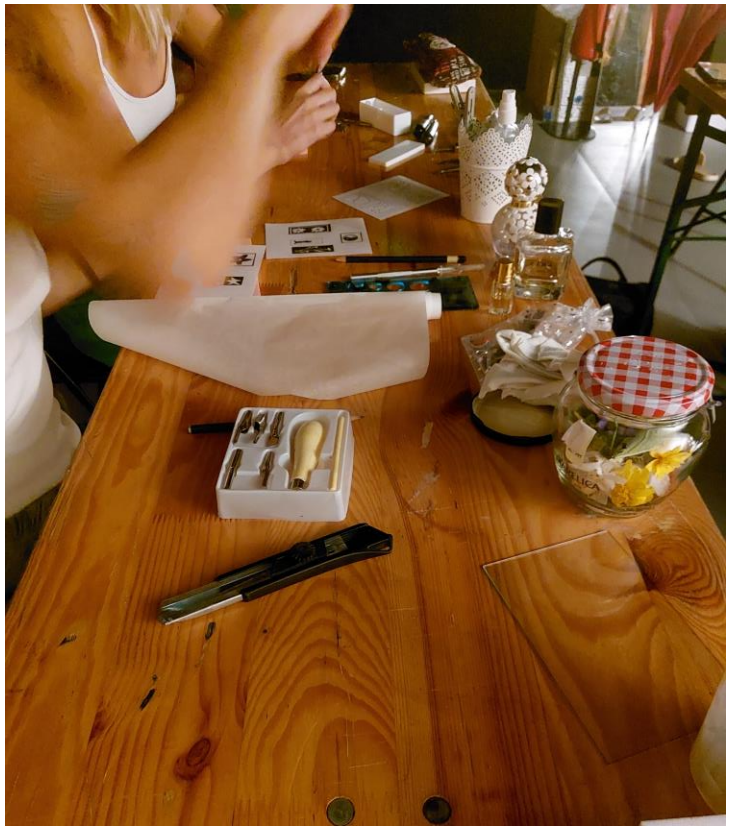
Local community – Students‘ club

Observation: Local community 1, **Cyanotype and linocut workshop** (DIY Home Décor and Creative Wardrobe Refreshment), September 2025, six young adults

M.‘s (workshop leader) approach positioned art as **a process of discovery** rather than mastery. She reminded participants that once you mess up, “it’s done, but it’s fine, it’s nice,” using humour and reassurance to normalise failure as part of creation. This playful acceptance of imperfection framed the workshop as a space of exploration and shared learning.



P: Maja Zadel

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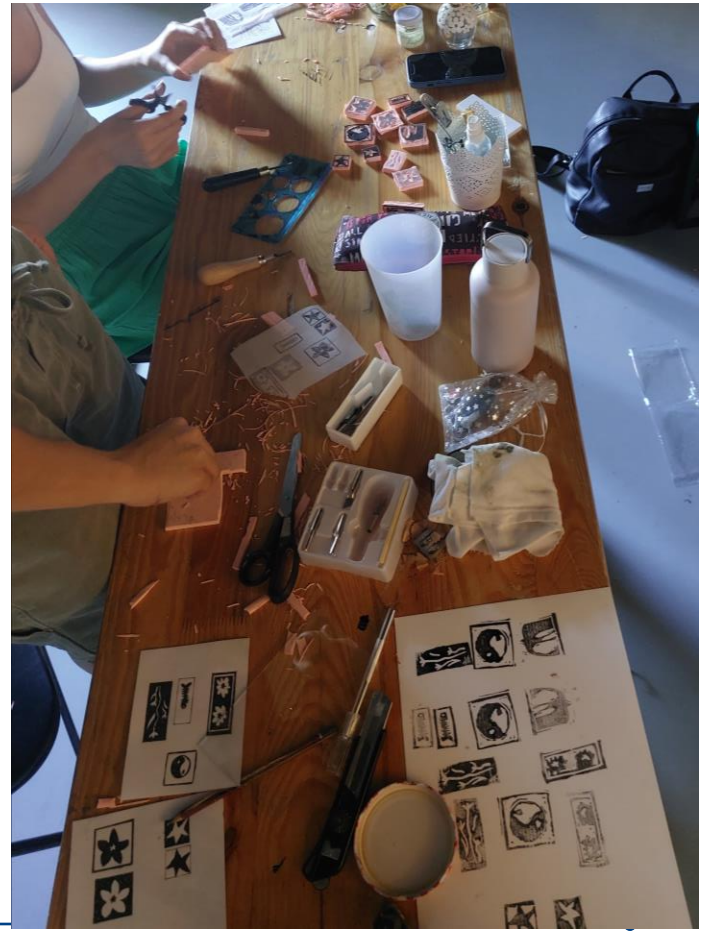
Local community – Students‘ club

Fostering sustainability (refreshing wardrobe and home décor by DIY activities)

Creativity sparks creativity: Participants discussed ideas for future projects, such as using cyanotype to design festival banners or creating posters printed with fonts made with condiments. Their interaction illustrated how imagination and dialogue were interwoven in collective artistic practice.

Political aspect: Beside future creative design ideas, the participants, starting from their experiences and perspectives, opened and discussed political topics (marriage, social benefits, ideological positions)

The workshop blurred the **distinction between artist and audience**, **teacher and learner**. Everyone contributed knowledge, shared resources, and co-constructed meaning.



P: Maja Zadel

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Reflections

Arts-based and multimodal methods can foster CCL but dialogic aspects must be incorporated

E] The workshop on marine life and recycling functioned as an artistic and educational microcosm where learning was **reciprocal, participatory**, and **affective**. The adult facilitators contributed to this through fostering creativity, confidence, and the sense that knowledge is something co-created rather than transmitted

E] Critical cultural literacy can be recognised in the way participants linked art-making with social and cultural reflection at the cyanotype and linocut workshop

Sindberg Jensen, Søren & Gro Hellesdatter Jacobsen. 2025.Participatory Visual Methods in Child-Centered Migration Research. In The Oxford Handbook of Child-Centered Approaches to Migrant Children, Gornik, B., Medaricć Z., & Sedmak, M. (eds.), 227-246. Oxford University Press.
Leddy, Shannon & Susan O'Neil (2022): Learning to See: Generating Decolonial Literacy Through Contemporary Identity-Based Indigenous Art. International Journal of Education and the Arts, 3, 9. https://doi.org/10.26209/ijea23n9
Curry-Stevens, Ann (2007): New forms of transformative education: Pedagogy for the privileged. Journal of Transformative Educati on, 5, 1, 33–58.

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Reflections

Arts-based methods alone do not equal involvement, participation or transformation

For this to occur, it is necessary to implement dialogic, critical and reflexive pedagogies, considering issues of asymmetrical power relations (Hoggan et al. 2009 in Leddy & O'Neil, 2022, 5; de Carvalho, 2025; Jensen & Hellesdatter Jacobsen, 2025)

→challenge the students (as well as teachers' (see Leddy & O'Neil, 2022; Azada-Palacios, 2023; Gorski, 2008)) assumptions regarding the

current status quo and the

previous production of knowledge to 1.) meet the learners at **their everyday experience** and 2.) **change how they see the world supporting social justice** (Finnegan 2023; Funk, Kellner & Share, 2016; Curry-Stevens, 2007).

more **informal and **relaxed** settings + **dialogue** and valuing others' **experiences** + valorising the vital, yet often undervalued, **role of community-based arts practices**

the need to strengthen pedagogical agency within schools to transform arts education from a **decorative or standardised activity into a critical, participatory practice.

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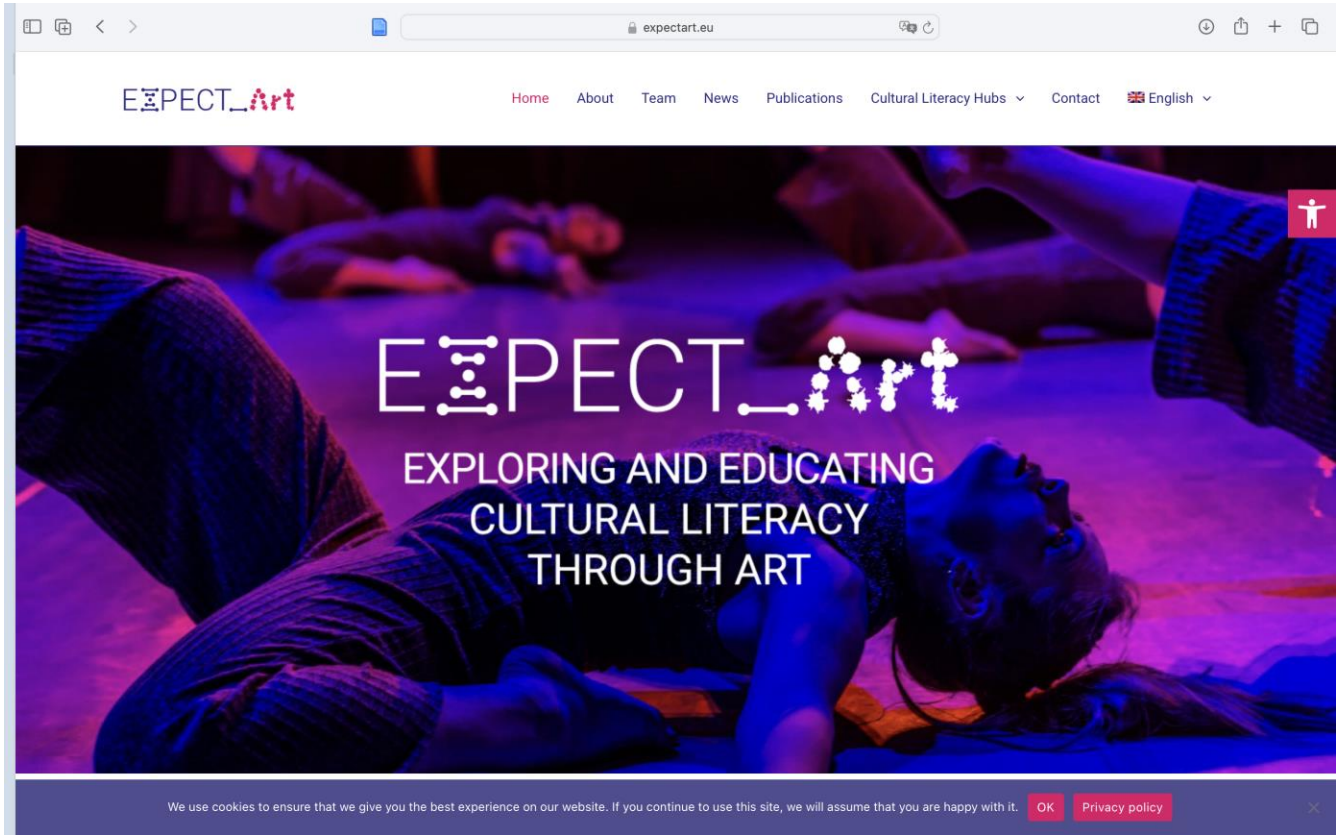

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