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An integration of art education into preschool instruction

Summary

The present paper describes the educational possibilities of art activities in preschool education which correspond to the contemporary priorities of preschool instruction. It presents the goals and aims of some action research which was conducted in kindergartens. Through non-traditional art activity, the educational opportunities were examined, focusing on an analysis of their procedures; reflections on individual activities being carried out. The research results were designed to help bring about real changes in kindergartens, to document the contribution of art creation and to provide arguments for personality-oriented education in preschool instruction.

Keywords: pre-school education in the Czech Republic, child development, educational opportunities, integrated approach, art production, action research

Introduction

Education, starting with preschool education, reflects not only social changes but also the present state of knowledge and understanding. It defines the goals of how to support children in their development, how to help them to become oriented in the contemporary world and all of its complexity. The aims of preschool education can have a socio-centric focus (there are specific norms towards which the preschool education is oriented, the instruction being regarded as a preparation for school with its prescribed system of knowledge, skills and habits), a paidocentric focus (based on Rousseau's concept of natural education, the goals are derived from the inner conditions of child development, the emphasis being put on the naturalness, spontaneity and relative freedom in the content and methods of the educational activity), or a convergent focus (striving for balance between the free development of the personality, the human uniqueness of each child and the essential and requisite degree of restriction, which is given by education in a formally closed society). In contrast to the past, when the child in preschool education was led towards a purposeful adaptation, according to strictly given goals and where the development of his experiences, skills and habits was emphasized, contemporary preschool education favours a personality-oriented model, which is considered the main tool of internal kindergarten transformation following the ideas of humanism and democracy. Therefore, it is characterized by freedom, informality and the individualized structure of educational and instructional goals (cf. Opravilová 2001: 128–132).

Opravilová (2001: 132) presents the characteristics of a personality-oriented model of education as follows: “*Through the development of emotional, social and volitional ties, it ensures the feeling of safety and security for a child and it creates a permanent opportunity for socially-based learning and discovery*”. The personality-oriented model also places great emphasis on children’s creativity and independence which are, to a certain extent, given to each individual. However, it is necessary to awaken, strengthen and improve them. It is, therefore, important to give children space for their activity, as then they can apply it within interaction with other children and adults, in communication with other people, their environment and the world. The aims and goals of personality-oriented preschool instruction are also supported by the Framework of the Education Programme for Preschool Education (2004). A document which determines the fundamental knowledge base at preschool level and which is also the starting point for the creation of school educational programmes and their implementation.

Preschool education in the Czech Republic is institutionally ensured by kindergartens or it is eventually realized within the preparatory classes of primary schools. It aims at education and care for children aged from three to six or seven years (in the case of a postponement in schooling). It should also supplement family education and provide multilateral incentives towards active learning and child development, as well as meaningfully enrich the daily programme during the child’s preschool years and provide professional child care. In addition to this, it accepts the natural development of children and consistently reflects this in the content, forms and methods of their education, while also allowing the development and education of each child within a range of his/her individual possibilities and needs. In terms of age, kindergarten classes may be homogeneous or heterogeneous; it is also possible to include children with special educational needs into mainstream classes and to create integrated classes.

The curricular document (pre-school curriculum) defines the structure of aims through purposes and outputs. These are general aims – purposes (child development, his/her learning and recognition, value adaptation, gains through personal attempts) on which particular aims are based in the following areas (biological, psychological, interpersonal, social cultural, environmental). They are labelled: *The Child and his Body, The Child and his Mind, The Child and the Other One, The Child and Society, The Child and the World*. Outputs are defined as key competencies at a general level – the capabilities being reachable in pre-school education (for learning, problem solving, competencies, social and personal, activities and civil competencies). Particular outputs are based on particular aims which lead to the acquisition of particular knowledge, skills, values and approaches. Moreover, preschool education maintains an integrated approach which respects the natural integrity of the child’s personality and his/her gradual integration into the natural and social environment. Therefore the individual areas, i.e. their different contents, mutually pervade and penetrate (cf. RVP PV 2004: 11).

When reading through the above mentioned document, art education is not named. However, art activities should be part of the content of everyday activities and contribute

to the realization of goals of preschool education, because the main types of activities in art education include the four main human activities which are realized within the relation of man to the object (cognitive activities, value-orientation and transformation activities) and within the relationship of man to man (communicative activities), as they are developed through art perception, art imagination and art creation (cf. Hazuková 2012: 16).

Defining the issue

The contribution of art activities to education, including preschool education, is historically confirmed. J. David (2008), an influential Czech theoretician of art education, in his extensive work *Century of the Child and the Challenge of Paintings* maps the development of world and domestic trends in art-pedagogical thinking. The author confirms that since the end of the 19th century, the interest in children's creation, which is regarded as children's art, has been increasing. For aesthetic education in preschool instruction, the ideas of A. Lichtwark (1915), who elaborated the methodology of art mediation, are beneficial, as well as the work of O. Hostinský (1873, 1907), who outlined the developmental line of aesthetic education from childhood to adulthood. Exhibitions presenting the spontaneous art creation of children were organized; the Dresden International Drawing Congress in 1912 devoted much attention to the psychology of drawing. While, in addition to this, psychologizing orientations within the concept of drawing were defined, gaining experience from the research of spontaneous artistic expression. Our art teachers also drew on foreign experience and the study of works by J. Ruskin, C. Ricci, J. Sully, G. Kerschensteiner, L. Tadda, W. Stern, G.H. Luquet and others. Among Czech authors, we can mention F. Čáda who advocated the importance of Comenius's *School of Infancy* for the development of aesthetic education (1904, 1907). The interest in children's creation, meanwhile, also being illustrated by the famous exhibition *The Child* held in Prague in 1920 (cf. David 2008).

Since the 1920s, aesthetic education in Europe has been understood as the education of the pupil's spontaneous expression, changing to become education towards sensitivity to different aesthetic materials (cf. Mistrík 2001: 440). With regard to this, in the inter-war period, it was O. Clop and L. Ondrůjová who were engaged in research into artistic expression. While in addition, we cannot forget the pedagogical work of L. Švarc and his colleagues who, in their House of Childhood, realized the instruction and education of war orphans, using creative activities and encouraging the artistic self-expression of the children. In the Czech lands, the creative concept of art education has been emphasised since the 1960s and was connected with the idea of the transfer of the creative approach to solving artistic problems into different areas. This period is primarily connected with the activities and publications of J. Uždil (1966, 1978) (cf. Hazuková 2005: 12). This theorist of art education devoted his research to spontaneous artistic expression (1974, 1978) and it was he, among others, who addressed the content of art instruction in preschool education (1983). Among the major authors who studied children's creations and advocated educa-

tion through art, we can also mention H. Read (1967) who regarded art and education as indispensable to human development.

After the year 1989, preschool education was influenced by different conceptions of art education. We can for example mention the artphiletic approach which is connected with J. Slavík. *Arte* refers to art (from the Latin *ars, artis* – art), but it also refers to art therapy. Philetic comes from the Greek root word *-fil-*, expressing a positive attitude towards something. The artphiletic approach is characterized by intense activity and an emphasis on creativity, expressiveness, experience in art activities and subsequent reflection (cf. Slavík 2011). Scientific articles and publications (1997, 2001, 2004, 2009, 2011) document the positive contribution of the artphiletic approach to preschool education. Further stimulating inspiration is offered through spiritual and sensual education by M. Pohnerová (1992). Spontaneous artistic expression, too, continues to gain attention, its symbolism being examined for example by H. Babyrádová (1999) who, among others, emphasizes the importance of syncretic perception for child creation. Further studies of preschool children's creative products were conducted and published in Slovakia by B. Šupšáková (2013). In addition to which, the issue of art education in preschool instruction in the Czech Republic has been for a long time studied by H. Hazuková (2011).

Art, as noted by E. Mistrík, should fulfil three functions within preschool education: “Art is a game, a means of knowledge and communication” (2001: 428). While, nowadays, a creatively-expressive model of education is implemented, which according to B. Šupšáková, can be represented as follows: accentuation (in terms of expression), process, expression, artistic value and uniqueness. Moreover, this model of art education, if well understood, has the power to effectively develop the child's personality, because children not only learn to create beautiful things, but above all to search for artistic solutions all by themselves and therefore their work becomes a unique testimony about them. Children, thereby, learn to understand the meaning of what they are doing, to find associations, independently evaluate, create conclusions or even generate new knowledge. Through dialogue they develop their communicative competence, etc. (cf. 2001). Therefore, in accordance with the idea of H. Hazuková, within preschool education, “the shift from the emphasis on the quality of the result to the quality of the process itself” should occur (2011: 36).

Based on the knowledge of the curriculum for preschool education, it is necessary to look for ways of how to incorporate creative activities into the context of larger educational units. In relation to this, preschool education allows the application of the integrative approach, a model for integrated thematic instruction having been created and described by Susan Kovalik (1993). The term **integration** expresses “the mutual penetration, linking of the content of school subjects created from real sciences into a new, tighter and functional educational content. This integrated educational content pursues the objectives of all these subjects” (Rakoušová 2008: 15). Podroužek characterizes integrated learning as a “*a combination of the curriculum of the individual school subjects or cognitively close educational areas into a single unit, with an emphasis on complexity and globalism*”

of cognition, where a series of interdisciplinary relations is applied” (Podroužek 2002: 11). In relation to integration, Valenta (2003: 23) talks about “the deliberate creation of mutual relations between the individually acquired pieces of knowledge and the conscious creation of interdisciplinary relations. In problem solving, the pieces of knowledge from different subjects and one’s own experience are used; mental structures are created within education as a whole”. As quoted by V. Spousta (1997: 15, 16), “the borders are merged – traditional spheres and science disciplines are mutually mingled. ... The interdisciplinary approach is applied everywhere where there is a complicated problem whose solution crosses the borders of one field, where there is a need of interrelation between the science disciplines being studied, or answers for a whole complex of questions needs to be found”.

Within integrated education, the emphasis is placed on the experiential orientation of instruction in relation to thinking stimulation and problem solving, as well as the child’s activity, which corresponds to the principles of preschool education. Integrated units are often based on a topic which should be attractive and interesting for children and, above all, the units should allow them to look at the issues from different perspectives. The activities should be spontaneous as well as guided and they should be interconnected and balanced. A teacher should think through the content of the activities so that they are appropriate to the age and abilities of individual children, which is also expressed in one of the curriculum documents – “a teacher accepts the developmental particularities of preschool children, enables the development and education of each individual child within the scope of his or her individual needs...” (RVP PV 2004: 6).

We can give examples of creative activities which may contribute to the formation of the above mentioned competencies. As we have already mentioned, art activities offer specific means to implement generally formulated goals. How a teacher treats the possibility to create opportunities of learning for children is, however, within his judgement. Art activities offer ways of leading to these outputs. To develop *learning competencies* in children, we allow them, within art activities, to watch the world around them, its beauty and diversity. To study the different forms of art expression, to find art tools and their art outcomes, and to do experiments with them. As a part of these art activities, too, we should encourage children to notice links, e.g. how the choice of a tool, material and other expressive tools influences the emerging art form, etc. Additionally, children should always apply their own experience in topic interpretation, area composition or the choice of art tools. For, in order for children to have elementary knowledge of the world (people, culture and technique) and its diversity, we must guide them towards a focused observation of natural as well as chosen artistic forms, offering them knowledge about the wide variety of art materials, processes, instruments etc. and the possibility of becoming acquainted with art.

Children should also have the chance to formulate questions and answers about the art assignment process through creation and what art experimentation will bring them. They can watch for example how a colour works on a dry or wet surface, what happens if they add a white or a black colour. We should also motivate them so that they want to understand why a certain situation happened in the process of creation, as art creation is

often followed by unexpected situations and we expect that children will want to try to overcome them, for example when they have to deal with an art “accident”.

As well as the above, creation often demands and develops the ability to concentrate on an art assignment solution. The various ways of how to realize art ideas and their own experience should also enable children to purposefully remember new terms, or art procedures, the children being able to communicate with us through artwork, informing us about important content, which they often enrich by their own comments. The teacher, in the meantime, should listen to them and teach them to evaluate their progress, as it is very important for children to realize their progress. This might be, for instance, that they have overcome their fear of creation or learned a new art procedure. It is also important that they value the results of others, such as unique artistic inventions and realized ideas, as these can be a source of knowledge and a feeling for art. If children create with enthusiasm, they are also motivated to learn, and so this is why, for children, artwork should be connected with pleasant feelings accompanied by expressions of happiness and enthusiasm. Linked to this, if an activity is adequate to the children’s disposition, they concentrate longer without feeling tiredness or pain because of difficult work with an instrument or the manipulation of heavy art materials.

In addition to this, preschool children should have enough opportunities to solve problems, while another competence is connected to *active interest to cope with a problem* – as avoiding solutions does not lead to the goal. In connection with this, artwork brings many problem situations as well as opportunities to solve them. To “correct” a child’s work, which they are not satisfied with because there was an accident, or to finish a child’s work because she/he does not want to think about how to continue, is not the right way to lead to creative thinking. It is important to use every immediate experience by using the trial-and-error method, to appreciate the spontaneous invention of new solutions to the art problem and to find new ways and possibilities. The children’s independence needs to be supported so that they will not continuously ask if they can do it “*this way*”. They will come up with their own – for them, original – ideas, but with our support only, nothing more.

As well as this, children should use their previous experience when they create spontaneously or are motivated by a teacher to represent a topic which is interesting and motivating for them, realizing it individually or cooperating in a group. In this case their imagination can be directed to create a unique drawing, which mirrors their individual experience and fantasy, through which children reveal their fictional world. Artwork then offers ways to support and *develop communicative competences*. Children, especially, like to express their ideas, for instance, their own understanding of a topic, expression through art, etc. If we explain to the child certain procedures or define an assignment, we assume that the child will understand what is said and verbally respond, not only to the sense datum but to the artwork as well. In addition to this, during teamwork we support children to have a reasonable dialogue with the rest of the group, while they are trying to find a solution to an art assignment, for example, or when they need to share an art experience. The children being able to express themselves in different ways – orally, musically, through drama as

well as artistically, because children communicate not only by using words and gestures, but also pictures. Overall, it depends on the teacher if the child communicates without being shy and understands the advantages of being communicative, welcoming activity and taking the initiative. Because it is only then that the children will not be afraid of coming out with an original art solution and its commentary.

Learning competence also leads to the ability to use means of information and communication, as children not only get new knowledge using the media but also see the quality of art books, encyclopedias, computer presentations and games, as well as audiovisual programmes, in addition to learning about the work of illustrators. As a part of acquiring the skills which come before reading and writing, they can also do art experiments with dots, lines, and space connected to graphomotoric exercises and concrete letter shapes. While, if we aim at *social and personal competences*, for instance, we support children to decide independently, e.g. when and how to solve an art assignment. The teacher should not have negative feelings or be offended, therefore, if children have their own opinion and ideas and if they choose their own tools, task solutions, forms of evaluation or interpretation of realizations through art. At the same time, we should also lead children to become responsible for their actions and the consequences they have, such as destroying the teamwork in progress, or making a mess around them on purpose. And, with regard to this especially, solving an art assignment together, learning and applying art tools and art procedures is a way that sensitivity and tolerance towards others are expressed. Something which can also be used to help others; for example, if another child is confused and needs assistance with physically difficult work.

Generally, too, it is necessary to develop empathy in preschool education so that children can distinguish inappropriate behaviour, understand injustice, hurting others, aggression and indifference. As a part of working on art, therefore, we direct children not to destroy the work of others, nor to mess up any products of art without the creator's agreement. In addition to this, children must not be mocked or humiliated for their products, as a child can win recognition while defending his/her art ideas but also submitting if there are some better ideas on which most of the group members agree. Through group activities then, we can lead children to agree and cooperate, respect others, negotiate, accept and affect a compromise, and not to give up in the presence of an artwork assignment. Teamwork does not start automatically, of course. For example, if we give children one common format of paper and we assume that teamwork will occur, children will often only mark one area of the paper and do their part individually. There is a need, therefore, to motivate children to do teamwork, choosing not only the topic but also the art tools which support that aim.

If children create spontaneously we can also often "read" their art expression, seeing pro-social behaviour and human relationship models. In this way, children can be led to have respect and tolerance, an understanding that people are different; which means that they have different life experience, and because of this, art ideas. Teachers then, need to support child diversity and art ideas. Additionally, individuality is connected with another

competence, *action and the public*. Therefore, we should motivate children so that they feel a need to create, organize and lead their art work. Artwork, in this situation, being an opportunity to allow the exceptional qualities and strong points of the child to come to the fore.

It is not possible to assume that a given set of skills, knowledge, but also values and attitudes will be acquired by all children at the same level. Pre-school education, therefore, should come out of the authentic experience of the children, which should be the children art work as its starting point because “*experience is what everybody consciously or unconsciously remembers from a situation, can later recover and behave to accordingly, or can express in different ways.*” (Slavík 2007: 168). Pre-school education, therefore, prefers situational learning based on creating and using the immediate situation.

Research methodology

Aims of the research

In 2013, action research was conducted, involving 53 kindergarten teachers. The aim of the study was to map out the role of art activities in the practice of kindergartens and to explore specific opportunities to learn through artistic creation. We were looking for answers to the following research questions: *How are creative activities used in practice in individual kindergartens? How do the art activities support the child's self-realization?*

The course of the pilot study

The pilot study took place in the kindergartens where the teachers work. The task of the teachers was to conduct participant observation and to record, in the form of field notes and photographs, two activities which were identified as art activities by their colleagues.

The data gained was analysed by the open coding system; further interpretation was carried out by the “showdown” technique (cf. Švaříček, Šedřová 2007: 211–226). The following categories emerged from the open coding: *diversity of goals of art activities; conventional opportunities to create; results of creative activity; barriers to the creative concept of art activities.*

The realization of various goals of art activities is in compliance with the Framework of the Educational Programme for Preschool Education, however, within the observed activities, mainly technical skills (how to hold a tool, how to trace, cut, stick properly, etc.) were emphasized. Outcomes in the form of a series of similar works, coloured templates and imitations of given patterns did not encourage creative solutions to the tasks offered. Hence mechanical activities predominated, using numerous templates, working according to the teacher's precise instructions, the parents' or school management's requirements (they want “nice” works to be used for the decoration of the interior, to be used as gifts for various occasions, etc.). The activities offered children opportunities for individual creation and also group cooperation, while the work took place in a pleasant atmosphere

and the children were interested in their work. In most cases, the activities took place in the interior of the kindergarten, the application of planar artistic means prevailed.

Barriers to creative activities were associated with the strict organisational demands, and therefore they had to be constrained or adapted to the conditions. Consequently, they could not be implemented because of the structure of the daily programme, lack of time and opportunity, and so on. We can state, therefore, that the described activities often corresponded to the persisting sociocentric objectives of the education taking place and that they did not create opportunities for the subjective artistic expression of the children.

The aim of the action research

The action research was conducted during the fall semester of 2013. Its initial impulse was based on the data gained within the pilot study. We agree with V. Švec (1999: 15) who believes that a “teacher cannot change his pedagogical activity only by studying literature, but he must do it, above all, by exploring this activity”. The aim was to investigate the possibilities of non-traditional creative work as an opportunity for education and self-fulfilment of children in kindergartens.

Action research procedure

Teachers in selected kindergartens led art activities which responded primarily to the identified barriers of the creative concept of art activities. Opportunities to create and educate took place outside the institution and only the material, which was readily available, was used. The activities supported the independence of children, the active search for solutions to artistic problems and further learning through experiential activity. The teachers encouraged children to implement art experimentation, and they monitored the process and took photographs. Subsequently, they reflected on the most important situations. The experiments took place in accessible environments which were close to the different kindergartens and provided enough stimuli and raw materials for educational activities. They included, for example, the school garden, a park, or the countryside in the surroundings of the village. The only material, which was ensured in cooperation with the parents of the children, was a large piece of cloth (e.g. cotton or linen canvas from unused bedding, bed sheets, etc.) which allowed group implementation of the task. The children, therefore, had at their disposal a surface to paint on not usually associated with the activity, and upon which they could register the exploration of a non-traditional means of painting based on the study of nature and deliberate discovery of the world, realized not only visually, but also through the other senses. In doing so, the children were encouraged to observe, search, touch, smell and also to listen. They also had an opportunity to think and mainly to try which products of nature can leave traces of colour. Importantly, the task could not, in any way, be considered a devastation of nature in the sense of breaking branches, uprooting plants and perennial herbs, etc. Additionally, the activity made use of concrete stimuli for exploring nature and for applying the acquired knowledge. The fundamental situations of the pedagogical experiment being described by the teachers, while the children's

reactions were recorded and also other participants in the experiments, who watched the course or commented on the works created, discussed the purpose of the activity.

A joint discussion of all 53 teachers, who implemented the above described intervention, followed (December 2013). The individual activities were confronted, the strongest moments, children's responses, educational gains but also the reactions of other colleagues and parents on the implemented activity, were described. Comments and opinions of teachers were recorded in writing in the form of notes. The gained data was then analysed again through open coding and the technique of "showdown". It thus met the characteristics for action research and was, therefore, qualitative, practical, participatory, reflexive and concerned with social change (cf. Mason, Fulková 2007).

Research results

The following categories resulted from the open coding: *experience from creation, creativity, uniqueness of creation, development of children's knowledge, new experience*. This unusual activity was a motivating tool for children to explore the possibilities of painting with natural materials. Unique large-format colour compositions were created as a result of group work. We can also state that the resulting pieces of work became a constant reminder of the special moments experienced by each group, as evidenced by the following reflections of teachers who led the intervention:

"On the way we collected various materials from nature (elder berries, blackthorn, rosehip, blossoms and leaves of pelargoniums, tagetes, camomile...) which attracted our attention by their colours. On stone tiles we put a piece of fabric (size 110x85 cm) and emptied everything onto it. The children loved the possibility of trying what prints all the blossoms and berries left. They spent more than 30 minutes over the fabric and reminding us of what they saw on the way. Thanks to the pebbles, in the tales, the frontage technique was also seen." (M.V.)

"We put materials from nature on the fabric-blackthorn, elder, black currant and the children stepped on it. Then we turned the fabric upside down and the children "cleaned" their shoes on the fabric, so the colour of grass appeared between the coloured areas. Another turn upside down and children filled the empty space with dandelions and fading gladiolas which they found in the autumn garden." (H.M.)

"Children picked materials from nature which they thought they would be drawing with while walking out in the country. They continued picking in the afternoon with their parents. The next day they experimented. In the school garden on the grass they spread out the fabric and tried what traces each material left. The blossoms of tagetes, pergolas and surfinias coloured best. Prints of sliced red beet were also very interesting. On the other hand, the berries of various bushes were a disappointment. The whole work was finished by grass and leave drawings. We had many berries left. But should we throw them away? We felt sorry about doing that. So we put half of them on another fabric and put the second fabric over it. The first shy steps followed. The children loved it very much, how the colour

came through the fabric and how, under their feet, an interesting picture appeared. The activity was finished by smashing all the berries accompanied by happy expressions on the children's faces." (B.H.)

"The motivation for the artwork was a fairy-tale about a little mouse that was running in a garden looking for something to eat. This way it learnt about the plants which grew in the garden: flowers, berries and herbs. First the children drew mice together on paths (for drawing you can paint using wet tempera, Indian ink, red chalk, charcoal but also mud painted by a thick brush). The created fields were coloured by blossoms, berries and other natural materials that left an imprint. We were all surprised what colours are offered by nature. This activity also brought a nice smell to our classroom." (I.G.)

"The children were enthusiastic about the new materials for being creative. They were slightly impatient when they found out that, for example, rosehip does not make any colour. So they brought colours and soaked materials from nature in it and then they rolled it over the fabric, creating prints and so on, to mark their traces." (D.A.)

"One Monday we visited a planetarium where a fairy-tale "About the Sun and its friends" was shown. On the way back to the kindergarten we collected various natural materials, such as elder berries, blackthorn, grass, leaves but also the blossoms of mums, tagetes, etc. In the afternoon we spread our fabric on the floor and had a discussion about drawing. "Planets, of course" shouted one boy and he led the whole work. In the middle of the fabric he drew a sun and with the rest of the children, other planets. Some children were at first a little afraid of getting dirty, so finally we covered the printed parts with natural material, put plastic bags on our feet and stepped on everything. Everybody loved it." (M.H.)

For the children it was a great experience because they found out that they could use other parts of their bodies to paint with – for example if we cover the area with foil, they can sit on it, walk on it, dance, jump, ... accompanied by music, rhythm or melody, they can react to speed or volume, and so on. It showed that inventiveness in art motivates children to create, as well as cooperation and thinking about the surrounding world. The creative activities also brought children other "gains". Many of these situations also showed the independence and flexibility of the children when they dealt with the immediate situation. For example, when they did not want to get their hands dirty, they tried to find what instruments would help them – such as stones for smashing berries and painting with other materials. The children, therefore, had an opportunity to find out about new solutions or alternatives to common procedures, to use their own imagination and fantasy in creation and interpretation of the work, to enjoy their new discoveries and feelings of work, to realize the value of non-traditional work, as well as showing their willingness to work in the natural world and to realize pleasant and unpleasant feelings connected to work. It is also enjoyable that painting with natural materials also initiated the children into trying to experience it again at home. And then this unusual activity not only awakened the parents' interest, but also the interest of colleagues who wanted to learn more about the activities. Therefore, it offered an opportunity for explanation and argumentation, i.e. the defence of art activities in preschool education.

In addition to this, the research results revealed the conservatism of some teachers (colleagues), who refused to become involved in such unconventional work. Their approach to teaching is conservative, however, and they underestimate the positive influences of artwork on the development of the personality of the child. Some of the comments were also negative, perceiving the activity as “anti-ecological” and non-pedagogical. Even here, however, there is a reason for discussion and mainly for the defence of a complex opportunity for learning. With regard to this, brainstorming took place among the participants of the research on how to deal with the issues that arose. And so, consequently, the suggested procedures were analyzed in terms of the educational goals offered and a pre-school education resources point of view. There were also arguments on how to defend the positive outcomes of the described activities being sought. There were, for instance, suggestions on how to gradually develop the children’s knowledge further. For example, to watch plants from autumn to winter, and based on their own experience, tell the children that some plants are annual and therefore they “die”, so it is not devastating when we use them in our work. The same with berries and leaves that are shed before winter and then go through organic processing to become humus. In this way, ecological thinking as well as other knowledge of the child is not developed only with commands and restrictions, but by adopting generalized knowledge, therefore allowing for a pre-school education that is based mostly on the experience of the children.

Conclusion

The research identified a need to emphasize the creative thinking of kindergarten teachers, not only in the area of preparation of learning opportunities, but primarily in its course when it is necessary to flexibly respond to each situation. Teachers should not underestimate children’s abilities, they should not impose their own ideas and their opinions which they regard invariable. Additionally, teachers should create more opportunities for the self-development, activity and creativity of children through art activities. The experiment demonstrated not only the real possibilities and the importance of creative activities, but also confirmed that children are able to work independently and creatively, if they are given the opportunity to do so. The implemented experiment proved not only the possibilities and importance of creative activities but also showed the opportunities available to build holistic children’s knowledge in pre-school education. Let us, therefore, offer unusual and playful education to children as M. Svobodová says, “*let’s strengthen the field of unexpected experience and little adventures that will be transformed from children’s minds through their hands to an artwork. We will be surprised by unusual harmony, remarkable colours, subject organization and the feelings expressed. Only in this way can monotonous creation and banal expressions be stopped. Created almost always stereotypically without any great excitement from the children ...*” (1998: 86). With regard to this also, it is important to present examples of good practice which use the possibilities of creative activities and to advocate their contribution within the context of the contem-

porary goals for preschool education. As only in this way, will we offer more knowledge and experience-based arguments for changes in the thinking of teachers, parents and other stakeholders involved in preschool education. Thinking which often limits the consistent implementation of a personal model of preschool education in everyday practice.

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