

The Impact of Systematic Exploration of Artworks in Raising Children's Healthy Eating Habits in Early Years Education

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to estimate children's knowledge on healthy eating habits through art-based activities. Several studies provide the value of nutrition and environmental education programs as well as arts participation early in life. Art activities stimulate creativity, build brain capacity by providing new problems to solve and attest positive social and healthy outcomes in early childhood. 111 children were involved in the study (56 males and 55 females) from five preschool settings. A questionnaire with images before and after the study was applied to all children. In the meantime, all children took part in an educational program, with nutrition-based activities, basic artwork and specific well-known paintings. The findings suggest that post-intervention children had a more enhanced understanding of healthy and nutritional choices and a critical appreciation that art and art activities can have an important place in daily schedule. The study highlights the need for more involvement in art education as a tool for healthy and environmental issues and result in all-sided children's development.

Keywords: healthy lifestyle, art-based intervention, educational programs, early years

1. Introduction

Early years are considered as a significant period during which learning procedures and enriched experiences play a crucial role in shaping children's cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development (D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018; Kokkos, 2017). Lifestyle in modern urban societies, as well as the current fast pace of life, have altered our consumption patterns, and in particular our dietary patterns, leading many to reflect on eating habits right from the critical age of early childhood and to seek a solution through the contribution of arts to education (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). There is a considerable number of scholars suggesting that art-based experience, as a form of expressive way of knowing, can contribute to the development of creative and critical thinking (Dewey, 1934/1980; Eisner, 1997; Kokkos, 2011). This study addresses this issue in the context of exploring alternatives that may emerge from different approaches in the field of education, always with a view to adopting healthy eating habits as well as developing a strong environmental awareness.

2. Literature review

2.1. Art education in early life

Art promotes the intellectual and educational level of humans. The concept of art is conceptually conceived of as creation and invention. It is an additional means of expression and a bridge for the design of new achievements (Magouliotis, 2002, Jensen & Bonde, 2018). Art provides the opportunity for the individual to experience something that couldn't be obtained from a different source. Furthermore, art contributes to the experience of unprecedented emotions, as well as opens new unique paths concerning the way of interpretation, externalization and expression, with many alternatives suitable for the temperament and uniqueness of each child (Eisner, 2002; Acuff, 2018). Moreover, art is a source of reflection, it activates thinking, it raises questions revealing the perspective of things, challenging in an impressive way the child's memory and thinking (Ntoulia, 2012). Thanks to the visual arts, students develop physically, improving their skills with the use of their hands, as well as spiritually with the development of relevant skills such as patience, concentration, and monitor of the progress of their work.

In addition, children learn to interact with their peers and in that way, they develop socially and emotionally, exchanging ideas, experiencing new experiences and expressing their feelings. This acquaintance with the surrounding world contributes to the one's cognitive development as it occurs through the production of art (Phillips, 2012; Aslan, 2014). Efland (2002), emphasizes the contribution of the visual arts to the development of the children's cognitive skills due to the benefits of creative learning and active participation of children. This leads to the reinforcement of the children's cultural awareness, with the artworks standing as an important primary source, since historical events, human values and philosophical issues arise through their examination. Dewey (1934) stresses the importance of art as a reformative factor that acts through understanding and through action by opening new perspectives. Expanding new horizons and introducing groundbreaking concepts bring ethics up to date, in line with the requirements of our time and introduce modern reflections on the field of education. At the same time, it sets the person accountable in the society and redistributes social roles.

Both personal and collective consciousness of the individual stand as reference point of art through the fulfillment of communicative needs pertaining to the dissemination of messages, the expression of thoughts, the description of feelings that arise from ongoing events. Engaging with art serves not only educational goals but it is also in a perpetual, circular relationship with education from which it reenergizes using it often as its basis and prerequisite (Magouliotis, 2014). Motivating students in completing their assignments is included in the benefits of visual arts according to Dhanapal, Kanapathy & Mastan, (2014) research. In more detail, the findings of the above-mentioned research result in improved cognitive skills, increased expression abilities and improved eagerness for creativity on behalf of the children. On the other hand, research by Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, (2013) results in the contribution of visual arts to the development of observation skills for the students. Kerlavage (1995) focuses on the influence of art in early childhood after 3 years old and the positive outcome of artworks that contain bright colors, contrasts and are characterized by simplicity, clarity and immediacy for young children. In addition, the visual arts help to manage feelings, such as children's anger, as well as to increase their self-esteem through the improvement of self-control and the extroversion achieved by the students through relevant activities (Alavinezhad, Mousavi & Sohrabi, 2014). Hariri & Faisal (2013) resulted in the positive effect of visual arts on students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, since an improvement in behavior and in the capacity of thinking was found. Smith (1982) emphasizes the proper incorporation of adult-related artworks by younger people in order to achieve their personal development. A significant factor here is the role of educators that are called upon to transmit the depicted ideals to the world of minors.

2.2. Healthy habits and behaviors in early life

During early childhood, children develop hygiene standards and behaviors. They thus shape the perception and knowledge of their body and personality and attain an appropriate balance in health (Pala, Reisch & Lissner, 2018). It stands to reason that parents are the most important influence on their children's eating and exercise patterns. At the same time, cultural standards determine the children's dietary preferences. The choice of foods consumed during infancy and childhood is likely to have a positive or negative impact on a person's health in the future. These critical choices may be a guarantee or a hindrance to one's subsequent biological evolution (Ebbeling, Pawlak & Ludwig, 2002). Establishing good eating habits through physical exercise and oral hygiene is a priority for preschool education according to the International Union for Health Promotion and Education, as outlined in the Union's report to the Commission of the European Union (Thanou, 2003).

In Greece, dietary patterns crystallize as a component of environmental factors, and in particular family preferences and attitudes, with parental eating habits having a catalytic effect on the shaping of children's eating behavior (Mitosi, Papadopoulou & Matziou, 2012). The social role of the school lies in the early and organized detection of the issue of obesity and the adoption of all those initiatives for the prevention of the problem. This fact makes Health Education inherent in pedagogical perceptions and the field of educational science in general. Health education can be supported by teaching through personalized or group activities of the Curriculum, depending on the occasional subject selected by the teachers. In any case, the approach aims at activating children's participation and raising concerns through action. To this end, the encouragement of dialogue, the study of books and other educational material, as well as the different aspects of visual arts are encouraged (Dev, Burton, McBride, Edwards & Garcia, 2019). The purpose of the Curriculum of preschool in the field of nutrition is to promote the mental and physical health of students and to adopt healthy eating habits. Considering the shaped financial situation and the living standard of a society, students should comprehend the origins of the foods they consume in their everyday life, their importance, but also their impact on their health. This process shall be carried out harmonically, with respect to their origin, their religious believes and the culture that governs themselves and their parents. Furthermore, they should be able to understand, in the extent possible and given the young of their age, the impact of advertise and develop a first line of defense against consumerism.

This will be achieved by developing skills in order for them to be able to process and evaluate the information they receive, by acknowledging the risks that certain foods may pose to their own health (Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2016).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Aims and objectives-research rationale

The aim of this research study is to investigate and record the eating habits of preschool children, along with the potential room for improvement of these habits by implementing the “Art in Children’s Life Program” (AinCL). A basic hypothesis was that systematic use of art for educational reasons could raise critical reflection skills through early years, aiming to an increased well-being and healthy lifestyle. More specifically, the goal of this study was to examine whether the introduction of systematic use of art in children’s life during the implementation of an educational program could: (a) facilitate the development of critical thinking through early years on these issues, (b) enrich children’s acquisition of healthy nutrition habits, (c) strengthen positive attitudes in physical activities (d) contribute to children’s perception of a healthy and clean environment. Our intervention was based on previous theory and research which supports that arts inclusion in education, starting from early childhood may foster cognitive and affective dimensions of thinking, promote growth and imagination, and provide a meaningful and educative experience (D’Olimpio & Peterson, 2018; Mages, 2018). Given this, expression and creation are included in pedagogical design programs, through the development of analogous activities related to dramatic art, visual arts and physical education. The aim of these programs is to stimulate the imagination of preschool students while developing children’s physical abilities and encouraging their expression. An essential prerequisite for the integrated development of interdisciplinary activities and the achievement of the objectives pursued is the thorough understanding of each program on behalf of the teacher. Thus, art evolves into a medium of communication and a means of expression for the students and future citizens (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, Trouli & Zinardakis, 2015).

3.2 Participants and method

The total number of children participating in the research was 111 (56 boys, 55 girls) and came from 5 preschool centers of Ioannina city in Greece. The preschool centers selected are those in which the students of the Department (Early Years Learning and Care, University of Ioannina) undertake their internships. The ages of all children ranged between 2.5 to 4 years old. Thirty (30) undergraduate students of the Early Years Learning and Care Department of the University of Ioannina were trained in a preliminary level in order to be able to implement an educational intervention on the selected preschool children. The above students volunteered as part of their internships. Meetings between the undergraduate students and the researchers (teaching staff) were preceded and the discussions focused on the way of implementation of the questionnaire, the gathering of the material, the research on the internet for the artworks that were to be used, the design of an educational program and the pilot implementation among them in order to gain familiarity with the tool.

At the beginning of the program, the children of all kindergartens answered a questionnaire with pictures. The undergraduate students asked them the question and the children would answer pointing to the corresponding picture. Then, for about three months an educational program was implemented (twice a week) with activities including visual arts, literature, dramatic play, kinetic, pre-writing and math activities and of course the subject of the activities was always based on a painting from whom they would start and would base the program of the entire day. At the end of the period the children would answer again in the same way to the same questionnaire with the pictures in order to see if there were any differences in their knowledge or attitudes towards eating habits. All the parents were informed in advance of the purposes of the study; children had the right to withdraw in any time and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

3.3 Questionnaire description

The questionnaire answered by the children consisted of seven (7) questions. The possible answers that the children had in their disposal were four (4) and consisted of pictures. There could be more than one correct answer in each question. In the first question, the students were asked to choose the food that would be the most suitable material for an artwork between eggshells, uncooked pasta, stuffed peppers and raw legumes. In the second question the children were asked to answer the question “Which aliments are good for our teeth and bones?”. The possible answers included dairy products, chocolate cake, potatoes and cured meat products. The third question requested from the children to determine which of the following activities are beneficial for our health. The suggested activities were watching TV, physical exercise, eating hamburgers and practicing a musical instrument. The fourth question requested from the children to determine which food is good for our body. The selected pictures that were given as possible answers showed the following: chocolate, fruits and vegetables, beverages with junk food and fish.

The fifth question aimed at finding the best ingredients in order to prepare a salad rich in vitamins. The possible answers were olive oil, vegetables, sunflower oil and packaged vinegar and lemon juice. The sixth one posed the question of how the children prefer to eat, alone or with company. The possible answers among which the children had to choose were an extended family dinner including the grandparents, alone, with close family members and with peers. The final question examined the issue of transportation to school with the possible answers to that question being: transportation by car, on foot or by bicycle.

3.4 Description of Activities

On the first phase there were four activities. First activity included story telling of the fairytale “Lula the Heart”¹ and discussion of the tale’s heroes. Which are the habits of the hero that harm her body? What does she need to change in her habits? Second activity was a card game. With the accompaniment of intense dance music, we show cards to the children that portray habits with either positive or negative effects on the heart. When the children see a card portraying something that does good to the heart, they dance vigorously. When they see a card portraying something that harms the heart, they sit down or lie down or cough loudly. To make the game a bit more vivid, we ask the children to run and hide under their desks when they see a card portraying something harmful for the heart. Third activity called “For a strong heart, I run and bike in the neighborhood!”. The children are divided into three groups and we ask from each team to “go to school” as car drivers, bikers and hikers respectively. They measure their pulses by listening to their heart with the stethoscope earpieces or by placing their hand on their heart before the beginning of the game. On our signal and with the accompaniment of music, the children-drivers sit on their chairs and drive, the children-hikers move vigorously from the one side of the class to the other and the children-bikers bike vigorously lying on their backs.

What do we notice at the end of the game? Which of the children’s heart beats faster? The game continues switching roles. The final activity called “Food from the brochure”. We search in supermarket’s brochures for aliments that are good or bad for the heart. We cut them off the brochures and glue them right and left from Lula’s heart. On the second phase there were three activities. First activity called “Bread and eggs on the canvas”. We observe Cezanne’s “Bread and Eggs” painting. We discuss the things we see and describe the colors in the painting. We mention how many cooking ways there are in order to prepare and eat the ingredients we see. We discuss where can eggs, bread, onions and wine benefit us. We observe them live in the classroom. We peel the eggs off the shell. Second activity was “My own painting”. On an A4 page we draw two breads and two eggs. We glue sesame to the breads after having them colored and glue the shells we have peeled off the boiled eggs to the egg drawings. Final activity included singing and dancing.

Third phase included three activities. First activity called “We like olive picking too!”. We observe and describe the painting of The ofilos “Olive harvest”. We discuss about olives and oil. We give real olives to the children to touch them with their hands and then a drop of olive oil. At the same time, we drop a bit of sunflower oil on their other hand. We ask them what they feel. What are the similarities (they slip on our hands) and to what do the two oils defer (color)? Where do we use the oil and what does it offer to our body (Olive oil – vitamins, sunflower – bad fats)? Second activity was “I collect, I count, I jump”. We make small balls of (brown) crepe paper. Using our bodies and with the accompaniment of music, we reenact the process of olive-harvesting using a stick to shake-off the olives from the “trees”. The teacher throws during this process the small balls on the floor while the children collect the olive-balls in small baskets (or cooking vessels from the “Kitchen corner”) and carry them to the oil mill. They afterwards count how many olives did each one of them collect. Third activity called “Black olive on white background!”. On an A4 page we draw a line (olive branch). The children glue around the branch small balls of crepe paper and olive leaves (if we can find natural leaves even better). Phase number four contained four activities. First activity was a fairytale called “Mr. Chocolate and miss Sugar with the Rotten Tooth”².

Story telling of the fairytale. We talk about chocolate and sweets. What do they have that it is harmful? what should we watch out for when we eat them? We look for and discuss about foods that can be good for our teeth such as milk and its products. What does milk give us and where else can it be beneficial for our body? We show our teeth and bones. How should we take care of them? What should we be avoiding of? Which materials from the kitchen area remind us of teeth? Second activity called “Strong teeth from hard beans”. On a drawn picture of a mouth we glue teeth-beans. Third activity was “A little more dance can do no harm!”. The final activity called “Teeth and little monsters!”. The children are divided into three groups: the group of “teeth”, the group of “caries” and the group of “toothbrushes”. The “teeth” dance carelessly with the accompaniment of music wearing an A4 paper placed on their chest with a ribbon. The music changes and the “caries” burst in and mark up with black markers the “teeth” (their paper).

¹Translator’s note (TN): «Hearty Lula», in Greek

²TN: «Mr. Chocolate and miss Sugar», in Greek.

The teeth are caught by surprise and get upset. They wonder why something like this happened. But then the toothbrushes come to the rescue and turn the papers on the other side and nurses the “teeth”. Fifth phase had three activities. Activity number one was “Dinner with family and friends”. We observe the painting of Renoir “Luncheon of the Boating Party”. We discuss about the faces, the clothes, the colors, the food on the table, the reasons that these gatherings take place, why is it comforting to eat all together, when do we eat all together at home. Second activity called “Come on in and eat with us!”. We prepare a dinner for our friends! We lay a tablecloth in the center of the classroom. The teacher prepares half a slice of bread, cheese and some tomato on each plate, and drizzles some olive oil over the meal. We all eat, clink our glasses together and discuss. We finish our meal with a fruit. Then, we all stand up and dance around the tablecloth. Third activity was “Apple, our beloved fruit, nature’s root!”. We hand over an A4 paper that has drawn on it an apple and the phrase “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” and ask from the children to glue little red crepe papers over the apple and the npaint some leaves.

4. Results

For the analysis of the results, the SPSS statistical data processing software was used. Specifically, the non-parametric McNemar test was used, the results of which are presented together with the frequencies and percentages of each answer received before and after the implementation of the educational program. Below are the most important answers to the questions before and after with the most statistical significance. An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the first question, “Which of these materials do you think you can make a work of art?”. The first answer (egg shells) had a high statistical significance in the pre (Q1-A-P) and post (Q1-A-A) intervention, p= .000(Table 1).

Table 1. “Which of these materials do you think you can make a work of art?” (egg shells)

Q1-A-P	Non selected	76	68.5%	.000
	Selected	35	31.5%	
Q1-A-A	Non selected	18	16.2%	
	Selected	93	83.8%	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the second question (“Which of these foods do you think improve teeth’s and bone’s health?”. The first answer (milk products) had a great significance in the pre (Q2-A-P) and post (Q2-A-A) intervention, p= .000(Table 2).

Table 2. “Which of these foods do you think improve teeth’s and bone’s health?” (milk products)

Q2-A-P	Non selected	68	61.3	.000
	Selected	43	38.7	
Q2-A-A	Non selected	11	9.9	
	Selected	100	90.1	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the third question (“Which of the pictures do you think improve heart’s health?”. The first and second answer (TV watching and dancing) had the higher significance in the pre (Q3-A-P) and post (Q3-A-A) intervention, p= .003(Table 3), (Table 4).

Table 3. “Which of the pictures do you think improve heart’s health?” (TV watching)

Q3-A-P	Non selected	52	46.8	.003
	Selected	59	53.2	
Q3-A-A	Non selected	66	59.5	
	Selected	45	40.5	

Table 4. “Which of the pictures do you think improve heart’s health?” (dancing)

Q3-B-P	Non selected	58	52.3	.000
	Selected	53	47.7	
Q3-B-A	Non selected	11	9.9	
	Selected	100	90.1	
	Selected	84	75.7	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the fourth question (“Which of the foods do you think improves body’s health?”. The first answer (chocolate) and the second answer (vegetables) had the p= .000 significance in the pre (Q4-A-P) and post (Q4-A-A) intervention(Table 5),(Table 6).

Table 5. “Which of the foods do you think improves body’s health?” (chocolate)

Q4-A-P	Non selected	39	35.1	.000
	Selected	72	64.9	
Q4-A-A	Non selected	70	63.1	
	Selected	41	36.9	

Table 6. “Which of the foods do you think improves body’s health?” (vegetables)

Q4-B-P	Non selected	56	50.5	.000
	Selected	55	49.5	
Q4-B-A	Non selected	15	13.5	
	Selected	96	86.5	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the fifth question (“Which of the materials is the best for our salad?”). The first answer (olive oil) had the higher significance in the pre (Q5-A-P) and post (Q5-A-A) intervention, $p = .000$ (Table 7)

Table 7. “Which of the materials is the best for our salad?” (olive oil)

Q5-A-P	Non selected	25	22.5	.000
	Selected	86	77.5	
Q5-A-A	Non selected	4	3.6	
	Selected	107	96.4	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the sixth question (“How do you prefer to eat? With family, alone, or with friends?”). The second answer (alone) had the greater significance in the pre (Q6-A-P) and post (Q6-A-A) intervention, $p = .000$ (Table 8).

Table 8. How do you prefer to eat? With family, alone, or with friends?” (alone)

Q6-B-P	Non selected	60	54.1	.000
	Selected	51	45.9	
Q6-B-A	Non selected	91	82	
	Selected	20	18	

An exact McNemar's test determined that there was a statistically significant difference in the seventh question (“Which of the tree ways of moving to school is better: by can, by bicycle or on foot?”). The second answer (on foot) had the higher significance in the pre (Q7-A-P) and post (Q7-A-A) intervention, $p = .000$ (Table 9).

Table 9. “Which of the tree ways of moving to school is better: by can, by bicycle or on foot?” (on foot)

Q7-B-P	Non selected	84	75.7	.000
	Selected	27	24.3	
Q7-B-A	Non selected	27	24.3	
	Selected			

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The conducted research established the contribution and the importance of art in shaping healthy eating habits. Developing a healthy and cultivated character contributes to the adoption of good practices in the daily dietary routine of the child. The students’ proper nutrition is a guarantee for health and exercise. The findings of the study suggest that post intervention children had a more enhanced understanding of healthy foods that help body’s function, a better concern of materials we can use for fine arts instead of throwing them away, an increased appreciation of socializing with peers during lunch time and a better understanding of the healthiest ways for their body and environment to move to school. Art adds to the holistic development of the children’s personalities and form a window for the educators to see into their student’s world and to better understand their concerns, their feelings and their worries (Thomas & Mulvey, 2008). A balanced development achieved through the education gained by the engagement with art, creates well-rounded individuals. These individuals can experience to the fullest every aspect, action and habit of their everyday life and can seek health and wellness at every opportunity, and of course through their diet (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). This study has shown the importance of the contribution of arts in the well-rounded spiritual and physical development of young people, thereby underlying the responsibility of politicians for a school that doesn’t aim at acquiring stale knowledge but aims at cultivation, culture and the value of human beings.

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