**Abstract** 162 characters **Text in total** 1885 characters

**My Culture, My roots – A Community Art-project with Nordic children**

Tarja Karlsson Häikiö

Keywords: community art, art workshops, cultural identity, elementary school

*The theme of the project My Culture, My Roots was cultural identity where the participating children between 7 – 17 years old had the possibility to reflect upon their cultural roots and create meaning through art workshops about their daily life, their interests, their identity in the cross-roads of their own traditional culture and a contemporary world. The project consisted of participatory workshops with creative writing and both analogue and digital visual art work. In the art workshops the children and young people could use different kinds of creative visual methods, besides writing, like drawing, painting or using mixed-media, collage or digital media as well as taking photographs. Other children and young people, as well as other audience, were invited to visit exhibitions and learn to know more about the participating Nordic countries and share the thoughts of the children and youngsters about their cultural identity. In this way the project contributed to investigation about cultural activities and visual learning strategies of children.*

**Introduction**

My Culture, My roots was a community art-project with children and youth conducted during years 2013–2014 in compulsory schools in the arctic area of five Nordic countries; Faroe Islands/Denmark, northern Finland, Greenland/Denmark, Iceland and northern Norway. The project was funded by the Nordic Cultural Council. In total, over 100 children participated in the project for a total of 6 schools. The aim of the project was giving children and youth the opportunity to express themselves and process their cultural identity through art and writing workshops. In this way the pupils, all in elementary school, were supposed to reflect on their unique cultural affiliation and gain in-deep understanding of their specific roots, since most of the participating children either belonged to minority groups or lived in minority cultural areas. The aim was also for children from various minority cultures to get in touch with and see and read other children's art work texts, but also to give them possibility to be creative and participate in their own culture, based on the Child Rights Convention article 13. The idea was that becoming aware of one’s cultural background in an increasingly globalized world gives perspective to their own lives and can boost the self-esteem of children and young people in a time of differentiated contemporaries. Leaders of the project was an artist and art educator, but also master degree student in Cultural Sociology at the University of Tampere, Finland and a PhD in Art History and Visual Studies and visual art teacher educator at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. In this way the project was connected to, and collaboration between, visual art educational practice and research.

**Art project process and methods**

The participating schools were:

* Faeroe Islands, 1 school: 23 children of faeroese and faeroese-danish background in school year 3 (age group 9-10 years) (workshop Nov 2013, exhibition Dec 2013)
* Finland, 2 schools: 8 respectively 18 children of finnish and finnish-sàmi background, both school year 1-6 (workshop Mar 2013, exhibition Oct 2013)
* Iceland, 1 school: 19 youngsters, mostly icelandic, from several year 7-9 classes (workshop April 2013, exhibition September 2013)
* Norway, museum workshop: a small group of norwegian youngsters, school years 1-7 (workshop and exhibition, Sep 2013) (In the article the results from the workshop from Norway is not included.)
* Greenland, 1 school: 21 children of innuit and innuit-danish background from several year 1-9 classes (workshop and exhibition, Aug 2013)
* The final exhibition of the project was held at the Parliament House Library in Helsinki in Sep 2014.

The participating children were able to write texts and create images by using artistic methods based on their life-world as young citizens in their culture but also as participants in various children's cultures. The writing of their own texts about their life was based on their personal experiences. Work in the art workshops was a way to express these experiences, but also provided a basis for reflection. Subsequently, they first wrote about their everyday lives, about their interests, their hobbies and what they do with their peers, their families and other things such as what is important to them, to the culture and the place they live in. After the writing workshop the children and youngsters was offered to paint an individual artwork with acrylic paints on a white wood panel of size 35 x 27 cm. They could also work in groups on a white fabric or with other imaging techniques like collage or free drawing.

Before the workshop the children were introduced to what the project was about, why they had been selected to participate in the project and to be able to get to know who the two external leaders of the workshops were. The teachers had been contacted in beforehand and agreed to join the project. The main reason for their interest had been the possibility for their pupils to learn and create in another context and to come in contact with children’s art work from other similar cultural environments. The teachers supported the introduction, which, depending on the children's language skills, was held in English, Finnish or Swedish besides the mother tongue. At least one teacher from each school was always involved in the workshop, which however, were led by the project leaders. The teachers also helped to translate the children's texts for the exhibitions (Image 1).

Image 1. Children reading texts from their writing workshop at Greenland.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

The workshops often were two hours for two consecutive days and the exhibition of the art works and texts were arranged either in connection to the workshop-days or arranged at a later occasion in public spaces. Here the children were able to see their own and their peers' work but also works from the other participating countries and in this way get in touch with other children's experiences. The schools could also be linked to an internal project blog where the participants were able to publish their own selected photographs after the workshops. In this way the children's thoughts and cultural expressions were given voice. Parents and the public were invited to visit the exhibitions and in this way to learn to know more about the participating countries and share the thoughts of the children about their cultural identity. The exhibitions were for instance held in public spaces like the Nordic Houses at Faeroe Islands, Denmark and in Reykjavik on Iceland as well as cultural centres, as Skierri, in Enontekiö, Finland (Image 2).

Image 2. Children in Greenland looking at art works of children from Faeroe Islands and Iceland at the school exhibition. Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

**Results**

In the project the children produced approximately hundred paintings and other art works as collages and photographs. The childrens art works can be categorized in topics, some more specific for the different schools and countries like national costumes or rituals, and some more general for all the partaking pupils, as nature and natural phenomena, sport activities, animals and pets and cultural expressions. The differences in the topics between the schools can be due to differences in the introduction, the translation made by the teacher, or by other events that affected the children like group settings, peer culture, child and youth cultural influences, local special conditions as nature and geographical surroundings, media surveillance, school thematics and practice as well as curriculum content etc. Still, the instructions given in the workshops were very similar in every country the children’s own interests were emphasized to have importance by the project leaders.

In Faeroe Islands typical topics were animals like birds and sheep, boats and fishing, houses, the sea, the national flag and peace (Image 3), but also favorite food like hamburgers (Image 4).

Image 3. Paintings from workshop on Faeroe Islands.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

Image 4. Painting of favorite food at Faeroe Islands.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

The children discussed that they are privileged because that Faroe Islands are not at war, because they do not have so much crime, because they have access to water and electricity, food, clothing, health care in form of hospitals and medicines. They also talked about different kinds of natural disasters and storms that are common on the Islands. In the Finnish schools the children chose to depict topics as nature and natural phenomena like fall colors in the mountains, but also sport activities as skiing, snowboarding or racing with scooters. Several children focused on trying to capture the flow of the northern lights (Image 5).

Image 5. Painting the flow of the northern lights in Finland.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

Other common topics were animals and the retention of cows, sheep and especially reindeers. Some of the children had their own reindeers and depicted and talked a lot about how they took care of them and an upcoming reindeer race soon taking place. On Greenland the group was more mixed both in age and nationalities with children born in other countries such as Denmark, the Faroe Islands, England, Australia and Thailand. Animals like crows, deer, polar bears, whales – animals that are common on Greenland – and pets, different national flags or costumes (Image 6), sport activities as snowboarding and swimming are some of the favored topics here.

Image 6. A child documenting a painting with national costume, Greenland.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

On Iceland the school has experience of cooperation with other countries and the pupils were accustomed to cultural exchange in visual arts. The pupils seem to choose motives that were particularly Icelandic and also representative of Iceland on a symbolic level. Typical topics among the youngsters were nature and natural phenomena like mountains, northern lights, vulcanos, waterfalls, but also flowers, Icelandics (small horses), lakes and images from sport or advertising like fotball logotypes, snowboarding (Image 7) or the yoghurt Skyr. (More can be read about the results from the project in Karlsson Häikiö, 2014 pp. 38-39).

Image 7. Snowboarding on Iceland.

Photograph: T. K. Häikiö, 2013.

**Conclusion**

The children from different nationalities and cultures were given possibility to reflect on their lives, identities, culture through the production of both linguistic and visual narratives. Many of the partaking schools were situated in minority cultural and thus multicultural contexts. Many of the children, as sàmi and innuit children, are in a social situation where they are captured in between preserving the richness of their traditions as a source of surviving, and an increasing secularization of the society they live in. The community art-project aimed at creating knowledge between children in the arctic parts of the Northern countries and to contribute to, and increase, the recognition of cultural diversity. An overall aim of the project were giving children and youth the opportunity to work with their conception of their cultural identity and in this way empowering children’s awareness and agency through creating conversations about children’s art work. In this way the project also highlighted school as a part of the active community and as a civic arena: a meeting place and generator of dialogue and participation.

**References**

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