

*Weaving the Social Engagement of Students Through Art Practices:
In the Wake of Project CARE/SS*

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Abstract

The EU-funded research project CARE/SS aimed to develop innovative online and blended courses for educating teachers in the arts. The project's objective was to empower teachers with critical pedagogy and sustainable development principles, enabling them to address contemporary social challenges effectively. According to the research findings discussed in this paper, integrating socially engaged art practices into the curriculum can positively impact students' social development, creativity, critical thinking, character education, and social justice. The project focuses on the social engagement of students through art practices, highlighting that art education is a multifaceted approach to promoting creativity, critical thinking, and community engagement. Through specific implementations and their reflective outcomes, this paper delves into mapping and analysing the multiple ways teachers and students used to explore, interpret, communicate, collaborate, and participate in social and political action, contributing to a more empathetic and democratic society. Furthermore, it addresses opportunities and critical challenges generalist teachers have to deal with to enhance students' artistic skills and foster teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills essential for social engagement. Overall, this research offers valuable insights into how art education can enhance students' social development and promote social sustainability. Socially engaged arts allow students to express themselves creatively, actively address social issues, and promote positive community change.

Keywords: Arts Education, Socially Engaged Arts, Sustainability, Blended Learning, Social Awareness

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Introduction – The Concept

Art education uniquely fosters a specific set of thinking skills not adequately addressed elsewhere in the curriculum. It provides children with a broad education that includes the arts, and the continued development of our society depends upon a creative education. This unique role of art education in fostering critical thinking and creativity is not just crucial, but it is the cornerstone for the continued development of our society.

Engaging students through art practices can be a powerful tool for fostering social awareness and emotional growth. By integrating arts into education and providing a platform for students to express themselves creatively and meaningfully, students can develop a deeper connection with social issues and enhance their social-emotional competencies (Casciano, Cherfas, & Jobson-Ahmed, 2019; Huhmarniemi, 2023). Through collaborative and community-based art projects, students can address pressing real-life social issues and create impactful interventions in public spaces, fostering a sense of social responsibility and community engagement (Song, 2024). A prerequisite for such an educational policy and action is the practical admission that arts education is crucial in providing students with supportive learning environments that enhance school engagement and relationships, ultimately contributing to a positive school climate (Bowen & Kisida, 2023). By incorporating arts into education, students can explore, interpret, and communicate ideas, collaborate with others, and engage in social and political actions, empowering them to become critical community citizens (Maloy & Thomson, 2023).

Recognising the unique benefits of socially engaged arts (SEA) in educational settings, documented through a growing body of research, case studies, and action programmes, is crucial for enhancing students' social engagement through art practices. Meyer and Wood (2019) stress the importance of nurturing socially engaged leadership among art teachers through service learning, which can encourage student reflection and action toward becoming educational leaders. Socially Engaged Arts provide a distinct platform for students to participate in democratic processes and actively cultivate empathy within society. Students can better understand civic responsibility and community involvement by incorporating art practices emphasising social engagement. Moreover, integrating socially engaged art in education can help bridge communities and drive social change. Bergaust (2020) discusses how the pedagogical perspectives in Education for Socially Engaged Art contribute to enhancing the social aspects of art practices, emphasising art's role in connecting individuals and fostering collaborative efforts for societal betterment. This collaborative aspect of socially engaged practices focuses on promoting constructive social change rather than commercial or object-based outcomes, aligning to foster social engagement among students through art. In the same line of thinking, Kpodo (2024) stresses the importance of visual arts education in fostering creativity, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among students, essential elements for promoting social engagement through art practices.

Integrating art into education allows students to explore their identities, develop innovative projects, and embrace diversity in higher education settings. In the context of inclusive education, arts integration has been identified as a valuable approach to meeting the diverse needs of students. In that context, Koch and Thompson (2017) highlight additionally the importance of providing support to teachers in integrating arts into instruction for students with disabilities, emphasising the role of arts integration in creating inclusive learning environments.

The transformative power of socially engaged arts in weaving the social engagement of students is not just a multifaceted and enriching approach but a beacon of hope. It fosters creativity, critical thinking, and community involvement among learners. With their philosophy of engendering social bonds and providing spaces for creative/imaginative communications, socially engaged arts have the potential to transform contemporary society.

Amidst economic and geopolitical turmoil and the pandemic crisis, the value of art and culture for society was transformed from indistinguishable in words to vital in practice. In the face of scepticism, creators and advocates, including art teachers, are tirelessly highlighting their social awareness. The European-funded CARE/SS project¹, a unique and innovative initiative, was born to meet this need and tackle the challenge of integrating new technologies in arts education. By merging Art Education with Socially Engaged Arts, this project took a significant step in addressing the challenges of our times.

Education research projects (Hetland & Winner, 2000; Ioannidou, 2022) have shown that incorporating art practices into the curriculum can positively impact students' and teachers' social development and overall performance, i.e. higher levels of empathy, tolerance, and social skills than those who do not engage in such activities. This outcome suggests that art practices can help all involved in education better understand themselves and others, leading to more meaningful social interactions. Artistic pedagogy opens spaces for dialogue in social contexts based on artistic and pedagogical practices, considered elements in constructing an ordinary world (Helguera, 2011). Socially engaged arts are known for bringing together people from all social strata and ages, attempting to create intersections and uncover solutions. An overarching conclusion from most case studies and research is that teachers, as critical facilitators, should engage in formative activities that enhance imagination, facilitate unexpected connections and empower teachers and students to recognise the potential of the arts to address their concerns. Encouraging experiences that challenge and simultaneously resonate with societal realities to bring them to light or provoke critical examination is not typically a focal point in education faculties or school curricula. Educators are responsible for ameliorating the prevailing notion that art education in primary schools lacks emphasis as a cultural and social entity. On one hand, art teachers must act as intermediaries, facilitating a cohesive connection between the individual and the prescribed curriculum. On the other hand, the curriculum should encompass a social context and relevance to the students' lives. This fact is the fundamental gap that CARE/SS came to fill.

The third deliverable of the CARE/SS project (PR3) evaluated local teacher training programmes based on innovative educational practices emerging through mainly blended and, in some cases, online learning and a transdisciplinary approach to socially engaged art education. In practice, the discipline of Arts education for teachers and their students offers an excellent opportunity for such a critical pedagogical approach to the curriculum and the holistic cultivation of teachers, students, and the broader community. Even when designing the project, we believed that implementing evidence-based social engagement interventions, especially for students, presents challenges in school settings, requiring a shift in policies and programme delivery. The arts-based participatory approaches attempted in training, microteaching, and implementations, which have yet to be systematically adapted to curriculums, hold the potential to validate student voices and address socio-political issues, thereby engaging students in critical citizenship and social justice. Due to their relatively

¹ Erasmus+, KA2: Strategic Partnerships for higher education, KA220-HED - Cooperation partnerships in higher education. <https://care-ss.frederick.ac.cy/>

vague messages, such arts-based social practices have faced educational challenges for years. However, the CARE/SS project used blended/online learning and new technologies to create inclusive learning environments and artistic practices where every voice is heard and valued. The aim was to empower individuals to engage with societal issues and contribute to positive change. Following the Guide-eBook2 (Vella, 2024) for reflection and action, teachers and students engaged with contemporary social issues around sustainable development and systematised in the programme's Guide within the Big Ideas framework. The notion of 'big ideas' is loosely based on Wiggins and McTighe (2011), who explain that understanding –in contrast to rote learning– is based on grasping broad principles or core concepts rather than multiple, 'smaller' bits of information and formulas. Understanding these more profound principles permits learners to apply their understanding to new situations. This emphasis on depth, rather than breadth, is reflected in the decision to focus on five concepts (i.e. *Public space, Respecting diversity, Sharing Knowledge, Collaborative Processes, and Transforming the world*) that are so relevant to socially engaged arts that they can easily be expanded and transferred from one discipline to another. This strategy allows these ideas to guide educators to reflect on, develop, and implement effective teaching and learning methods at different levels of the educational system.

Integrating socially engaged arts into the various local teacher training programmes proved crucial for preparing educators to create socially inclusive and environmentally conscious learning environments. What was new in these expressions of social value was that they were presented as rooted in solidarity rather than a political imperative. Educational spaces transformed into providers of community solidarity through the arts, and trainers and trainees became spokespersons for a social shift on critical issues of community, public life, equal living, and others, with the impetus to seek a solution through the arts. Suppose the CARE/SS project takes root as a practice in all educational institutions and levels. In that case, this shift towards solidarity may profoundly impact the understanding of culture as a public value.

Aims and Objectives of Training Courses and Implementation Activities

CARESS's groundbreaking initiative pioneers a comprehensive approach to meeting two critical global needs. It centres on fostering digital preparedness, adaptability, and proficiency within the education of both educators and organisations engaged in arts and cultural education and advocacy. Moreover, it aspires to deliver high-quality arts education that is intertwined with real-life issues, promoting vital skills such as critical and innovative thinking, social and intercultural competence, and active citizenship. Furthermore, it endeavours to enrich the capabilities of educators and organisations involved in arts and sustainable development education.

The five countries implemented interventions (training courses, seminars, workshops) in which the teaching methodologies of 'the socially engaged art education' framework had been developed, starting in February 2023 and extending till January 2024. The recruitment of trainees/teachers depended on each partner's accessibility to these teachers' groups. Contacts with diverse actors, such as schools, teachers' associations, and educational authorities, occurred in various ways and mixed media according to schedule. The project demonstrated adaptability by making local adjustments to match the programme's timetable with the in-service teachers' schedule. The university semesters set the periods for the partners whose courses were aimed at pre-service teachers. Also, each partner identified the number and type of courses within their programmes of study adapted to the project's needs (blended learning).

The initial numbers of training courses, trainees, and activities (blended, microteaching, implementations) have not just met but exceeded the initial minimum goal of seven local teacher training courses by a significant margin, giving an impressive amount for the time PR3 has been running. In fact, twelve blended or online courses were delivered for in-service and pre-service teachers, a testament to the project's success and the dedication of all involved. The anticipated participation to involve 100 teachers (approx. 20-25 per country) was far exceeded, reaching the quadruple number of 413 in- and pre-service generalist teachers, with minimal participation of arts-oriented teachers. Most of the participants were acquainted with the essential concepts required for the project's success, which included Collaborative processes, Inclusion/Diversity, Public space, and Social involvement. However, the level of digital skills amongst the trainees varied among the partner countries, with most having only basic skills. Although they could perform satisfactorily, they needed further familiarity with more arts-specific applications.

All partner universities have successfully developed training sessions according to the guidelines provided by the Training Guide. The average duration of each training course was estimated to be approximately 40 hours, including face-to-face meetings, museum/cultural visits, workshops, synchronous online meetings, and asynchronous activities, which are optional and compulsory on educational platforms.

The participants were tasked with grasping the theoretical framework and, even more challenging, establishing the connection between theory and practice. Art played a crucial role in this process and was harnessed to facilitate the comprehension and mastery of theory when putting the taught concepts into practice. After all, this suits the concept that art is not merely an accessory but a valuable primary resource, serving as an additional language of communication beyond restrictive linguistic conventions, enabling a more universal and direct understanding of concepts. Consistent with the original project design and philosophy, trainers focused on multimodality, interdisciplinarity, participation, experiential learning, and collaborative teaching processes by involving the department in nearly every lesson and several hands-on activities.

Participants had the opportunity to delve deeper into the course content using two rich online resources, the CARE-full and eLearning platforms of AUTH, where they had access to ample relevant material. They also engaged in various artistic processes, experimented with different digital media, and explored artistic forms and practices to promote critical and dynamic teaching and learning processes in any educational context. Trainers aimed to cultivate a learning culture where participants felt safe and willing to engage, collaborate, express themselves, provide and receive feedback, and reflect, ultimately returning to the classroom with expanded knowledge and a desire for new explorations and achievements.

The entire course process provided an unprecedented experience of interaction, meaningful communication, and collective action with all group members. An overwhelming majority (approximately 90%) of participants and attendees expressed enjoyment of the learning process and identified its strengths. The essential elements were highlighted as the departure from the typical teacher-centred approach and the invitation for active group or individual work involvement. The variety of art forms was also appreciated. Further, participants acknowledged the role of art in their active engagement in the course, recognising that their involvement facilitated retention and made learning more memorable. They appreciated the freedom and creativity fostered by emphasising the process rather than the result. Active involvement in experiential activities was met with enthusiasm. Collaborations in the purely

experiential sessions liberated students who had hesitated to communicate in larger groups and encouraged impressive results. Additionally, trainers and trainees utilised their digital technology knowledge to contribute to the Padlets, Canvases, and other applications created for the course, sharing short stories, poems, and various narratives.

The projects at the end demonstrated their ability to translate theory into practice by establishing a learning environment that promotes participation, collaboration, and creativity through art and digital technology.

The final assignments required them to design an intervention in an elementary school classroom using one of the strategy cards in eBook 2 as a model. Their teaching scenarios were based on the big ideas. Their projects needed to outline the rationale, objectives, steps for implementing the activities, and the necessary means and materials. Each project also contained a narrative message for the audience and concluded with a group reflection.

One example is briefly described to illustrate the overall project. This teaching scenario was based on the concept of *Collaborative Processes*, offering four categories of partnerships with a wide variety of activities proposed by the group:

1. A collaboration between first and sixth-grade classes using music as a medium. The children from the two classes learn and sing a traditional continental song together ("The Bitter Laurel Flower"). The song is then orchestrated for better timing, after which the children arrange it in rap or another genre they agree upon, blending tradition with modern musical trends.
2. An intergenerational collaboration between 6th-grade children and members of the neighbourhood Open Care Centre for the Elderly (KAPI). The aim is to exchange knowledge about how children play today and how they played generations ago. They discuss values such as respect and kindness in play and the materials used in group and individual games then and now. The group explores whether play materials affect children's entertainment and behaviour during play.
3. Cooperation between the sixth grade of a school in Thessaloniki (Greece) and the sixth grade of the Intercultural School of Thrace. Children with diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences engage in teamwork activities to create an intercultural collage and game, promoting a more profound understanding and respect for differences while strengthening their identities. This also enhances children's technical skills using advanced digital collaborative tools such as Padlet and Wordwall for digital literacy. Their art-based postings (pictures, drawings, texts, songs) aid in self-expression and creative engagement, especially for students underrepresented in traditional teaching.
4. Collaboration between a 6th-grade school and the inclusive theatre group "En Dynamei," comprising artists with and without disabilities who integrate the "unlikely," "strange," "different," and "foreign" into their art and life, promoting empowerment. The group and the children meet at school, get to know each other, form mixed groups, and rewrite traditional fairy tales from the perspective of a character, breaking down stereotypes usually found in these tales. Finally, they perform their adaptations for the entire school.

This group aligns with the programme's goals by emphasising collaborations and using diverse art forms to create inclusive communities, fostering intercultural dialogue, and promoting respect and acceptance of diversity.

To assess whether and to what extent CARE/SS' theoretical goals are achieved, the partner universities carried out the research by using quantitative and qualitative methods. The scientific team of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki was responsible for the preparation/ development of the monitoring and evaluation tools for the teacher training courses. All partners adopted the developed and agreed protocol for the PR3. The tools, including a Table for data collection (Trainees), are adapted to the specificities of each TTP, an overall Evaluation Questionnaire, and a final assessment phase with three feedback questions for personal interviews. Data were collected mainly through qualitative research tools due to the number of attending teachers and the need to gather data that will probe deeply into the courses' effectiveness.

Furthermore, each partner submitted a country report based on a standard template, concisely describing the local programme and analysing the data collected. The training courses were conducted and assessed to promote evidence-based reforms to deliver quality education, competency transfer, and practical training. Trainees were required to collaborate and implement aspects of their learning in schools (micro-teaching for pre-service teachers or implementation of small arts education units by in-service teachers), attempting to bridge theory regarding socially engaged arts into practice.

eBook 3 (Ioannidou, 2024) provides comprehensive case studies of teacher education courses developed by all partners and the outcomes of their implementation. These case studies are valuable for future research, particularly in integrating similar strategies into curricula and European educational policies. Each country/partner university contributes chapters delineating the aims and scopes of the training, exemplary activities, and the application of micro-teaching or short arts units in schools, shedding light on various aspects of the training. eBook 3 allows readers to explore 15 activities (3 per country) and 25 applications (5 per country).

All country reports also include analyses of the questionnaires and interviews to capture the appropriateness and relevance of teacher training according to trainers and trainees. The individual qualitative reflections, complemented by the participants' comments and the trainers' conclusions, complete the country reports. An assessment tool (AT) was created for the quantitative part, which is composed of the following dimensions/constructs. The four dimensions of the AT include a. Satisfaction of participants' expectations and aspirations, b. Domains of contribution, c. Conceptions of usefulness, d. The usefulness of digital media arts as a teaching method. In all countries, results obtained from qualitative interviews pointed out that participant trainees acknowledged the importance of promoting the philosophy of the Critically Engaged Arts as a promising and effective curriculum framework in schools and other educational and cultural entities. Finally, eBook 3 highlights the methodology, advantages, challenges, flexibility, and value of the transformative pedagogical framework for online or blended learning implemented in arts education by adopting the socially engaged arts philosophy in the context of critical pedagogy. It concludes with a general assessment of the training courses' critical findings that stress essential issues while offering ideas for further research and improvement suggestions.

Detailed and very useful not only for the development of research in this field but also for their practical application through examples and good practices are the other four eBooks²

² <https://care-ss.frederick.ac.cy/index.php/resources/project-results-e-books>

that highlight the importance of weaving social engagement through art practices in education. In particular, eBook 1 discusses the current educational challenges in European countries. eBook 2 provides a comprehensive guide for contemplation and action, outlining the theoretical framework, practical strategies, and exemplary practices developed by the partners in their training programs and courses. eBook 4 explores the cultivation of professional communities among the participants and the broader community, analysing the dynamics of the arts and their impact on society. eBook 5 covers the theoretical foundations for educators on various concepts and issues in socially engaged arts, critical arts education, and sustainability. It also offers numerous detailed examples of teaching and social engagement through the arts in educational institutions.

Concluding Remarks

Several common issues emerged from all five countries' research reports. These demonstrate the widespread impact of training courses as both a process and an opportunity for igniting creative dialogues concerning the diverse ways the arts may significantly contribute to major social issues. When considered as points of critical dialogue, such courses can activate students at all levels of education.

This pioneering initiative, executed through training programmes implemented in five participating countries and universities, involved participants in exploring the role of arts in contemporary society and education. By employing a diverse range of pedagogical techniques, including the extensive use of new technologies and digital applications, the participants were able to engage in meaningful discussions surrounding this critical theme. Additionally, the participants were incentivised to produce creative artistic works, allowing them to showcase their unique talents and imagination.

The teacher training programmes' results and subsequent research and evaluation provide compelling evidence supporting the adoption of this educational approach in daily teaching practice.

During their training, pre-and in-service teachers were offered the opportunity to explore creative and innovative ways of utilising digital educational content. The assessment projects they presented highlighted the positive impact of the CARE/SS project on their personal growth and professional development, as well as their knowledge of social and artistic issues and their newly acquired methodological skills in teaching. During the interviews, they spoke of gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons and the ways to connect arts with critical social issues and how this awareness could make them more responsive to social, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Armed with this knowledge, they could develop arts units focused on broader sustainable development goals, civic engagement, and participation while embracing common values.

The trainees were exposed to socially engaged arts examples to help them understand the relevance of the work of contemporary artists who focus on issues of social change, collaboration, and justice. Implementation in schools or microteaching and workshops at the partner universities, with the aid of the "*arts in the box*" package, considerably enhanced the quality and experiential aspect of their training. The project's impact and transferability were advanced by equipping trainees with the skills necessary to serve as agents of change with a multiplier effect. By doing so, the project's influence was extended to their respective cohorts and students.

The project faced several challenges, including time constraints and a blended audience that included in-service, pre-service, generalist, and art teachers with varying levels of familiarity with the subject. Despite the success, some partners encountered difficulties related to permits and face-to-face participation, while others had large numbers of participants who were immobile. Additionally, obtaining official permissions proved to be time-consuming and, in some cases, prohibitive to developing the applications as planned in the project. Furthermore, there was a need for more time for deeper reflection, with interludes between presentation, preparation, exercise, and feedback. Finally, concerns were raised about whether the programme emphasised digital applications and methods of familiarisation with the arts more than the substance of the SEA theme.

Despite these challenges, the project achieved several accomplishments. It received a warm reception, and trainees actively participated in the program. There was good interaction between trainees, and they used digital applications satisfactorily. Furthermore, local socially engaged art projects demonstrated the construction of students' voices and subjectivity through creative collaboration, highlighting the potential of the arts to engage students in meaningful ways critically. Moreover, there was an interest in further training, particularly concerning socially engaged arts and collaborative art practices.

In the light of Critical pedagogy, it is evident that should encourage the development of critical thinking skills. Art enables individuals to critically assess reality and take a stance against it by prompting aesthetic judgments. Art articulates the objective and universal aspects of human experience through the subjective and individual, profoundly contributing to the critical understanding of social realities, human relationships, and the distinct issues and challenges therein.

The selection of artworks goes beyond engaging the senses; it aims to evoke deep emotions and feelings among participants. By nurturing these emotions, art could mould the individual's personality, fostering a profound sense of empathy and emotional connectivity among trainees and trainers. After all, emotion in art is not a mere existence for its own sake but a powerful tool that strives to divert attention from individual trivialities and daily habits towards pivotal human concerns, fostering a sense of shared humanity.

Implementing CARE/SS art actions provided a powerful platform for engaging with essential aspects of human existence. As Brecht succinctly noted, these artistic collaborations sparked deep contemplation and prompted reflection on everyday life. Socially Engaged art, as facilitated through the CARE/SS training and implementations, served as a beacon of hope, bolstering individuals' confidence while playing a pivotal role in supporting social causes. It also raised awareness about the significance of social, emotional, and artistic (SEA) development and emotionally conveyed its ideals and objectives.

In this context, the CARE/SS project integrated art and creativity into the curriculum, significantly and positively impacting participants' social and emotional development. The local training programs enhanced participants' artistic skills and promoted teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities crucial for social engagement. These hands-on experiences inspired future and in-service teachers to engage with others, contribute to their community, and educate their students to become analytical and critical thinkers capable of examining their life circumstances and broadening their perspectives on social equality. These collaborative art practices notably contribute to character education and the promotion

of social justice, facilitating emotional and physical reconnection among community members (Gingrich & Choudhrey, 2021; Ioannidou & Mitakidou, 2022).

In conclusion, fostering the social engagement of students through art practices involves harnessing the transformative power of socially engaged arts, nurturing leadership through service learning, bridging communities through collaborative art practices, and promoting inclusivity through arts integration in education. Hence, critical art education can act as a catalyst for social change, personal development, and inclusive learning environments.

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