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# A School without Art

**Marco Pitzalis**

In its broadest sense, artistic activity is given a different space in Italian schools according to their grade level and school tracks (note: vocational or general secondary school). This article will reflect on socialisation models, the organisation of spaces and time in education and training, bodies and emotions, prevailing pedagogical models, and professional ideologies in Italian schools.

I will use the concept of ‘artistic expression’ to refer to any form of symbolic activity that takes shape through the body, involves manipulating and using materials, and aims to give an expressive form to cognitive and/or emotional factors. I will show how this concept interrelates with image and art education objectives within the school curriculum. Furthermore, how this is linked to the process of socialisation in the school and the professional culture of teachers.

The particular place that art education holds within the school curriculum is associated with the child’s age and, naturally, the grade level of the school. Although this is a well-noted, common-sense fact, it is not a trivial one. It allows us a greater understanding of certain aspects of school life and why the idea of a constructivist pedagogy has difficulty taking root, especially in the higher levels of schooling.

**1.** Pre-school is characterised by a didactic programme that focuses on enhancing the expressive and creative dimension. This expressive dimension concerns not only the teaching activities but also school life in all its aspects, impacting the walled structures, spaces and the structuring of time. The walled structures

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are where the children's drawings and the teachers' work give shape and colour to the school classroom. The walls must be conquered, and the children take possession of them with their artworks. The classroom structure, with regard to the layout of the furniture, constantly changes, adapting to the activities and permitting the continuous mobility of the players.

How spaces are used also differs from other school levels. General use rooms and outdoor areas are often utilised for collective activities needing open space. In the absence of different spaces such as gyms or conference rooms, collective activities may occur in the school hall. While courtyard recreational activity may become organised play, for example, by using the garden for activities integrated with the curriculum (composting, gardening, building vegetable gardens, etc.).

In pre-school, the way that time is structured in school life does not differ in macro terms from that of other school levels. Here too, there is school time and non-school time. However, compared to different school levels, the organisation of daily time is porous. For example, the children's entry and exit times are more flexible. This porosity and this flexibility allow greater parent inclusion and participation and the planning of activities that mark school life every year according to a calendar of socially significant events (Christmas, carnival, the end-of-year play). These events are consequently intertwined with the school and make the pre-school a school open to the world.

These planned activities are often linked to forms of artistic production and expression that bring the teacher and the child into play in a complex and comprehensive way in the shared space of the performance, exhibition, and presentation. The teacher's body and the pupil's body are central to the expressive dynamics of classroom life.

The emotional, 'erotic' and muscular aspects of classroom life are not negated but are cultivated and become part of the process: affection is *required* as a correct and socially accepted interaction modality.

In this school universe, matter (materials), its manipulation, a relationship with objects, and artistic-expressive skills are sought after as requisites for developing transversal competencies and as preconditions for acquiring more advanced technical skills (writing). Singing, drawing and painting, drama, and dance are, in fact, integral parts of daily life and pedagogical planning. On entering a kindergarten classroom, you may well observe teachers and pupils intent on manipulating different types of materials to perform collective activi-

ties that require the constant, active and cooperative participation of all players. Indeed, if you wish to see an interactive constructivist education, you should choose a pre-school. This particular characteristic is due to the meeting of two fundamental elements: a teaching staff with adequate psycho-pedagogical training and a solid motivational drive (Pitzalis *et al.*, 2016), and a request on the family's side (mainly middle class), for whom the education of the child has become not only a crucial but also a dramatic moment due to their emotional investment. These *elements* oscillate between a double conceptualisation of childhood (Pitzalis and Spanò, 2021). On the one hand, childhood is seen as in need of protection from the potential danger posed by adults (an element that leads parents to exercise substantial control over teachers and school staff); on the other hand, childhood is seen as a developmental moment to be accompanied by adults who must then provide appropriate stimuli to activate the child's infinite potential thus allowing a maximum openness to the world. This ideology of childhood can be found in the 2012 national education guidelines<sup>1</sup>, which state that 'pre-school is a protective environment, capable of welcoming diversity and developing the potential of all children who between the ages of three and six express a great wealth of needs and emotions, who are ready to encounter and experiment with new languages'. Therefore, it seems that there is a strong convergence between professional teaching cultures and practices, the parents' point of view and the philosophy of ministerial guidelines.

**2.** The primary school experience is a turning point in the child's educational path and marks the entry into the 'real' school (at least as perceived by parents and teachers at this level of school). The child's requirement to adapt to school regulations can no longer be waived. From this moment on, the adjectives 'schooled' or 'unschooled' enter the school classification system to indicate the entirely successful – or *unsuccessful* – institutionalisation of the child, *as understood* by Goffman to demonstrate the acquisition of a correct institutional habitus (Tarabini *et al.*, 2017).

The primary school years see rapid evolution in teaching style. In the early years, this continues to be shaped by an expressive and affective modality. In contrast, the last two years of primary school are characterised by a more deci-

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.indicazioninazionali.it/wpcontent/uploads/2018/08/Indicazioni\\_Annali\\_Definitivo.pdf](http://www.indicazioninazionali.it/wpcontent/uploads/2018/08/Indicazioni_Annali_Definitivo.pdf)

sive assertion of a social and psychological distance between teacher and pupil. At the same time, the class becomes a collective actor and builds its dynamic in its relationship with the teachers. At this time, the tendency to place order and control at the heart of the school system increases.

In primary school, 'art and image' apparently has a central role, being an integral part of the so-called vertical curriculum that designs the pupil's entire educational pathway comprising the development of a set of cognitive and relational competencies. The 2012 and 2018 national primary school guidelines attribute a 'connective' function to art education throughout the entire curriculum, in which an ideological and political matrix emerges, of which it is worth emphasising at least one aspect – for the purpose of this reflection – summarised in these words: «the idea of a *complete* human being able to concentrate, in the singularity of the personal microcosm, the multiple aspects of the human macrocosm». A central role is attributed to expressive and artistic activities in the document. In contrast, the idea is introduced that it will have to make way, progressively, to 'real' knowledge.

In primary school, the space given to artistic expression is, in fact, subject to progressive marginalisation. It is unlikely to be part of an independent educational project, but instead, it is side-lined to other activities, such as an illustration activity. Most importantly, the body is regimented – outdoor spaces are barred, movement within the classroom is limited, and the body is, in general, an object of control. The muscular dimension is banished and stigmatised. Emotionality is limited. Access to space outside the classroom is limited and rigidly controlled. It is rarely included in the school areas that can be used. Space also becomes less porous compared to the pre-school experience. The space-time system is rigid, and parents no longer have citizenship within the school or the opportunity to be in the school space during school hours. Parents' participation becomes gradually limited or excluded, except as spectators of performing activities. These performative activities are moments of drama in school life in that the implicit tensions of both school life and the system of intersubjective interactions are dramatized. It would be interesting to make *these tensions* the subject of a research project to shed light on the complex dynamics of this process. An 'artistic' performance in public (for example, the end-of-year play) involves the audience and the passing of a judgement that may impact the teachers themselves, creating tensions that could cause the pedagogical purpose of these activities to be lost.

However, on the whole, there is a tendency in primary schools to maintain a minimum degree of openness to artistic expression, even if it often ends up being subordinated to the 'serious' curriculum and its objectives of the transmission of knowledge.

**3.** In the secondary school, as we have shown elsewhere (Pitzalis *et al.*, 2016), the professional teaching culture focuses on 'discipline' in a dual sense: the centrality of the subject taught and the school programme, and also the maintenance of order. Indeed, the school holds firm to the objectives of moral, behavioural and logical education and a conception of teaching that, despite the emphasis placed on transversal skills, remains centred on the transmission of knowledge and summative assessment. 'Seriousness' gains the upper hand in the lower secondary school, and artistic expression is confined to drawing and music lessons. As the 'medial' school between the primary and the upper secondary, this level of school is the moment when the emotional dimension becomes the object of strict control and self-control, and the teacher-pupil relationship is definitively transformed into a 'professional' one through the radical exclusion of the affective dimension. The body becomes the object of tighter control, and movement becomes restricted.

These elements are confirmed and radicalised in the upper secondary school. Here, the approach to art becomes fundamentally of a historical and notional nature and translates in high schools into acquiring what is considered to be knowledge of a high level of historical-artistic culture. Spaces close up, and times flow only according to an established order. The body is now regimented and has few possibilities of expression, continually exposed to a negative evaluation of conduct. Artistic expression is confined to one type of school – the Artistic high school section – while 'serious' schools, art can be no more than art history or technical design.

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