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Supporting Key Competences in 6th Grade Art Classes Using an Empathy-Centred Approach

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Abstract

This study focuses on supporting the key competences of 6th graders using an empathy-centred approach in visual art classes. The research represents the third cycle of pedagogical action research conducted during a 35-academic-hour course with 70 middle school students aged 12–13 in an Estonian comprehensive school. The data were collected through a research journal, participant art journals, course feedback forms, and artworks analysed inductively. The findings indicate that the students recognised and acquired visual art strategies for expressing and dealing with different emotions. Some indications of helping behaviour were also detected. From the teacher-researcher point of view, the key competence framework encouraged the reimagining of the art learning process and helped to recognise and acknowledge students with different skill sets.

Introduction

The overarching aim for this action research was to determine how key competences could manifest and be emphasised in the comprehensive school art class. In this cycle, the aim was to explore the interplay between the intent to support the development of key competences and empathy.

Adolescence is a time when the social and emotional landscape of an individual's life is rapidly changing. Furthermore, it has been described as a major transitional period as changes take place on physical and psychological scales as well as socially and contextually (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Steinberg (2005) emphasises adolescence as a phase of vulnerability and formation that has far-reaching implications. Adolescents are expected to gradually develop and internalise abstract social and moral principles that form pro-social and responsible behaviours (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hoffman, 2001). However, research results vary on how pro-social behaviour develops and changes within the adolescent phase (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Overarching tendencies have been described as increasing perspective-taking ability, whereas personal distress decreases over time as the individual reaches adulthood (Davis & Franzoi, 1991).

Art creation is based on reflection and dialogue with the visual world, culture, and individual experiences. The postmodern era emphasises interactions and reciprocal influence in art learning (Wilson, 2007). The dialogical pedagogy approach challenges the idea of knowledge transfer (Haase, 2019). Collins (2002) stresses the need to encourage a mutually self-reflective dialogue within student-teacher interactions to encourage creative thinking.

Many authors (e.g., Bland, 2005; Collins, 2002; Stout, 1993) have emphasised the importance of reflective practices engaged in art creation as the driving force behind creative thinking. Reflective habit is also an integral part of bridging the gap between procedural and declarative knowledge, which in turn facilitates effective learning (Beittel, 1979; Pressley & Harris, 2009). Furthermore, a “good” art teacher has been described as a conversationalist, who can “experience and respond to a wide array of meanings, many of them nonverbal” (Eisner, 2017, p 30). The ability to remain focused and concentrate on what is being said and what needs to be heard is a key element of being effective in the art of conversation. Therefore, the ability to take a step back and reflect is equally important for the teacher and the student (Eisner, 2017). The relational foundation of teaching forms a basis for learning (Hammond, 2014), and makes it possible for students and teachers to relate to each other and, together, relate to meanings emerging from engaging with art.

Creating art and viewing art help to make and bring meaning to lived experiences and support the growth of empathy (Riddett-Moore, 2011). The deliberate use of disruption in art

classrooms to encourage students to reinvent their understanding and themselves can serve as a vehicle for exploring and developing empathy. This can manifest itself in working with art materials or engaging in reflective practices (e.g., writings and discussions). Being willing to explore and accept new versions of knowing does not come without resistance and this may even manifest itself as defiance in a learning situation. Riddett-Moore (2011) emphasises that in order to support reconstructive thinking, art creation should allow students to explore a theme with the help of art, rather than using art mediums as a means for representing objects. There is a strong connection with inviting play to the classroom as play encompasses the power of being absorbed in an activity and exploration. In supporting empathy, Riddett-Moore (2011) states that encouraging experiential aspects in art creation can have more effect than directly discussing empathic strategies with students.

Visual Art Education in the Estonian Educational Context

Visual art as a subject has undergone many shifts and changes from a technical and crafts-centred tradition to a more expressive and communicative discipline. Approaches in art education in the 21st century emphasise more reflective, critical, and contextual aspects of art viewing and making (Karlsson, 2022; Räsänen, 2008). A larger shift in the Estonian Art Syllabus took place with the changes to the National Curriculum in 2011. In March 2023, a new revised National Curriculum and Art Syllabus were implemented and introduced. The underlying basis and key ideas, such as output-based education, learner-centredness, an integrated approach, and supporting competence development remain in the revised curriculum.

The Estonian National Core Curriculum (2011 and 2023) states that key competences are the overarching competences, which are important for growing as a person and a citizen and key competences should develop through all subjects. The Art Syllabus (2011) gives a brief overview of how key competences can manifest in art classes. The supporting study material on key competences (Üldpädevuste Kujundamisest Aineõpetuses, 2017), which supplements the curriculum, presents some additional arguments for how key competences can be integrated into art classes. However, the comprehensive conception of supporting key competences has only received minimal discussion within the context of comprehensive art education.

The Art Syllabus (2023) supports teacher autonomy in choosing the exact learning content and materials bearing in mind that the learning outcomes of each school level have to be targeted and supported. It expresses the need for an art teacher to be in active dialogue with classical, modern, and contemporary art and visual culture. The Arts Syllabus (2023) also emphasises the need to include the student in the process of creating learning objectives and activities.

Currently, preparations are underway to elaborate the Arts Syllabus with instructions on how to bring more meaning, competence support and integration to the arts learning process. However, no comprehensive textbooks or teacher handbooks for comprehensive school art education have been published in Estonia within the last ten years, which has led art teachers to figure out their pedagogical and didactic choices, and accompanying materials, mainly by themselves.

Contextualising Key Competence Support for Middle School Students

Based on the Arts Syllabus (2023) and age-specific factors, four key competences were identified as particularly relevant for and relatable to art education, namely social competence; communication competence; competence in mathematics, science, and technology (STEM); and digital competence. Based on these, supporting strategies and learning activities were formed.

Social and communication competence involves the ability to get along with others, communicate and act in socially acceptable ways and take the perspective of another (Epps et al., 2005). Perspective-taking is also viewed as the cognitive dimension of empathy (Cuff et al., 2016) and is associated with pro-social behaviour and moral judgement (Eisenberg et al., 2001). A teacher's modelling of acceptance, concern, and respect for each student has a strong impact on student understanding of pro-social and caring behaviour (Frey et al., 2000). By focusing art education on real-world issues relevant to students, they can use art making as a tool to safely explore and challenge power dynamics in society (Bradshaw, 2016).

The disciplines of **maths and science** as well as art require the use of visual and spatial reasoning, pattern recognition, and problem-solving skills, moreover the ability to manipulate and transform abstract concepts into concrete expressions (Subramaniam & Hetland, 2007). Other writers have argued that imagination is one connecting factor for the arts and sciences (Sullivan, 2018). This has led to combining science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) with the arts (STEAM) to encourage creative expression in multiple disciplines. However, art educators have voiced concerns about the arts being diluted in contrast to the sciences or treated narrowly from a technical or craft perspective, therefore not taught in its full potential and diminishing art's social contextual properties (Katz-Buonincontro, 2018).

Digital competence involves information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and security, and problem-solving and decision-making (Ferrari, 2013). Information and data literacy involves the ability to access, manage, evaluate, and use information and data effectively. Communication and collaboration refer to

communicating effectively using digital technologies and collaborating with others online. Digital content creation encompasses the ability to create and manipulate digital content. Safety and security refer to being aware of and taking measures to ensure the safe and secure use of digital technologies. Digital competence is meaningfully learned in a concrete subject context and through authentic problems that leave room for individual study needs (Wesselink & Giaffredo, 2015).

A study conducted with 6th graders found that students given more personal choice in learning content expressed greater knowledge of the curriculum, positive self-concept, and positive attitudes toward art (King, 1983). Several studies conducted among comprehensive school students have demonstrated that engaging in dialogical argumentation is effective in fostering critical thinking and evidence-seeking argumentation skills (Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Nussbaum, 2008). Using portfolios in visual art classes has been shown to promote self-assessment and self-regulated learning as they increase flexibility to include learning evidence from a variety of sources (Bland, 2005).

In delving into student developmental aspects and key factors in supporting social and communication competence; competence in mathematics, science, and technology (STEM); and digital competence, the teacher-researcher arrived at themes of perspective-taking and from that to the connecting element of empathy.

The Perspective of Empathy

Empathy is considered a crucial social capability, which enables individuals to predict, comprehend and share others' perspectives (Davis & Franzoi, 1991). Therefore, social and communication competence are highly intertwined with empathy. A common definition involves empathy as an emotional reaction resulting from the perception of another's emotional state or situation, as it involves experiencing feelings similar to those of the other person (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Empathy can be broken down into three main components (Weisz & Cikara, 2021), namely (a) affective empathy, which refers to the ability to feel others' emotions, (b) cognitive empathy, or perspective-taking, which involves considering others' thoughts and experiences, and (c) empathic concern, which is a motivational component and refers to the desire to help others and alleviate their suffering. Empathic concern has been shown to be a reliable predictor of helping behaviour, such as the willingness to help a stranger. The components of empathy are context-dependent and can be influenced by motivations and goals. The three components often co-occur in realistic social situations, and the strength of this representation is that it recognises the inter-relational functioning of empathy connecting affective experience sharing with conceptual perspective-taking (see Weisz & Cikara, 2021).

Having identified the key competences' connection to art studies and empathy as a theme that can be pursued throughout the key competences, and with a view to the importance of relational competence in the age-specific development period of 6th graders combined with the lack of teachers' support materials for teaching art according to the National Curriculum, the following research questions were posed:

1. How can empathy be supported in visual arts education by exploiting the idea of key competences?
2. How is empathy manifested in the learning process viewed through social, communication, mathematics, science and technology, and digital competences?

Methods

This article presents the third cycle of pedagogical action research. The research was conducted between January and June 2022 in one comprehensive school in Estonia. The first author was the facilitator of this action research and is referred to in the article as the teacher-researcher.

Participants

The participants were 70 students in three 6th-grade classes. The students were between the ages of 12 and 13 years. This course was the first interaction with the teacher-researcher for all three classes.

Procedure

The action research cycle focused on four key competences listed in the National Curriculum (2014). Figure 1 exemplifies the connections between the key competences and empathy as the main focus, as well as strategies for supporting the certain competence sub-skill and formation as a learning activity. The research was implemented within a full course of 35 academic hours of art lessons in eight different learning units, varying in length from 2–6 academic hours.

Social and communication competence involved the ability to express oneself understandably, appropriately, and politely, taking into account the situations and understanding the communication partners. It involved the ability to embrace diversity in communication. Presenting an artwork to a group of classmates or the whole class allowed students to engage in dialogue with artworks and with each other. Students were encouraged to explore emotions from a variety of perspectives and through a range of art media. This presented the challenge of translating complex, adaptive responses to internal or external stimuli, such as emotions,

into visual form. Emotions are often expressed through metaphors (Kövesces, 2003), and hence students were encouraged to explore a variety of visual languages to reflect emotions: symbols and metaphors, using fragments of existing artworks to compose new meanings, and abstract expressions using colour and the principles of composition.

Competence in mathematics, science, and technology was addressed mainly through understanding the importance and limitations of science and technology. The aim was to bring forward the themes of interconnectedness (Barad, 2014) and the active relationship between what we may interpret as objective and subjective. We grappled with the questions of climate change by analysing ecological artworks; for example, the work by artist Olafur Eliasson and professor of geology at the University of Copenhagen, Minik Rosing, called ‘Ice Watch’ (2014–2018) and delved into the theme of our perception of time. In addition, students investigated the lives and value of insects in an ecosystem. These topics formed the basis for making artwork individually and in groups.

The support of digital competence focused on an awareness of the challenges of the digital environment, coping with the rapidly changing world and using digital technologies for learning. During the art course, students reflected on their social media use, made a group video about their perception of time, and collaboratively or individually made a virtual gallery of their artworks. Discussions on the ethics of taking photographs were also held.

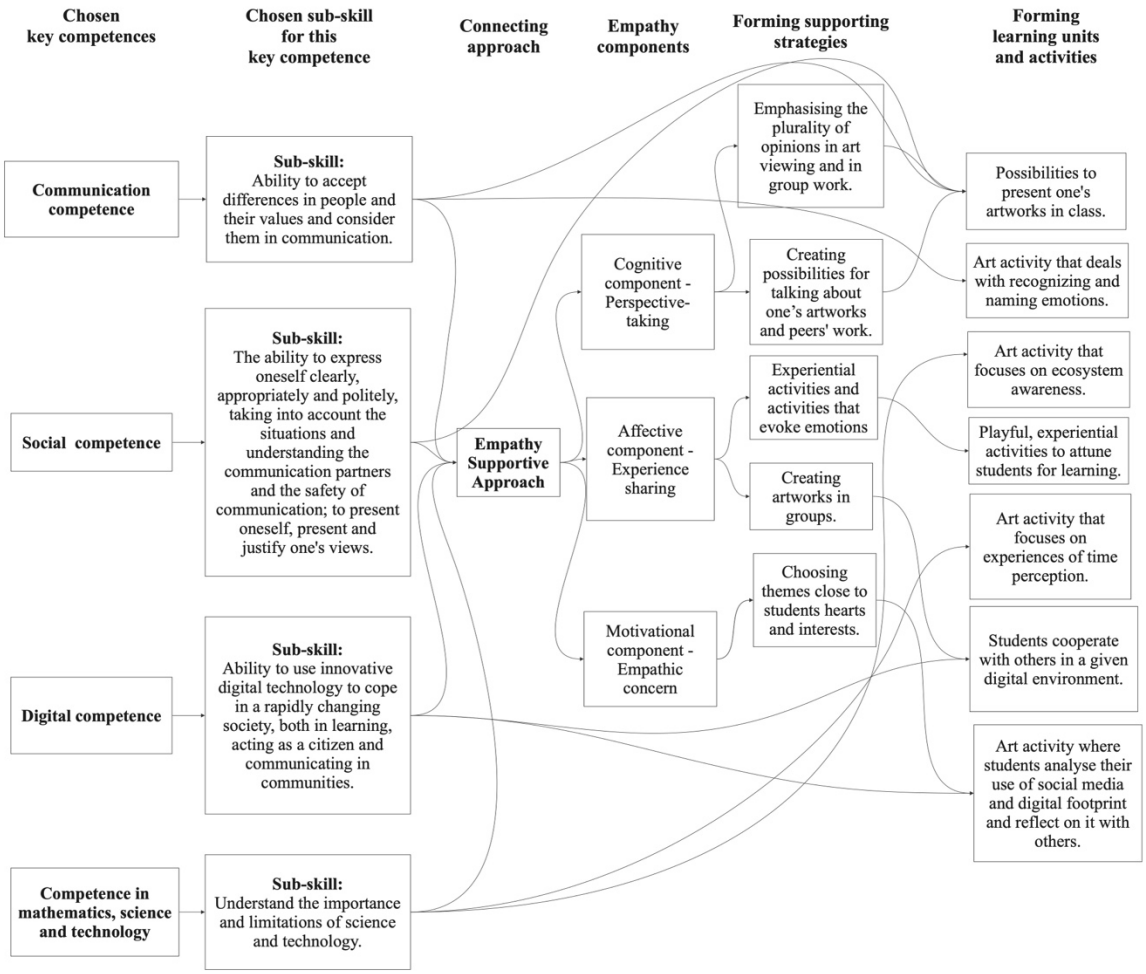

Figure 1. Planning Steps in Creating the Learning Units.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected, including reflections from the research diary, recordings of classroom activities, student artworks, and art journal entries (Table 1). As the students were encouraged to use their art journals in their spare time, not all of the student art journal entries were documented. Student permission was sought to photograph the journal entries.

Table 1

Data Collection Plan

Type of data	Amount of data	Collection method	Competence it reflects	Operationalisation
Research diary	32 research diary entries	Teacher-researcher's reflections; students' remarks	Social and communication competence	Overall effectiveness of the learning unit. Changes in teaching strategies.
Classroom action observations	116 photos	Photos (by teacher)	Social and communication competence; Digital competence	Students working methods, process overview.
Student art journals	70 art journals	Photographed art journals and formative assessment discussions based on student journals	Competence in mathematics, science and technology; Digital competence	Students planning for the artworks, goal setting, reflective assignments, and artistic skill development.
Student artworks	141 photos, 19 video works, 21 Artsteps galleries	Photographed artworks and copies of video works and digital gallery links	Competence in mathematics, science and technology; Digital competence	Student ideas, emotions and effort levels.
Students' feedback	63 feedback forms	Students' feedback questionnaire	Social and communication competence	Student reflections of the whole course

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using inductive analysis. The teacher-researcher perspective was analysed by reading and reflectively analysing research diary entries. These reflections were analysed in parallel with the students' written feedback. All written feedback was analysed by examining views from an interactive viewpoint and placing situations in a larger social and cultural context (Niemi et al., 2010). Photographs from class provided visual cues in analysing the learning process. In addition, the students' artworks as visual data were analysed by looking into the expressive qualities of the artworks and the use of metaphors in expressing emotions (Kövecses, 2003). Helping behaviour has been connected with experience sharing and empathic concern (Weisz & Cikara, 2021) and perspective-taking with prosocial

behaviour (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Hence, empathy support was identified in students' helping behaviour. The units of analysis were arranged according to the learning units and as themes of experience sharing, perspective-taking, empathic concern, and expressing emotions.

Ethical Considerations

The school head granted research permission and parents provided informed consent using the opt-in method for their child's involvement and permission to publish artworks. Students' participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. The research does not constitute medical research and consequently did not require an ethics review in the Estonian context (see Hea Teadustava, 2017). Student grades and treatment were not influenced by participation.

Results

The data analysis resulted in four main themes. As the first research question focuses on the strategies for supporting empathy in visual arts education by exploiting the idea of key competences, the role of the planning phase is presented first. To answer the second research question, the interplay between key competences and empathy in the art learning process is expressed.

Planning for Key Competence Support

Contemplating and connecting the perspective of competences with age-specific aspects and curricular emphasis provided a sense of assurance and coherence for the teacher-researcher as the learning units had many connecting themes.

Based on the research journal entries it becomes evident that the framework of empathy encouraged the teacher-researcher to experiment and lean towards experiential learning methods. This is reflected in this excerpt from the research journal:

> 03.04.2022
> *With integrating Marina Abramović's work 'The Artist is Present' I found that students need to get the feeling of looking into another's eyes and sense the intensity in that. I wanted them to feel how our emotions and senses change the perception of time and juxtapose this with the ability to measure time.*

The sense of coherence and purpose made it possible to tie in different activities more closely and refer to the in-class discussions more fluently within the course.

Experience Sharing and Perspective-Taking

Experience sharing was encouraged by introducing novel and playful activities to the class that would evoke emotions. Introducing those experiential activities for tuning in to the learning unit themes was quite novel for the students. This included playing a game of Dixit for example, not competitively, but to make personal interpretations of these imaginative illustrations and to think from another person's perspective.

The cognitive aspect of empathy was emphasised by promoting the exchange of ideas by providing different opportunities for co-work and discussion. From the teacher-researcher, this entailed being sensitive to what came forward from the learning process and being flexible with the time needed to complete the activity at hand.

Expressing Emotions Through Different Forms and Media

The course entailed different options for exploring and expressing one's emotions. This included a more depictive stance, for example, by expressing emotions associated with their social media use (Figure 2) or by creating a collage from photographs of old artworks (Figure 3) and connecting that to a feeling. The students were also able to express their emotions through abstract art and colours (Figure 4).

Figure 2. 6th-Grade Students' Artworks Depicting the Emotions Surrounding Social Media Use.

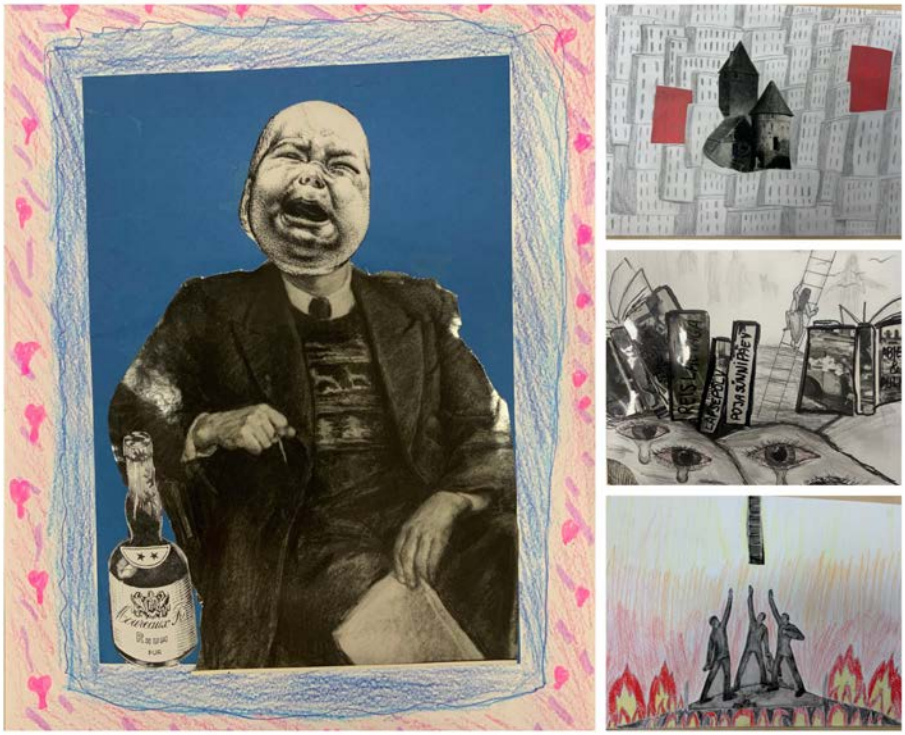

Figure 3. 6th-grade Students' Appropriative Collages Expressing Emotions of Their Own Choice.

Figure 4. 6th-grade Students' Abstract Paintings Expressing Emotions of Their Own Choice.

Students were versatile in using metaphors and symbols for various emotions. The more common symbols included eyes full of tears, broken hearts, sunshine and flowers, but the more unique symbols included, for example, ladders representing climbing out of a depressing emotion, a large amount of common apartment buildings representing conformity, and bad posture representing the sense of being weighed down by negative social media content. Abstract expression was not so familiar to the students, and they were inclined to add some representative symbols in their abstract artworks (Figure 4.).

Empathic Concern

Students' artworks dealt with emotional narratives of suffering and overcoming difficulty or giving as a helping attitude to some suffering. The suggestions of pathways out of the suffering or difficulty suggested a motivational aspect of empathy. A student who created the artwork on the lower right in Figure 3 reflected on their work as follows:

> "*These people are in hell, because they lost someone and that sorrow is like hell for them, but the ladder helps them out from this sorrow. (...) I have also felt real sorrow, but someone has always helped me."* (Student art journal entry)

The author of the picture on the left in Figure 3. described the meaning and emotion in the picture as such:

> *"Here is a depressed person who is in their depressive bubble and they don't see that there is love and support around them."* (Student art journal entry)

Empathic concern was mainly seen through the way the students expressed compassion and helping behaviour towards each other. The teacher-researcher's perceptions of the connectedness of the class group changed quite a lot during the course. The class, which at first seemed reserved and polite, started to express more spiteful comments and derisive attitudes towards one another. On the other hand, when seeing the more lively and laid-back class group during a museum excursion, the viewpoint for this class changed and they became more united (e.g. expressing agreement within the group) in the eyes of the teacher-researcher. This perception of connectedness was extended to in-class activities as well. Indeed, more supportive and helpful behaviour, accompanied by playful yet encouraging feedback, was in evidence for this class group. One class group displayed enthusiasm, for example, by applauding each individual who gave a presentation about their artwork.

Often the demeanour of adolescent students was full of jokes, play-fighting, and critical reflections. Now and then within the course, the teacher-researcher challenged this to determine whether the students were having fun with each other or had turned to make fun of someone or something.

The assignment of making a video about their perception of time mostly reflected the critical stance the students had towards the school, the controlling teaching style of some teachers, the rote learning that they had experienced, and the sense of constantly rushing from place to place. One work used the figurative language of continuously climbing the school stairs, representing the tediousness of the school day (Figure 5). This sense is magnified by the colour distortion and how dark and gloomy colours shade the indoor space and brighter colours the outside. Another group used a speeding toy car to represent how their days are spent being driven from school to extracurricular activities and hobby schools. In that way, students expressed their need to be heard and considered – to be on the receiving end of empathic dialogue. This assignment integrated digital competence from the digital content creation aspect, as well as the ability to share and present their work.

Figure 5. Still Frame from a Student Group Video Reflecting Their Perception of Time.

To support the reflection of the whole course and its assignments, the final assignment for this course was to create a digital art gallery of their artworks in groups or individually. Although students are very familiar with their mobile phone cameras, students still needed guidance in taking quality photographs of their artwork. The digital gallery assignment (Figure 6) encouraged students to think more about the interpretation of their works, for example, in naming their work and seeing it from the viewer's position.

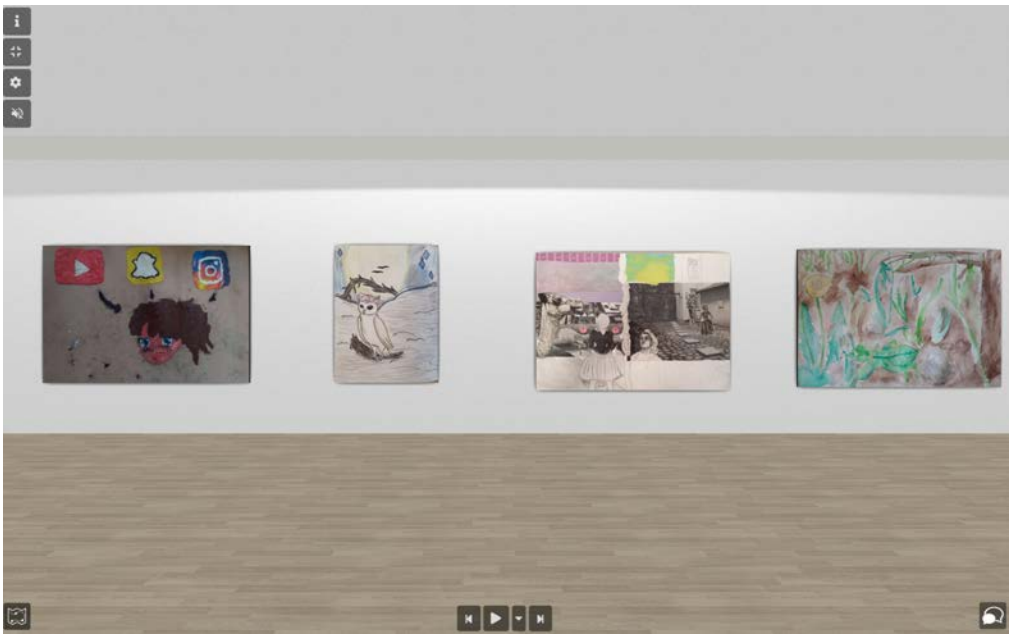

Figure 6. Screenshot from a Student's Artsteps Gallery View.

From the students' end-of-the-year feedback questionnaire, it became apparent that they mostly recognised the connecting theme of self-expression and more precisely expressing emotions from the course. When answering the question of how visual art is connected to communication, mainly emotions and feelings were mentioned (n=19). The students also mentioned expressing themselves or communicating their ideas (n=12). Some examples of student responses within these themes included:

Student 18: *With art, it is sometimes easier to express emotions than by talking.*
Student 50: *People can sense each other's feelings and can share their feelings and emotions.*
Student 63: *Art is a nice thing that can express different things. Some understand art in one way and some differently. Art also helps with stress and worries. Thanks to this, a person can change. Art also develops your imagination and broadens your horizons.*

Additionally, a few students (n=4) mentioned beauty as the communicative factor and co-work and common interest (n=3) as the connecting factor. There were also several students who struggled with answering the question (n=19).

While reflection was viewed as a natural component of the art learning process, students

encountered challenges in presenting their work to their peers and articulating the ideas and decision-making processes underlying their artistic creations. Eight students experienced difficulty in describing what they had learned in this course.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to examine how key competence support is manifested in art education and emphasised by the framework of empathy. The first objective was to find pedagogical premises and strategies for supporting empathy through social; communication; mathematics, science, and technology; and digital competences.

The ability to manipulate and transform abstract concepts into concrete expressions that has been linked to STEM competence (Subramaniam & Hetland, 2007) became a recurring aspect of this art course that highlighted social and communication competence as students delved into abstract concepts such as sense of time, emotions, and metaphors. One of the main elements in supporting empathy through key competences was discussing real-world problems (Bradshaw, 2016; Wesselink & Giaffredo, 2015) the students could relate to and encouraging them to express their viewpoints (Fried *et al.*, 2023). Students related to the themes of ecosystem and climate change, social media, and inclusion and exclusion, enabling them to artistically express and reflect upon their personal encounters and narratives.

This study found that deliberate attention to key competences provided a consistent foundation for the learning units and increased coherence between the units as the competences merged in many learning scenarios and students referred back to previous themes within the course. This was highlighted by the analysis of how key competences are expressed within art instruction, and the association between visual arts education objectives and age-specific considerations. The approach facilitated a multifaceted understanding of the learner, prompting the integration of experiential learning methodologies to enhance the educational experience. The empathy framework was instrumental in reinforcing this experiential perspective.

The second research question looked at how empathy manifested in the learning process. Behaviour that was helpful and supportive was sought as an expression of empathy (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Weisz & Cikara, 2021). There were indications of such behaviour and sympathy toward one another increasing within the course. In two of the class groups, the tendencies to cheer one another on, give supportive feedback, and express more personal opinions were identified. Regarding one class group, the teacher-researcher saw a slight increase in play fighting and inconsiderate behaviour (e.g. spiteful remarks toward one another). This may refer back to remarks by Eisenberg et al. (2001) on how perspective-taking abilities can also lead to manipulative behaviours.

Pre-existing class culture strongly influenced the level of openness and honesty in the students' expressions and artworks. When expression was welcomed not only by the teacher but also supported by the class, the students delved more deeply into delicate and heavy topics and emotions. Some of the heavily loaded themes were, for example, loss, depression, anxiety, and anger. Negative emotions and critical remarks reflecting the school environment were also expressed. This echoes Bradshaw's (2016) findings in supporting empathy in middle school art classes and that the neutral ground of art can become a safe space for students to give voice to somewhat controversial subjects. However, the playful activities integrated into the learning process provided a chance to evoke emotion. As Kövecses (2020) remarks, the meaning behind metaphorical language can be shaped by elements like humour and emotion. The artworks included the use of humour and cynicism in expressing a viewpoint.

Viewing the learning process through an empathic lens heightened the awareness of the nuances of classroom conduct. For example, the teacher-researcher became more aware of how her nonverbal communication influenced student attention. Exploring emotions caused a variety of emotions to surface. Discussions about empathy and emotions evoked delicate responses, particularly concerning the topics of mental health, bullying, and emotion regulation, which have become heightened amidst the ongoing crises around the time of the study. These experiences prompted teacher-researcher reactions of empathic concern, which were also shared with the students' primary teachers. This underscores the importance of cultivating empathy in the classroom while recognising the risks of empathic exhaustion. As Riddett-Moore (2015) pointed out, teachers should recognise the vulnerability and intricacies that caring deeply manifests.

The researchers acknowledge that this research is subject to certain limitations, primarily arising from the distinct characteristics of the class and the participating students, as well as the dual role of the first author as both a teacher and a researcher. These challenges were addressed through reflective collaborative practices. It is important to recognize that this small-scale study, and its findings, are not intended to be broadly generalizable. The results highlight that the key competence framework provides a valuable opportunity for recognising and reinforcing the multitude of talents present in the classroom. The study indicates that the goals formed by the teacher strongly influence their perspective in action. That in turn impacts what students notice from the activities and if they analyse these perspectives in themselves as well. Therefore, supporting key competences can serve as a basis for broadening student understandings of what art learning means in the hope that it will provide a stronger connection with art and artistic expression in adulthood.

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