

Collaborative school murals as experiential art practice: Enhancing creativity, empathy, and social skill development in Primary Education

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Abstract

The present study explores how the collaborative making of a mural, within the school environment, can enrich children's experiences with art and contribute to their educational and cognitive development. It also examines how such collective artistic practices support students' personal growth as members of a school community and, more broadly, of society. Through the lens of collaborative mural-making, the study emphasizes the experiential and interactive nature of art, which aligns with the engagement of children in collective creative processes such as mural making. Three core pillars of benefit were identified, regarding the contribution of collaborative murals to the development of students' social skills and empathy. Firstly, the pedagogical dimension, which relates to the enhancement of artistic techniques and the transfer of knowledge. Secondly, the psychological benefits, including cognitive development, the strengthening of emotional self-regulation and self-confidence, and social learning, as participation in collaborative art projects fosters a sense of community. Thirdly, the aesthetic and social sensitization, that emerges both from the mural's influence on the school environment and from students' increased awareness of the value of aesthetics.

Keywords: Collaborative Mural, Visual Arts, Experiential Learning, Collaborative Creativity, Social Awareness, Cognitive Development

1. Introduction

The collective production of a mural constitutes an innovative pedagogical practice that harnesses the power of art to cultivate students' social and emotional skills. Many schools have incorporated collaborative mural projects into their educational activities to strengthen the sense of community, empower students, and engage them in the creative process. A central aspect of school life is the feeling of belonging, "strengthening the sense of brotherhood and reducing boredom" (Santosa, 2021: 202). Equally important is the development of sensitivity toward the aesthetic quality of the school environment, which emerges through children's growing ability to collaborate for the wellbeing of the community (Santosa, 2021).

Dewey's (1934) theory provides a solid basis for understanding art as an experiential and interactive process. Dewey argues that art is an extension of everyday experience, in which "doing and undergoing" are inseparably linked, creating a strong connection between artistic production and the enjoyment of art. Within the school context, students' active participation



in mural-making not only enhances their skills but also transforms their surroundings, imbuing the everyday environment with meaning and aesthetic value.

According to Lowe (2000: 358), “community art” can function as a tool for “community development”, actively engaging members of a community and strengthening its cohesion. The process of community art is described as a ritualized framework of social interaction that facilitates the emergence of social bonds, solidarity, and collective identity. Through the gathering of participants, the establishment of a shared goal, and the creation of a shared atmosphere, community art projects result in a collective work that serves as a “community symbol” and further strengthens social ties. Collaborative artistic practices, such as mural making, can also promote intercultural and gender inclusion an essential dimension of contemporary art education. Broadening the curriculum to include “global art from diverse cultures” may be reflected in the themes and imagery chosen for the mural, offering participants the opportunity to explore and express varied cultural values (DiBlasio, 1997: 36).

The present study examines collaborative mural-making as a means of enhancing creativity, social inclusion, and emotional development in primary education. By analysing relevant theories and empirical findings, the study highlights the pedagogical and psychological dimensions of artistic collaboration, offering new perspectives on the integration of art within the educational process.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Art as an educational tool

Art constitutes a powerful educational tool that promotes experiential learning and aesthetic development. According to Dewey (1934), art should not be confined to a museum-based notion but should incorporate everyday experience, offering children the opportunity to connect artistic production with their environment. He argues that “aesthetic experience is primary and widespread in nature,” while the world of traditional art objects follows as secondary (Stroud, 2014: 34). In the context of primary education, this suggests that a collaborative mural project is valuable because it extends art beyond traditional boundaries and embeds it within children’s daily surroundings. This view aligns with Dewey’s (1934) assertion that art is pedagogically most powerful when it is a lived and experiential encounter, and it connects with Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, which proposes that children in the stage of concrete operations (7–11 years) begin to develop symbolic understanding and apply their thinking to concrete problems.

Collaborative mural-making supports this cognitive process by providing a framework in which children can bring together abstract ideas and practical activity. Through artistic engagement, children move from an egocentric perspective to a more collaborative orientation, learning to recognize the contributions of their peers and to cultivate empathy (Piaget, 1971). Moreover, mural-making functions as a form of collective play through art, where children envision and realize a shared artistic goal. This process strengthens both imagination and teamwork skills, as children learn to integrate their individual ideas with those of their classmates (Piaget, 1951).

Collaborative murals allow children to transform their everyday environment into something meaningful through art, making the aesthetic experience clearer and more impactful for them. This connection enhances imagination, critical thinking, and creativity, which are skills essential for students’ holistic development. Art becomes a medium through which students express ideas and emotions while simultaneously developing their aesthetic



sensitivity (Stroud, 2014). As Santosa (2021) notes, collaborative murals turn the school environment into a “canvas” for creation and cooperation, reinforcing the sense of belonging.

2.2. Psychological theories and applications in education

Collaborative artmaking incorporates fundamental psychological theories that support the development of social and emotional skills. Bandura’s (1978) social learning theory, which highlights the importance of observation and imitation in the learning process, underscores the role of peer interaction in educational settings. Through collaboration, students observe and model behaviours such as conflict resolution, taking responsibility, and managing disagreements. Group dynamics encourage the development of social competencies, reinforcing students’ self-confidence and sense of responsibility.

Collaborative mural-making provides a context in which students experience social interaction through shared creativity. According to Piaget, social exchanges within cooperative environments, enable children to develop skills related to problem-solving, communication, and conflict management (Piaget, 1965). These experiences support the process of equilibration, through which children adjust their perspectives and construct new cognitive structures.

Additionally, the multisensory nature of art facilitates learning by engaging multiple senses. As Shams & Seitz (2008) note, multisensory learning strengthens experiential learning and the retention of social skills, as students participate in activities that involve visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli. Collaborative mural making integrates these elements, offering students a comprehensive experience that encourages cooperation and emotional safety. The artistic process extends beyond aesthetic appreciation; it becomes a means of cultivating empathy and interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences emphasizes the significance of interpersonal intelligence, which is nurtured through collaboration. Collective artistic activities, such as mural making, enhance empathy and help students understand the needs and perspectives of others. This contributes to the development of strong interpersonal skills that are essential in both school life and broader social contexts.

2.3. The importance of classroom culture and the role of the teacher

Classroom culture plays a crucial role in shaping an environment that supports collaborative creativity. Working together on shared activities, such as the making of a collective mural, allows students to build relationships with their peers. This practice “can strengthen the fabric of brotherhood, motivate students to work, allow the exchange of skills-related experiences, and reduce boredom” (Santosa, 2021: 203). The mural-making process offers students the opportunity to recognise the value of cooperation and collective effort while simultaneously developing self-confidence and social skills.

The importance of classroom culture in fostering collaborative creativity highlights the fact that “the teacher’s stance has been shown to play a significant role in this interaction” (Craft, 2008: 242). In the context of a collaborative mural project, the teacher’s role in establishing a supportive and inclusive learning environment is essential in ensuring that all students feel valued and capable of contributing creatively. Classroom culture can be understood both as the setting in which student engagement develops and as a product of that engagement, with the “teacher’s stance” playing a decisive role in this dynamic (Craft, Cremin, Burnard, & Chappell, 2007: 140).



Within a mural project, ensuring that all children feel emotionally safe and treated with respect is a necessary condition for expressing their creativity freely, without fear of criticism or exclusion. Such a culture promotes collective participation and teamwork while reinforcing a sense of belonging (Santosa, 2021). As Eteläpelto & Lahti (2008) point out, the quality of classroom dialogue and collaboration encourages creative participation and the development of interpersonal relationships.

As Craft (2008) notes, the teacher must act as a facilitator, cultivating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. The emotional safety provided by the teacher is essential for students to express their ideas openly and contribute creatively. DiBlasio (1997) suggests collaboration between teachers and artists as a way of integrating art across the curriculum. This interdisciplinary approach enriches students' learning experiences while offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the arts and education. The teacher's role is therefore to ensure equitable participation, creating an environment in which differences are viewed as strengths that enrich the collective endeavour.

3. Research methodology

Our research methodology was based on a literature review, an established approach for gathering and analysing data from previous studies (Snyder, 2019). The literature review enabled us to examine both theoretical and practical dimensions of collaborative mural-making, with a particular focus on its applications for children in primary education. The process involved selecting scientific articles and books from databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and PubMed.

The inclusion criteria comprised studies that investigated the contribution of art to cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as research examining the implementation of collective artistic activities in school settings. We reviewed studies that explored the role of art in developing social and emotional skills, with an emphasis on how artistic engagement supports collaboration and empathy.

The review method allowed us to identify the positive effects of collaborative mural making on children's cooperation, empathy, and creativity. It also highlighted the theoretical foundations supporting the educational value of this practice, including social learning theory (Bandura, 1978) and cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1951). Furthermore, the review process enabled us to identify gaps in the existing literature, which we propose as areas for future research.

Our focus on primary school ages (6–12 years) was grounded in the importance of this developmental period for the growth of social and cognitive skills, as emphasized in the relevant literature (Santosa, 2021). The present study contributes to the field by illuminating the connection between collaborative mural-making, learning outcomes, and social inclusion.

4. Presentation and analysis of the results

In her study *Creating Community: Art for Community Development*, Seana S. Lowe (2000) examines the relationship between community art and community development. Drawing on data from community art projects in two Denver neighbourhoods, she describes community art as a ritualised structure of social interaction. Lowe (2000) documents the formation of social bonds, solidarity, and collective identity that emerge through the gathering of residents, the establishment of a shared goal, and the creation of a shared disposition for designing a collective symbol. Based on this perspective, a collaborative mural within a school setting can serve both as a form of artistic expression and as a means of social empowerment.



According to Booth (1995), the arts are recognised as an asset that contributes to the development of healthy communities, and they can mobilise support and resources for social initiatives through collective artistic practice. Weitz (1996: 7) argues that the arts have the capacity to transcend the constraints imposed on our lives, stating that they “can take anyone, but especially a child, and carry them beyond the boundaries set by chance and circumstance”. She further notes that the arts “offer children and youth opportunities to learn new skills, broaden their horizons, and develop a sense of self, wellbeing, and belonging” (Weitz, 1996: 7). This highlights the essential role of art in shaping both individual and collective identity.

Fromm (1955: 302-303) expands the significance of collective art by defining it as “a ritual indispensable for building a healthy society.” He maintains that “collective art is shared and allows individuals to feel one with others in a meaningful, rich, and productive way”, viewing it as a fundamental component of life and a key element in the transition “from an individualistic to a communal society”. In the same spirit, Becker (1982: 1) describes the collective and cooperative nature of artistic production as an “art world” grounded in interdependence and collaboration.

Sociologists such as Hillery (1982: 31) propose that a community may be defined as “a social group residing in a common area and possessing one or more additional common ties”. Parsons (1951) and Bellah et al. (1991) emphasise interdependence, reciprocity, and shared characteristics among group members, while Christenson (1979) highlights the emotional dimension of community sentiment as the subjective measure of the positive feelings members hold toward one another. Lowe (2000: 358) underscores the capacity of community art to generate bonds of solidarity and collective identity, describing the art-making process as “a ritual setting for social interaction”.

Incorporating these perspectives into educational contexts, such as a collaboratively created school mural, can strengthen cooperation among students, foster creativity, and cultivate a sense of belonging by producing a shared artwork that symbolises community and collective effort.

4.1. Integration and expansion

The approaches outlined above provide the research basis for analysing collaborative mural-making in educational settings. In our methodology, we focus on connecting these theoretical perspectives with data from schools that have implemented collaborative mural projects. Through collective production, students develop not only artistic skills but also social competencies such as problem-solving, empathy, and effective communication. As a pedagogical practice, the collaborative mural incorporates principles of experiential learning and social inclusion, demonstrating how art can transform the school environment and foster a sense of belonging.

Piaget’s theory offers important guidelines for understanding learning through practical activity in primary education. At the stage of concrete operations, students grasp cause-and-effect relationships by participating in collective tasks. Mural making provides an ideal context for students to observe how their individual contributions influence the outcome, strengthening their collaboration skills and supporting social learning (Piaget, 1970).

4.2. Enhancing empathy and emotional intelligence

Collaborative mural-making strengthens students’ empathy and emotional intelligence by allowing them to understand and respect different perspectives. As Schonert-Reichl and Oberle (2011) argue, art functions as a medium that promotes emotional safety and



encourages cooperation. During the creative process, students learn to recognise the emotions of others, respond to their peers' needs, and develop relationships built on trust.

Strengthening empathy has important implications for the creation of positive school communities. Dewey (1934) maintains that art can serve as a means of understanding human relationships, providing children with a safe environment in which to develop emotional intelligence. This is also supported by Santosa (2021), who highlights the role of art in fostering collaboration and mutual support.

4.3. Multisensory learning and social development

Multisensory learning, as described by Shams & Seitz (2008), offers an experience that activates multiple senses and makes learning more experiential. In mural making, students engage in visual, kinaesthetic, and auditory activities that enhance their understanding and retention of social skills. According to Shams and Seitz, art integrates learning through experiences that are deeply connected to collaboration.

The creative process also provides a setting for conflict management and problem-solving. Craft (2008) notes that students involved in collective artistic activities develop skills related to interaction and cooperation while simultaneously strengthening their ability to navigate more complex social situations.

4.4. Social learning theory and psychological empowerment

Bandura's (1978) social learning theory underscores the importance of observation and imitation in the learning process. Within the context of mural making, students observe and model positive behaviours such as taking responsibility and managing challenges. This process enhances their self-confidence as they recognise the significance of their role in a collective project with both social and aesthetic value.

Participation in such activities also has a positive impact on students' psychological wellbeing. Weitz (1996) emphasises that art can broaden children's horizons, strengthen their self-esteem, and provide a sense of belonging. Through the creative process, students come to appreciate the value of their contribution to the group, gaining a sense of accomplishment and participation.

4.5. Strengthening collaboration and community

Collective art reinforces the sense of community and collaboration by creating bonds among students. Dewey (1934) describes art as a medium that connects individuals and communities, promoting collective action. Through group mural-making, students develop skills of interdependence and trust.

Lowie (2000) notes that community art activities can generate a strong sense of *gemeinschaft* (community), even within contexts dominated by more institutional structures (*gesellschaft*). This sense of community enhances cooperation and participation, creating an environment in which all students feel accepted and supported.

5. Discussion

A collaborative mural can be understood as a prophetic expression of children's collective vision of their community or school, illustrating how art can inspire change and transformation. This perspective is consistent with Dewey's (1934: 350) view that art may function as "a mode of forecast [of the future] that does not follow diagrams and statistical charts". In this sense, creative expression through art moves beyond the bounds of normative



frameworks, promoting authentic human relationships that “cannot be found in rules and commands, admonitions and administrative decisions” (Dewey, 1934: 350).

At the same time, the creative process itself, as it unfolds through collective artistic expression, embodies the unpredictable nature of art and the challenges that accompany it, enriching children’s learning experience and their collaboration skills. Creativity is often a “messy” process, marked by uncertainty and, at times, impasses, tension, and conflict (Craft, 2008). As Craft (2008) points out, these challenges form a core learning experience, as working through them raises both stimulating and difficult questions. This unpredictable trajectory becomes a learning process in its own right: children learn to manage challenges, work with peers, and seek solutions, thereby strengthening their creative competences. Within the context of collaborative mural-making, such tensions can act as a catalyst for the development of teamwork and creative problem-solving. Children are called upon to navigate differing perspectives and identify shared solutions, transforming the “messiness” of the creative process into an opportunity for personal and collective growth. In this way, art becomes not only a source of aesthetic enjoyment but also a means of enhancing collaboration and problem-solving in the school environment.

Students do not simply create; they also learn to collaborate, to support one another, and to develop social skills that extend beyond artistic expression. The outcomes of collective activity highlight that “group activities can promote the spirit of cooperation and mutual support” (Santosa, 2021: 202), something that is vital for psychological wellbeing and social inclusion. Santosa (2021: 200) further notes that collaboration “increases awareness of the importance of cleanliness and beauty in the environment”, offering psychological benefits associated with a well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing learning setting.

Drawing on traditional community models, Lowe (2000) shows that community art can generate a sense of *gemeinschaft* (community) even in contexts dominated by more institutional forms of social organisation (*gesellschaft*). The distinctive features of community art processes contribute to their effectiveness in building communities. At the same time, discussions regarding the political dimensions of such practices suggest that community art can function as a tool for addressing social challenges.

DiBlasio (1997: 38) underscores the role of art education in cultivating higher-order skills such as “reflection and discussion”, particularly through “discussions focused on aesthetic issues” and broader dialogue about art. In a collaborative mural project, students can engage in reflective conversations about the themes, symbols, and concepts embedded in their collective work, thereby strengthening their cognitive and reflective skills. The value of collaboration and knowledge exchange in the mural-making process is further reinforced through interdisciplinary approaches. DiBlasio (1997: 34) notes that the “sharing of responsibility” supports the idea that collaborative activities, such as group mural making, can integrate art across the curriculum, enriching the overall educational experience. This process enables students to perceive the connections between the arts and the wider curriculum, which is crucial for a holistic approach to learning. She also argues that interdisciplinary art education, including collaborative mural-making, can lead to “the development of perceptual acuity, engagement in critical thinking, heightened sensitivity to the uniqueness of cultures, and experience in improving creative problem-solving skills” (DiBlasio, 1997: 35). This illustrates how such projects can be educationally beneficial, strengthening a wide range of cognitive and social skills.

In addition to supporting cognitive and social development, collaborative projects of this kind appear to have a positive impact on student behaviour, as observed during their



implementation. Monitoring of behaviour and classroom conduct revealed encouraging indications: students appeared “happy and enthusiastic” (Santosa, 2021: 202), and positive changes became evident as they adapted to the dynamics of working together.

The findings of the present study are consistent with Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, supporting the view that collaborative activities promote children’s cognitive and social growth. Mural making operates as a tool that allows children to develop skills in collective decision-making, emotional intelligence, and creative thinking, facilitating the transition from egocentric to socialised thought (Piaget, 1965).

“Collaborative creativity,” as a mode of learning, emphasises “the building of intersubjectivity” (Craft, 2008: 242) and the importance of “intersubjective engagement” in educational settings. In a collaborative mural project, this notion can be interpreted as the process through which children work together, share ideas, and form a common understanding that is reflected in the collective artwork. Learning becomes horizontal, as students exchange techniques and knowledge related to mural-making. This experience offers “the transmission of mural-making techniques to students” (Santosa, 2021: 201), facilitated through teamwork and “learning processes among group members” (Santosa, 2021: 202). Creating a mural as a group fosters a shared purpose and nurtures creativity among students.

As Dewey (1940) argues in *Time and Individuality*, art is not the exclusive privilege of those formally recognised as artists but an authentic expression of everyone’s individuality. This perspective can be directly linked to the notion of student-created murals in schools and may be summarised in three key pillars. First, art as a collective process: Dewey (1940) emphasises that engaging in artistic work turns individuals into artists through their activity. In the context of a school-based collaborative mural, students, regardless of their level of artistic skill, participate actively in production, releasing their creativity. Second, the strengthening of individuality and collectivity: according to Dewey (1940), art reveals and honours individuality in all its forms. Through collective work, students learn to recognise and appreciate their classmates’ uniqueness, contributing to a community in which all voices are heard. Third, art as a source of creative growth: Dewey (1940) describes the freedom of individuality as a source of artistic production and development. In the school setting, a collaborative mural supports this freedom, allowing students to experiment, express themselves, and develop collaboration skills.

“Social engagement” is often “the primary site of creative activity” (Craft, 2008: 242), a point that can be directly related to collaborative mural-making. Social engagement raises questions about “the equality among peer participants, and how such equality is secured and sustained in ways that make social engagement productive for all participants” (Craft, 2008: 242). A project of this kind allows students to engage socially while simultaneously creating art, with the mural functioning as a tangible manifestation of their collective creativity and social interaction.

Regarding children’s psychological development and their skills (cognitive, interpersonal, and intellectual), group production allows students to observe and imitate positive behaviours such as cooperation and problem-solving, which is consistent with Bandura’s (1978) social learning theory. Interpersonal intelligence, as described by Gardner (1983), is also strengthened as students learn to recognise and value the diverse contributions of their peers, cultivating empathy and solidarity. The multisensory nature of art, as discussed by Shams & Seitz (2008), supports experiential and social learning by offering students rich opportunities to engage fully in the process and to develop social skills such as communication and collaboration. Moreover, the emotional safety created by a well-designed learning



environment, as suggested by Craft (2008), encourages the free expression of ideas and active participation.

6. Conclusions and recommendations for future research and educational policy

Collaborative mural making in primary education represents a highly effective pedagogical approach for strengthening social interaction, emotional intelligence, and creativity. Integrating collaborative art into schools offers a meaningful opportunity to enhance social cohesion and encourage creative expression. Collective murals can serve as a central component of the curriculum, not only within visual arts but also in interdisciplinary activities that combine elements from subjects such as history, geometry, and the social sciences.

Further research is necessary to examine, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact of such initiatives on children's emotional development, empathy, and overall social behaviour. Studies of this kind could shed light on aspects such as increased self-confidence, the development of cooperation, and conflict management, providing a robust scientific basis for broadening the implementation of collaborative art projects in schools.

Equally important is the training and professional development of educators so that they acquire the necessary tools and theoretical grounding to effectively manage collaborative artistic projects. Through targeted training programmes, teachers can learn how to support students' creative expression, facilitate collaboration, and address diversity within the classroom.

Collaborative murals also offer a unique opportunity to promote intercultural understanding and to cultivate tolerance and respect for diversity. Through these activities, students can explore and express their cultural identities while learning to recognise and appreciate the perspectives of other cultures.

Finally, partnerships between artists and schools can enrich students' educational experiences. As DiBlasio (1997) notes, such collaboration can integrate art into various school subjects and inspire creativity, strengthening interdisciplinary learning. Supported by educational development policies, this approach can contribute to reshaping the school environment, making it more creative, supportive, and inclusive.

Collaborative art, therefore, is not only a tool for developing skills but also a means of empowering the school community, transforming the school into a place where students can learn, create, and grow both emotionally and socially.

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