

CLASSROOM DESIGN AS A WAY OF MOTIVATING STUDENTS FOR ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES

JANJA BATIČ,¹ PETRA LEBAR KAC²

¹ University of Maribor, Faculty of Education, Maribor, Slovenia

janja.batic@um.si

² Primary School Janko Padežnik Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia

petra.lebar-kac@guest.arnes.si

In this chapter, we present the results of a case study that we conducted to discover how the equipment and space of a design in a universal classroom can encourage students' spontaneous artistic expression. The study included fifth-grade students and their generalist teacher. In the 2022–2023 school year, pupils were offered an art station that included various art materials and art challenges. We aimed to determine how students would utilize the space for artistic expression, their approach to selecting art materials, and their attitude toward art activities outside of art classes. Data were collected by analysing the teacher's observation diary, photographs of the art works, and student surveys. The results showed that the art station was very well received by the students and that the most popular material for modelling was clay. Spending free time with friends was also a very important aspect of the art station.

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1 Introduction

Researchers' interest in children's artistic expression dates back to the 19th century and coincides with the emergence of public education in Europe and America (Efland, 1990). Under the influence of the tendencies of modern art, in the 20th century admiration for the artistic expression of foreign cultures increased, and the interest in children's artistic expression also grew. The first scientific debates on the artistic development of children and progressive ideas about art education emerged around this time, but they were suppressed by fascism and World War II. Two important directions can be observed; the first has a starting point in the Bauhaus movement, and the second has its starting point in the work of Herbert Read (Karlavaris, 1991). Based on the Bauhaus movement, many art education experts shifted their concepts from spontaneous and expressive artistic expression to rational systematic learning and mastery of visual language. They proposed the idea that art design can be learned because students can learn certain laws of art theory and then apply them in their art work. This concept was significantly anchored in art pedagogical practices. Another concept, more characteristic of the United States and Great Britain, is based on Read's (1945) work *Education Through Art*. The idea behind this work is that art has such a strong humanistic potential that it can help educate a modern, free, and creative person. This concept significantly expanded the objectives of art education, which had previously been focused on narrow professional aspects (Karlavaris, 1991). As a result, the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA) was formed; it was officially created, with the adoption of its constitution, at the first General Assembly in Paris in July 1954. The 2018 InSEA Manifesto highlights the various aspects of visual art education, including, among others, the importance of creative verbal and non-verbal communication skills, the importance of making art alongside learning about art, the development of visual literacy and other transferable skills, and the importance of visual art education, which enables students to better understand themselves and others and contributes to students' well-being. InSEA's vision of 2050: Futures of education (Coleman et al., 2021, pp. 1–2) emphasises the importance of drawing, which is 'a natural and universal human activity, one that is about exploring the world, investigating, communicating, and understanding' and identified the following important areas: decolonising learning; collaborative and participatory co-designed learning; innovative learning spaces; and creativity and imagination. This document also states that

The concept of the classroom will be envisioned to be more like a studio. These studio spaces, which may be mobile, will be filled with opportunities for exploring the world and interrogating complex problems. Innovative learning spaces will cultivate artistic inquiry with access to a variety of materials, play-based objects and artefacts. Nonetheless, it will be important for learners to have a separate physical structure, space, and time for collective learning as a permanent, sustainable and open structure. (2021, p. 6)

There is a significant difference between studio classrooms and ordinary classrooms. In studio classrooms, the space is set up 'to promote work-flow, there is sometimes music playing to create a mood and to sustain and/or modulate students' energy, and students are usually absorbed by handling (often messy and sometimes complex and even dangerous) materials and tools' (Hetland et al., 2013, p. 15). The studio classroom should be organised in such a way that it allows easy access to art materials, storage of art works, changing the layout of furniture according to the tasks set to stimulate interest in learning and creating, and so on (Hetland et al., 2013; Lancaster, 1990). According to Ellis (1998), it is the use of various materials that allows students to explore freely, test their ideas, and solve art problems in a creative way while at the same time also providing enough room for their personal expression and creativity. The studio space or classroom should not be too clean and tidy, because this can discourage the teacher from offering more challenging art materials to younger students (e.g. paint), and at the same time it should not be untidy and poorly organised (Barnes, 2015). Hickman (2005, p. 42) compared a classroom with a work of art and stated that 'art classrooms are complex and multi-layered; it is up to the art teacher to ensure that the layers are meaningful and the activities that take place are worthwhile with due regard for reflection'.

The question arises as to which pedagogical approaches might correspond to this idea of studio art education in elementary school. One of the approaches to teaching fine art, in particular, emphasises the importance of space. This approach is called teaching for artistic behaviour (TAB); it is learner-centred, gives students a structure for independent studio work, and allows teachers to replicate an authentic artistic experience for students (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018). The teacher helps students do what artists do: play with material; come up with their own ideas; change ideas; consult others (e.g. classmates); take risks in their work and abandon failed experiments; use art materials in traditional ways and/or in purely individual ways; combine art fields; express themselves through their work; and communicate their ideas and beliefs (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018). Studio centres in TAB classrooms offer

students the opportunity to work with different art materials and provide access to multiple choices; also, 'classroom space is organised around these hubs, complete with essential materials, tools, and resources' to support students' learning and creative expression (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018, p. 7). Studio centres in art classrooms can enhance the implementation of differentiation strategies that teachers use to tailor instruction for diverse student needs, especially for gifted students (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020).

As we can see, space plays an important role in the implementation of choice-based art education lessons. The shape and organisation of the space dictates the students' behaviour, their expectations, and their motivation to work. Children must be able to move about the classroom, gathering materials and tools (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018). As Lawson (2001, p. 15) noted, 'The space that surround[s] us and the objects enclosing that space may determine how far we can move, how warm or cold we are, how much we can see and hear, and with whom we can interact'. Space in connection with artistic expression can have a significant impact on people's well-being or, as Cannatella (2015, p. ix) observed, 'How art makes us feel shouldn't be taken lightly bearing in mind how much it can affect our human conduct in the world'.

In elementary school, art activities occur in several forms. They are primarily related to the teaching of fine arts and the realisation of set learning objectives. Art activities are also an important part of cross-curricular teaching and learning. At the same time, they can play a central role in ensuring students' well-being: 'Arts activities can involve aesthetic engagement, involvement of the imagination, sensory activation, evocation of emotion and cognitive stimulation' (Fancourt & Finn, 2019, p. 4). Art activities provide students with a non-verbal medium to express their emotion and can act as a form of therapy, given that art materials 'can evoke feelings in the person using them' (Hogan, 2014, p. 12). There are some parallels between art education and art therapy – among others, Dunn-Snow and D'Amelio (2000) mentioned similarities between the therapeutic and creative processes and empathic conversations with students. They also noted that art activities 'that bring pleasure and a measure of safety can also reveal children's potential to adapt, cope, and thrive' (Dunn-Snow & D'Amelio, 2000, p. 52).

Art activities can also play an important role in students' social and emotional learning. By researching the works of artists, and by doing their own art activities, students can develop different competences relating to the following dimensions: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; and responsible decision-making (Irman Kolar et al., 2020). Incorporating art activities into free play during recess in elementary school can be a valuable way to support children's holistic development; as Keeler (2015, p. 21) pointed out, recess 'can be a place for creation, collaboration, construction, and rich social engagement'.

Art activities in upper classes of elementary school usually take place in specialised art classrooms with the appropriate equipment and accessories. In the lower classes of elementary school, art classes take place in the universal classroom. In the first three years of elementary school in Slovenia, and especially in the first grade, stations for various activities are often present. In the fifth grade, there are usually no additional stations in the classrooms. If the art is taught by a specialised art teacher, classes usually take place in a designated art classroom. However, if the lessons are conducted by the generalist teacher, classes usually take place in the universal classroom, and they usually do not enable students to gain rich experience by exploring different art materials and tools. The purpose of the research is to examine possibilities for unguided artistic expression among students outside of formal art classes, specifically during recess and transitions before or after class in the universal classroom.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Questions

We were interested in the unguided artistic expression that takes place outside of class (during recess and before or immediately after class) and posed the following four research questions:

To what extent will students use the offered space for artistic expression?

How will they approach the free selection of art materials?

What will be the attitude of students toward art activities outside of art education classes (during recess)?

How do students imagine their ideal classroom?

2.2 Participants

Twenty-one fifth-graders (12 male and 9 female) and their teacher were included in the survey.

2.3 Measurement Instruments

In the 2022–2023 school year, we offered students an art station that was intended for artistic expression outside of art education (especially during recess). A variety of materials and accessories were placed in that part of the classroom, along with various artistic challenges.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

We designed a case study to examine how the equipment and layout of spaces in a universal classroom can encourage students to spontaneously express themselves. We followed the students for 8 weeks and collected data by analyzing the teacher's observation diary, photographs of the resulting artworks, and surveys completed by the students.

3 Results

3.1 Art Activities During Recess

The students noticed the differently arranged station of the classroom. They were interested in what they could do in the art station. The teacher informed them that they could make whatever they wanted from the materials offered. In doing so, she set the condition that they clean up after themselves at the end. During the first week, the students went to the art station during each recess, collected different materials, and took them to their desks. They understood that this was a free-time

activity; only one student asked the teacher if he could engage in an art activity during class. In the first week, the students used the following materials the most:

- veneer,
- coloured sticks,
- paper straws, and
- buttons.

Among the products, architectural models (Figure 1, Figure 2) and greeting cards (Figure 3) appeared to the greatest extent (in the first week it was Valentine's Day, and four female students designed greeting cards for their mothers during the recess in the art station).



Figure 1: Student's artwork

Source: own.



Figure 2: Student's artwork

Source: own.

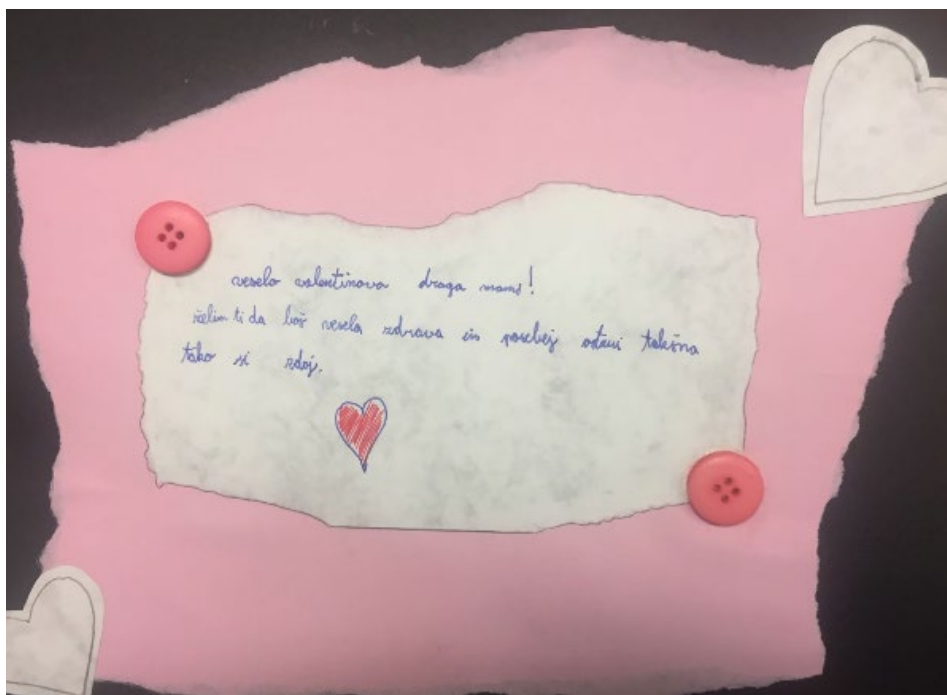


Figure 3: Student's artwork

Source: own.

In the second and third weeks, the students had less time to play with art materials because of other activities (festival, school events, a sports day). A few students asked the teacher for additional art materials (paper straws and liquid glue). The teacher noticed that, in the second week, fewer students stayed in the art station than in the first week, the students were mainly engaged in completing architectural models (Figure 4, Figure 5). On Wednesday, the students asked the teacher if they could exchange the reading recess for creative play with art materials, but the teacher did not allow it because of a prearranged agreement at school that everyone reads on Wednesdays during recess.



Figure 4: Student's artwork
Source: own.



Figure 5: Student's artwork

Source: own.

In the third week, the students realised that there was also clay in the art station. Clay had not yet been used by the students in this school year, and all the students who were present in the school in the third week (18 students) wanted to work with clay. They approached the work very spontaneously; through play, they independently discovered the characteristics of the material. The teacher noticed that after the initial game (pounding the clay, throwing the clay against the table), one group of students started to form simple shapes (Figure 6, Figure 7), while the other group spent the time during the recess by kneading the clay, pressing it, and talking to classmates. The teacher had the most problems and reservations when students were using clay. This was because she always used clay in a very planned and guided way in art classes: she first introduces working with clay to the students through the method of direct learning of art techniques, and only then does the students' independent work follow.



Figure 6: Student's artwork
Source: own.



Figure 7: Student's artwork
Source: own.

This time, however, the focus was on the independent research of art materials. Quite a few students found out, while playing with art materials, that the clay product falls apart when water is used excessively, that the pieces that are not put into a plastic bag in time dry out, and so on. Because there was a lot of interest in working with clay, the next day the teacher gave the students some guidelines for working with the material, and then the work went more smoothly.

During the fourth week, about seven students stayed in the art station, and their work went well. They made shapes out of clay, with some asking for wooden sticks to help them in their task.

After the end of the first month, we used a questionnaire to check students' attitudes towards art activities. First, we were interested in whether the students had made any art products in their free time at school. Fourteen students made two or more art works, six students made one, and only one student did not create any work of art. We also wanted to find out whether the students were satisfied with their art work. Nineteen students answered that they were satisfied with some of their products; only two students did not express satisfaction with their products. Ten out of 19 students also wrote which artwork they were most satisfied with. Five students mentioned a clay product (e.g. clay cat, clay marmot, other clay sculpture). Three students mentioned the architectural model (e.g. swing, house). One student pointed out a greeting card for his mother, and one student wrote down a car.

In addition, we were interested in whether, during this time, they had tried to do similar art work at home in their free time. Most students (18) wrote that they worked on art only in school, while three students said that during this time they expressed themselves artistically at home as well.

Furthermore, we wanted to know what the students liked the most about the art station. We sorted their responses by frequency of occurrence:

- We can create there (7 students)
- Using clay (5 students)
- There are a lot of different materials (4 students)
- We can do what we want (2 students)
- Drawing (2 students)
- Everything (1 student)

We also asked the students what materials they would like to work with but that are not currently in the art station. According to the frequency of the material, we got the following responses:

- Linoleum (7 students)
- A tree (3 students)
- Thicker sticks (2 students)
- Painting canvases and paints (2 students)

The following materials appeared only once: string, watercolour paints, crepe paper, glass, modelling clay, and Styrofoam. One student wrote that he did not want anything. Linoleum was an unexpected answer. The teacher explained that during class they did linocuts, which they really liked and wanted to continue it in the art station. Of course, this was not possible because it is a demanding technique for which the presence of a teacher is mandatory.

Finally, we were curious to know whether artistic expression is part of the students' leisure activities at home. We asked them whether they also express themselves artistically at home and, if so, what materials they use. Almost half of the students ($n = 10$) said they did not engage in art activities at home. Other students stated that they draw ($n = 5$); design products from clay, cardboard, paper, or wood ($n = 3$); paint on canvas ($n = 2$), and design with glitter ($n = 1$).



Figure 8: Cards with art challenges
Source: own.

After 4 weeks, the art station was complemented by art challenges that were printed on cards (Figure 8). Whoever wanted to could take a card and try to draw what the instructions stated (e.g. draw a door leading into space, draw a cross between a pear and a fish with one stroke of a pencil). All other materials were still available in the station.

After the end of the second month, we again checked the students' attitudes towards art activities and the art station. We asked them whether they had used the prepared cards as an art challenge and, if so, whether they liked them. Just over half of the students ($n = 11$) used the cards for the art challenge, and everyone liked the activity offered.

The students were also asked which of the activities that took place throughout the entire period in the art station would they remember the most. Here, clay came first. Almost half (10) of the students remembered the statue or architectural model of clay the most; they also mentioned making shapes with wooden sticks (2 students), drawing an insect (1 student), a swing made of different materials (1 student), and working with buttons (1 student).

Additionally, we asked them to describe their experience of exploring the different art materials in the art station. More than half of the students (12 students) responded. Two students wrote that they had fun and two said that they felt happy. Other answers appeared only once: 'super', 'beautiful', 'pleasant', 'relaxed', 'hard to describe', 'excellent', 'interesting'.

Our next question concerned what the students enjoyed most about the art station. Eleven students responded, more than half of whom answered this question wrote that they enjoyed being able to work with friends (6 answers; Figure 9). The other answers appeared only once: 'whenever the teacher gave new clay'; 'when I researched the materials'; 'when I created on my own'; 'when I created'; 'when I created with paper'.



Figure 9: Socialising with friends during an art activity

Source: own.

With the next question, we checked to see whether students had ever felt uncomfortable in the art station. Most students (17) wrote that they never felt uncomfortable. Two wrote that they were uncomfortable when it was crowded. Other answers appeared only once: ‘when it was loud’, ‘when I realised there were no straws’.

3.2 Architectural Sketch of an Ideal Classroom

In the end, we were interested in what students’ ideal classroom would be, what special stations they would have. Students were able to express their ideas in words and sketches. They wrote that they would love to have the following in the classroom:

- reading station (4 answers),
- sports station (3 answers),

- sofa (3 answers),
- garden station,
- music station,
- animal station,
- air conditioning, and
- that the classroom should be larger.

Fourteen students also presented their answers in sketches. We analysed the sketches, taking as a point of view the size of the space that students set aside for individual classroom activities.

In the first group, we included six sketches, from which it is clear that the students devoted almost half of the entire space to different activities (Figure 10, Figure 11).

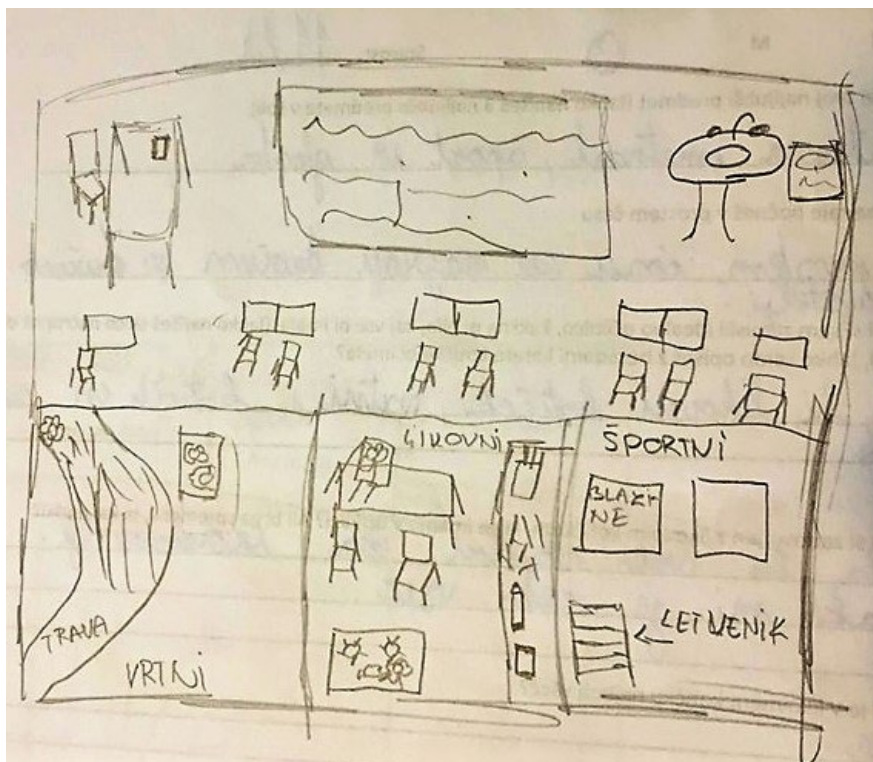


Figure 10: Classroom floor plan (Example 1)

Source: own.

Example 1: A student divided the floor plan of the classroom into two parts. In the upper part, there is a place for learning (a desk for the teacher, tables and chairs for students, a blackboard, and a sink). In the lower part, the student divided the floor plan into three units of equal size. The student placed a garden in the classroom (he specifically marked where the grass would grow); the second part is dedicated to art activities (space for art materials and art work is indicated); and the third part is dedicated to sports. The student specially marked the climbing frame and cushions.

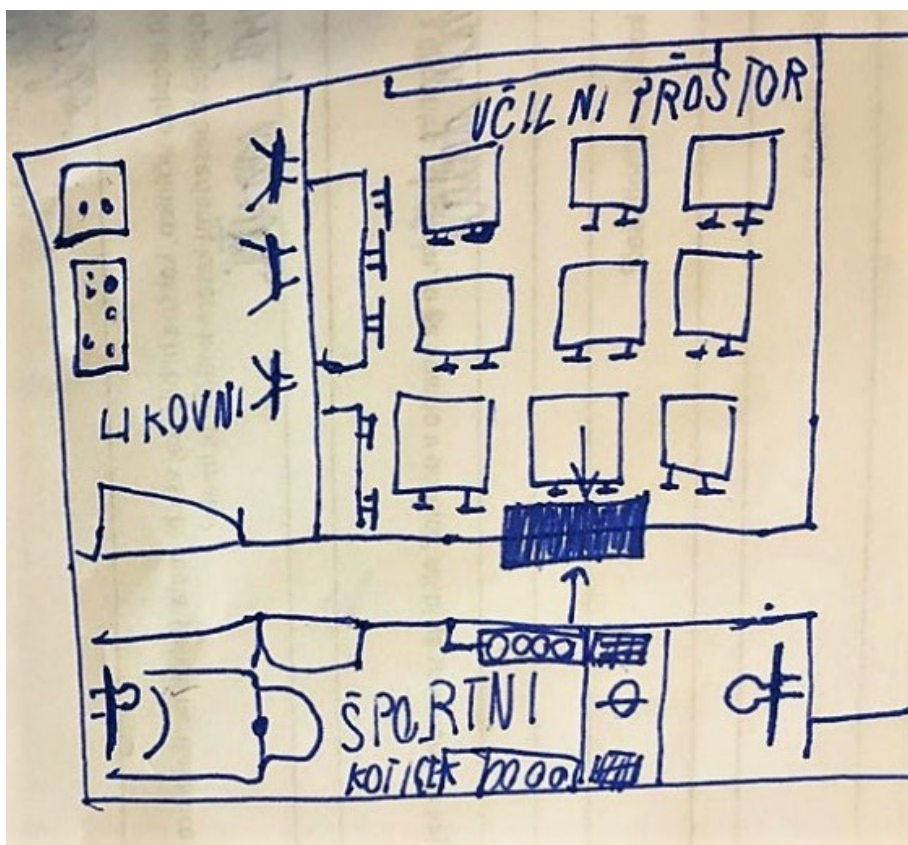


Figure 11: Classroom floor plan (Example 2)

Source: own.

Example 2: The student divided the floor plan into the upper part, which is wider, and the lower part, which is narrower. He divided the upper part into two spaces. The left part is slightly smaller and is intended for art activities (the student placed

tables and easels for painting in this space). The larger space next to it is dedicated to a classroom (tables, chairs, blackboard). In the lower part, a longer and narrow space is dedicated to sports (a basketball court and a football court are marked).

In the second group, we included four sketches in which students placed stations on the edge of the classroom, which occupied a smaller part of the space (Figure 12, Figure 13).

Example 3: The student took into account the floor plan of the existing classroom. The central part of the classroom is dedicated to tables and chairs for students. On the left side there is a school blackboard on the wall, and in the lower left station are a table and a chair for the teacher. There are many cupboards placed in the back of the classroom. The student also added an art station to the classroom, a space for relaxing, with a sofa, and a place for lunch.

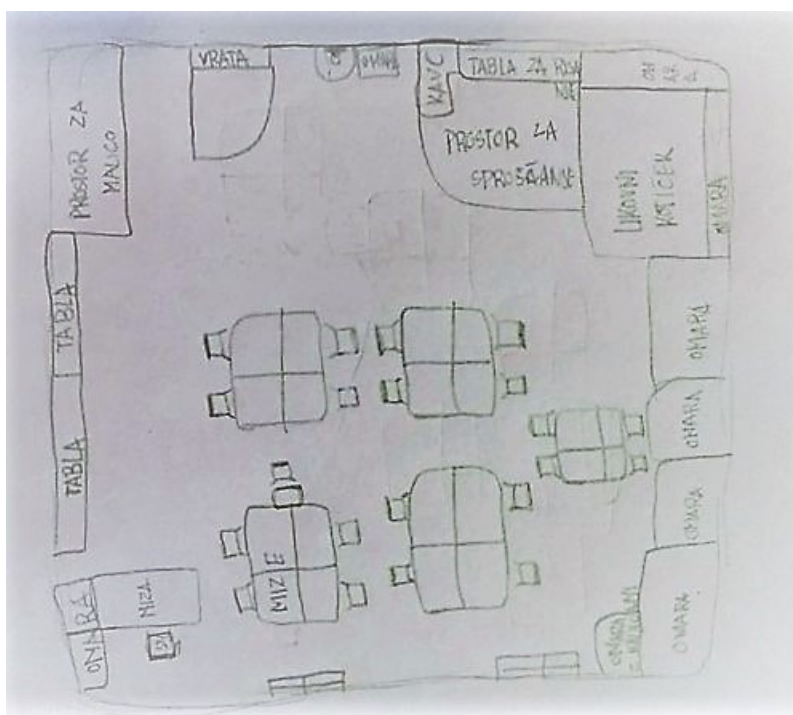


Figure 12: Classroom floor plan (Example 3)

Source: own.

Example 4: In the front of the classroom, the student placed a desk for the teacher and a large air conditioner. There are desks for students in the central part. In the back part of the classroom are an art station, cupboards, and a sofa.

In the last category, we included four sketches from which stations are not visible, the central part of the classroom is occupied by tables, some less common items have been added (e.g. a sofa; Figure 14, Figure 15).

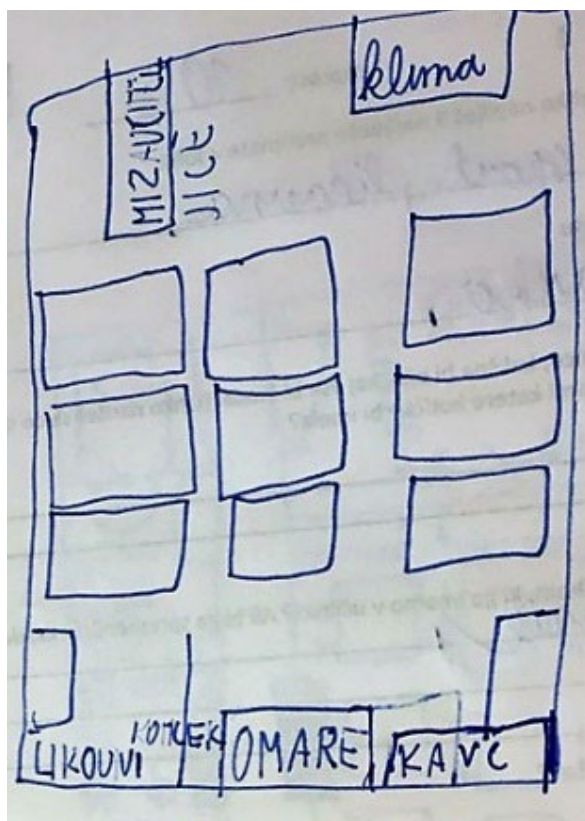


Figure 13: Classroom floor plan (Example 4)
Source: own.

Example 5: The student did not set up stations for special activities in the classroom. He used words to mark individual objects, namely, a door, a cupboard, a table, a chair, and a computer. The classroom seems very large and spacious.

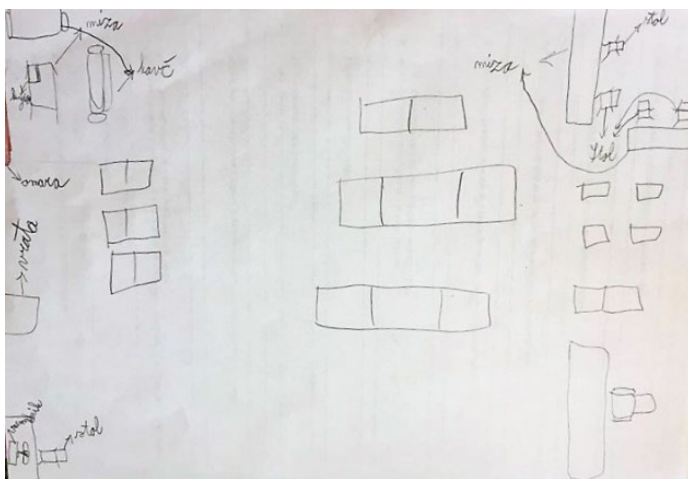


Figure 14: Classroom floor plan (Example 5)

Source: own.

Example 6: The student designed a very spacious classroom. In the central part, there are tables and chairs for students. The classroom also has a large desk for the teacher, a large blackboard, a couch, a special drawing board, and a sink.

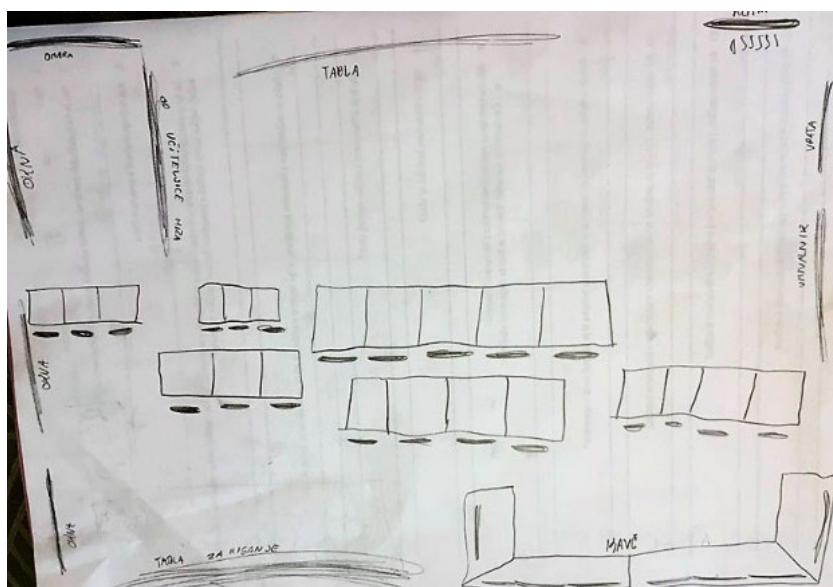


Figure 15: Classroom floor plan (Example 6)

Source: own.

From the analysis of the students' architectural sketches, we can conclude that all the spaces planned by the students are much more spacious than the existing classroom in which the students have lessons every day. Eight students used their existing classroom as a starting point when designing their ideal classroom. As many as six students imagined a completely new layout of the classroom that includes very specific elements for individual activities. The indoor garden is certainly among the most unexpected spaces to be found in the classroom.

3.3 Interview with the Teacher

At the end of the survey, we conducted an interview with the teacher. First, we were interested in why she had decided to arrange an art station in her class. The teacher stated that students often do not know what to do during recess, so she decided to offer them different activities. At the beginning of the school year, they arranged a play station, but because not all students like to play – some are calmer (i.e. not rambunctious) – and prefer to express themselves artistically, she decided to offer them a creative station. Additionally, activities in the art station were intended for students who finished their schoolwork earlier, allowing them to choose between reading and creative activities.

We were also interested in how satisfied the teacher was with the art station and what the greatest advantages and disadvantages were. The teacher noted that the art station proved successful, as the students were happy to go there. However, the size of the space was a challenge; it was too small for everyone, causing the work to spread throughout the entire classroom. Initially, students 'forgot' the rules of working in the stations and, for example, did not tidy up after themselves. After a conversation the teacher held with her students, the situation improved. Since the clay material used at the station dries quickly, the teacher provided zip bags for storing smaller pieces of clay. Other general challenges included storage of art works, drying of creations, an abundance of created pieces, and the overall lack of classroom space. In such cases, the teacher would need more furniture. She also noted that cleaning utensils for artistic expression was difficult due to having only one sink and cold water in the classroom.

Moreover, the teacher recognised that this approach provided additional opportunities for artistically gifted students to express themselves through creative activities.

4 Discussion

In this short study, we found that the organisation of a classroom art space had a significant impact on students' spontaneous engagement with art materials. Our results cannot be generalised because of the nature of the case study, but they can provide us with a better insight into the understanding of the importance of the learning space. The arrangement of space in a classroom is not only a matter of practicality but can also reflect the teacher's attitude towards learning and teaching (cf. Park & Choi, 2014). In our case, the teacher consciously decided to offer the opportunity to play with art materials during recess and thus also the possibility of creative expression for the students. We found that even small adaptations of the learning space can encourage students to express themselves with art materials during recess.

Most of the students used the art station and created art works with different materials. The students chose art materials very spontaneously, often choosing the same ones, which means that they frequently were grouped into pairs or smaller groups. The material, not the teacher, dictated the composition of these groups. Clay was generally the most popular art material among students. This, of course, does not surprise us, for two reasons. First, in art classes students have clay available only occasionally; other art materials are more often present and used. Second, clay has therapeutic properties: modelling clay can have a significant impact on students' well-being (Wong & Au, 2019). Kimport and Robbins (2012, p. 77) proved in their study that 'a 5-minute period spent manipulating clay produced more mood enhancement than the same amount of time spent manipulating a soft stress ball'. Therefore, we are not at all surprised that some students used the recess time to talk with their classmates while pressing the clay, without focusing on the end result.

We also found that socialising with friends was an important aspect of spending free time in the art station during recess. Socialising during recess is of an informal nature and at the same time very important for students, as confirmed by a study in which researchers examined the importance of mealtimes for students, finding that

students enjoy mealtimes because they can talk freely with their classmates about things that are important to them (cf. Baines & MacIntyre, 2022).

In addition, we were interested in how students imagine their ideal classroom. One can see in the students' architectural sketches that they would like a larger space with more diverse equipment for different activities. The small size of the classroom and the availability of only cold water made both the students and the teacher unhappy. Nevertheless, in our case study, the space (art station) encouraged the students to devote their free time to playing with art materials and creating art works. However, this required a great deal of engagement from the teacher, namely in regard to the rearrangement of furniture, the collection and adoption of materials for artistic expression, the recycling of waste material, and an understanding of the importance of artistic expression outside of art education classes (during recess).

The teacher also recognized possible implications for working with artistically gifted students. Play is essential for these children as it provides a space for them to explore their creativity and express their unique perspectives (Beisser et al., 2013). Engaging in playful activities, particularly with art materials inspired by the art station and art challenges, allows artistically gifted students to experiment with different techniques and concepts. Engaging in free play provides a safe space for exploration, where children can learn to navigate their environment, develop autonomy, and communicate their ideas effectively (Shively & Taylor, 2023). In addition to free play, a creative environment is essential for gifted students, as it provides the supportive conditions needed to cultivate their unique talents (Lee et al., 2021). The teacher transformed the classroom into a creative environment with minimal material changes. This restructured classroom positively influenced engagement and motivation, allowing children to fully explore and develop their abilities.

It is important to emphasise that this study employs a case study design with a small convenience sample, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, we can highlight two important conclusions. First, in the art station, the emphasis is on free play with art materials and experimentation. This activity basically follows the goals of art classes but is not time-limited in the way that a formal art class is. In the art station, students could play with the materials over a longer period of time; the final product was not important. If such an art station were available throughout the entire school year in the context of free time in school (e.g. during recess), it

would provide many opportunities for artistically gifted students, allowing children to fully explore and develop their abilities. Second, there is the social aspect – that is, socialising with friends and working together. In art classes, students work individually, in pairs or groups, depending on the task. The teacher, not the students, usually chooses the form of work. The art station provides more freedom. In both situations, students can develop social skills, but in the art station students can also retreat, work alone, calm down, and so on.

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About the authors

Janja Batič, PhD is an assistant professor for art education at the Faculty of Education at the University of Maribor, Slovenia. She has more than eighteen years of experiences working with future classroom teachers. Since 2019, Janja Batič has been educating future art teachers at the Department of Fine Arts. Her research area includes art education, visual literacy, multimodal literacy and picture books research.

Mag. **Petra Lebar Kac** completed her Master's degree in Education at the primary level at the Faculty of Education in Maribor and graduated in Pedagogy from the Faculty of Arts in Maribor. She works as a classroom teacher and educator at Janko Padežnik Primary School in Maribor. She is active in several areas, such as preparing the curriculum for visual arts, working with Roma and foreign students, and exploring various aspects of classroom activity, including formative assessment and creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

