What else can art do in working with children around sensitive topics? A qualitative systematic review

*Marian Tumanyan, Tuija Huuki
University of Oulu, Finland

Art has a special place in society, including the lives of children and youths. Beyond purely aesthetic boundaries, art possesses social and psychological values and capacities. The affective turn in the humanities and in social sciences has, in recent years, allowed various potentialities of art to surface. However, to our knowledge, few studies have investigated comprehensively the potentialities of arts in the fields of education and childhood research. Even fewer studies have examined specifically the use of the arts with children in relation to topics they find difficult to communicate or too painful to express. This study aims to scrutinise the currently existing literature in order to identify ways of using the arts to work with children on sensitive issues, and to explore the potentialities of arts-based methods in education and childhood research in general. To that end, we have conducted a qualitative systematic review, performing electronic searches via specific keywords of the databases Proquest, Ebsco, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. We also looked for publications in reference lists and social media networks. We sorted published peer-reviewed articles and scientific anthologies from 1997 to 2017 according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, criteria that was met by twenty-three studies. We demonstrate that, in work with children on sensitive issues, art has been used as one, tools of psychological therapy; two, as a means of recognising and surfacing previously invisible acts, voices, and histories; three, as tools for transforming children’s unequal cultures; and four, to expand children’s capacities and communications. Moreover, informed by recent feminist new-materialist and post-human theories and studies, art has been used, five, to provide methodological instruments enabling the capture of events and phenomena that traditional methods of research might not access easily. This presentation will focus on the methodologies and affordances of the arts in mapping material, affective, and more-than-human dimensions and on non-linear meaning-making processes in children’s relations.

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