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# The positive influence of art activities on poor communities

## ABSTRACT

1. *For the author, art education in very poor areas means extended pedagogical*
2. *work that focuses not only on the children and the goals of art education, but*
3. *also the social-educational background of the children's families, the communities*
4. *they live in. The article gives two distinct examples (from Hungary) of how the*
5. *teachers got the families of the children involved in visual art activities in order*
6. *to promote cohesion in the village communities and the families, to provide posi-*
7. *tive models for the children, and – in some cases – also ensure some income for*
8. *the family*

9.

## ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

10. *A művészeti nevelés a hátrányos helyzetű területeken a szerző számára olyan*
11. *kiterjesztett körű pedagógiai tevékenységet jelent, ami nem csupán a gyerekekre*
12. *és a művészeti nevelés céljaira fókuszál, de foglalkozik a gyerekek családjainak,*
13. *közösségeinek szociális-kulturális hátterével is. Az írás két olyan esetet ismertet,*
14. *amelyek során a tanároknak sikerült a gyerekek családjait is bevonni vizuális*
15. *művészeti tevékenységekbe, hogy ezáltal erősítsék a falu, illetve a családok közösségét,*
- 16.

## KEYWORDS

visual story telling  
cooperative painting  
community building  
needlepoint

## KULCSSZAVAK

vizuális  
történetmesélés  
kooperatív festés  
közösségfejlesztés  
hímzés

1. In Hungary children are considered underprivileged if they live in families whose income per capita is below the officially declared minimum subsistence level. Children whose parents never finished secondary education are considered especially underprivileged.
2. Basic art schools provide extra-curricular activities. They are not part of any particular school, they serve the needs of schoolchildren of different ages, coming from different schools in certain neighbourhoods. They serve to complement compulsory school education, and so are meant for children who have a keen interest in one form of art or another. Any child may attend them; there are no special entrance criteria.

*a gyerekeknek így pozitív példát mutatva és bizonyos esetekben a családoknak némi jövedelmet is biztosítva.*

Soon after I began my work as an art educator in an extremely poor area of Hungary, I realized that in order to achieve lasting results with underprivileged<sup>1</sup> children, their families - in fact, the whole community they live in - must be taken into consideration.

Twelve years ago I created a framework for what I believed was “effective” art education. This is Igazgyöngy (“real pearl”) Foundation, based in the village of Berettyóújfalu in South-East Hungary, one of the poorest parts of the country. The Foundation operates a basic art school<sup>2</sup> in six different locations in the area, subsidised partly by the state, partly by donations. We educate 670 children, 70% of whom are underprivileged; 250 live in deep poverty, most coming from gipsy families.

The school focuses on visual arts education, which has been successful since the very beginning. Our students have won many prizes at national and international student art exhibitions (500 on average each year).

What makes our school special is that the focus is on complex personality development – which noticeably improves students’ motivation for learning at school – as well as personal and interpersonal competencies, which improve their chances in life.

My colleagues and I developed a number of assignments for the children that contribute to bridging the educational gap by helping them develop their fine motor skills, observe and interpret the visual world, grasp the essence of phenomena, and improve their logical thinking. These assignments also help to naturally integrate different fields of learning.

However, we soon realized that the problem of socially integrating these underprivileged children can not be solved inside the school alone. Most of them grow up in families where the parents are undereducated and unemployed, so the children have no positive examples to follow. Therefore, the Foundation mapped the areas of possible positive intervention. Our focus was on three closely linked areas: education, family care and community development. We also realised the need to improve cooperation between the institutions responsible for these areas.

Our family care activities aim to create a partnership with the parents, to help the families develop more liveable surroundings and outline a possible future for these underprivileged children. We have developed a number of good practices that have proven to have visible results and have also been adopted by other communities. These include the home garden programme, making bio-briquettes (fuel blocks) for heating, restoring their houses, health programmes etc.

In order to improve village communities, we have started to extend our art education practice and involve the parents as well. During the art workshops we organised for the children in the small villages, we noticed that parents were willingly taking part in the various arts and crafts activities. They joined in when we were decorating the village hall and the nursery school with wall paintings. Later, when a sponsor made it possible for the children to paint on stretched canvases, we invited a well-known gipsy story teller and suggested that the children choose an episode from one of the stories they were hearing and depict it with acrylic. They could take the canvases home and the whole family could join in on completing their initial composition.

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1. Our stories – Planning the compositions



2. While the older children prepare a new painting, the little ones need to be occupied, too



3. Our stories – The family helping to complete the painting



4. Our stories – Posing with the picture in process



5. Our stories - Judit Kiss and Zsófia Kiss; The poor man and his daughter



6. Our stories – A friend helping



7. Children at home in the summer



8. Our stories – Norbert Mohácsi: The cunning servant



9. Our stories – Tibor Zsigmond: Peartree John



10. Our stories – Tibor Juhász, Endre Gyöngyösi: Nine riddles of the Devil

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1. This cooperative family action led us to our most recent project in which we  
 2. get the parents involved in a more purposeful, planned way. We are trying to  
 3. teach them some traditional handicrafts, which would allow them to perform  
 4. some meaningful activities other than their daily duties, as well as give them  
 5. a possible source of income. We have started teaching them needlepoint. We  
 6. gave them some motifs traced from their children's drawings, small pieces  
 7. of needlepoint canvas, and showed the mothers the various stitches. These  
 8. women had never done any embroidery before; they are undereducated, some  
 9. of them are illiterate. After several meetings, much discussion and encourage-  
 10. ment, we managed to get 15 women (most of them gipsies) to do needlepoint  
 11. pictures in one of the segregated villages.

12. The embroideries were a bit stiff at first, and the choices of colour were  
 13. also quite faint. Despite this, they were pleased with their own first accom-  
 14. plishments, and grateful that we were supportive. Then we showed them the  
 15. original drawings of the children. As had been our intention, they felt encour-  
 16. aged by this; their use of colour became bolder and they started to use their  
 17. imagination much more. By the third attempt, they did not need any further  
 18. instructions; many of them started to use a wider range of stitches, seeking  
 19. original solutions.



11. Needlepoint – A group of the women



12. Needlepoint – The first collection



13.–15. Needlepoint – the ready products



16. Needlepoint – Mrs Móni Balog



17. Needlepoint – Kludia Balog



18. Needlepoint – Katalin Mohácsi

Afterwards, the small images became the central parts of patchworks used for textile objects, like bags. In a neighbouring village, one of our volunteers had been teaching women to sew the bags. We are planning to teach them to produce other objects as well (glasses or pencil cases, for example), decorated with embroidery that bears the naive charm of children’s drawings. We also mean to widen the range of handicrafts in these communities, and involve the men as well, for most of the people who live here have not the qualifications to take a job – even if there were any available ones.

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19. While their mothers are learning, the older children look after their siblings



20. Husband watching her wife learn a new technique of painting

Our first attempts have convinced us that these art activities will have a strong positive influence on the community, as well as strengthen the self-esteem of the individuals, provide the children with a possible model and ensure some income for the family.

The idea of linking handicrafts to solving social problems has already been applied in many other places. What really is new here, however, is the use of the children's original drawings as a basis for the embroideries, which creates a bridge between children, parents and grandparents, while also linking generating income to creating valuable objects. Several generations work together – this team effort strengthens family ties, and the sense of belonging to the community.



21. Nóra commenting on the drawing of one of her students



22. Nóra discussing problems with Mária, a mother of seven

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