

*The funambulist strategy: art-educators-researchers in the
classroom*

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The paper draws on a two-years project involving a group of art-educators-researchers from the Faculty of Fine Arts/University of Porto, 10 classes of 1st and 2nd grade pupils (total of 189 children) in 5 primary schools, and their respective teachers (9 in total), in Felgueiras, Portugal. The project is named LABEA – Laboratory of Research in Arts Education – Felgueiras, and consists of a pilot project in the area of Arts Education aimed particularly at teacher training. In Portugal, primary education teachers are generalist and have not specific training in arts. This often leads to an idealization of artistic areas, and consequent instrumentalization in favor of other curricular knowledge. If, on the one hand, we from the Faculty of Fine Arts were hired on the basis of an instrumental principle - the effectiveness of art in reducing school ‘failure’ -, our critical position as art-educators-researchers forces us to raise several questions. We will try to address some of them throughout this text, especially the aporia in which we have often found ourselves during these two years, a position of going back and forth which we call the funambulist strategy.

The arts in primary education in Portugal

Historically, arts education has occupied both privileged and secondary places in political and educational discourses. Whilst it is valued for the cultural and symbolic capitals that it fosters (a discourse produced by cultural elites and based on a policy of taste and consumption), it is also taken as an ‘adornment’ in schools’ menus, where knowledge that apparently is more fitting with the needs of capitalism and of neoliberal societies stands out. Nowadays this second strand tends to transform itself with a rhetoric around creativity and the training of the future citizen as a creative, autonomous and flexible subject (Assis, 2019; Martins, 2020).

Despite being considered important by teachers for the emotional (and disciplinary) balance of the children, school time dedicated to areas of expression is often more reduced than recommended in curricular matrices, as discussed elsewhere (Martins & Alves, 2015; Martins, Pereira, & Sousa, 2017). The pressure of the so-called ‘serious’ knowledges (Portuguese, Mathematics and Environment Studies) tended to push the expressive areas to the margins, or to an existence adapted from the molds established by other knowledge types, resulting in tasks to be solved in an exercise book. On one hand, although aware that the ongoing time reduction weakens the teaching of the expressions, when it is time to choose which disciplinary area to shorten, a disconcerting consensus falls on the arts. On the other hand, the emptiness created by the lack of critical referents in the pedagogical practices of 1st cycle teachers, with a markedly generalist training, would lead to the reproduction of ways and strategies from activity books and school manuals for the development of the curricular areas of artistic expressions in the short workload assigned. Once a pedagogy of repetition had been installed, the kind of work dedicated to artistic expressions did not differ, in its shape, from the idea of exercise developed in other curricular subjects, although in terms of content it would distance itself substantially, due to an installed common sense that art subjects are closer to *playfulness* than to specific forms of knowing. If this perspective can lead to attitudes in which the teacher places herself in a protective position on behalf of a naturalized childish expressiveness, it also leads, occasionally, to an approach of spending time, disciplining the infantile bodies in an individualised relation with themselves, for instance by painting drawings inside contours defined by the exercise sheet.

We realised that our presence in the classroom was valued, whether because it was considered that we knew how to do things that the teachers did not know, or because we could articulate the arts with other knowledges – the so-called ‘serious’ knowledges - which eventually would define the success of the students. We also perceived that the LABEA project was welcomed in the classroom not as a motor of destabilization but as a useful instrument reinforcing the power logics (of the knowledges, the assessments, the practices) inscribed in

the school system.

A funambulist strategy

Thinking about teachers' expectations regarding the place that a group of art-educators-researchers may occupy in 1st and 2nd grade classrooms emerged as one of the initial moments of inquiry upon the latent tensions between what we considered to potentially act as part of a propositional criticism of arts education, and the work logic and expected outcomes presented to us as an essential part of their teaching work.

How to subvert the rules of the game beginning with our own action? How to think about arts education disconnected from the logics of manufacture, textbook instructions, and the ancillary role towards 'serious' school subjects in the combating of academic failure? And how do we propose activities whose development is not to be always linear? How could we, as strange presences in those schools, initiate such negotiation with the teachers?

The beginning of the of the project was configured as a propositional phase of activities on the part of LABEA, which proceeded to plan proposals within the scope of expressions, articulating them with the contents contained in the curricular matrices of this and other school subjects. In face of many contradictions and under the pretext of creating connections, we found ourselves involved in practices that, as a principle, articulated arts education with mathematics or Portuguese, or in activities that changed formats and scenarios but did not pinch the matrix of the arts, still understood as manufactured products, as playful moments, and as a space for the free expression of children. Nevertheless the activities that we carried out in schools were seemingly different from those previously happening. They were different in formats, in the type of work that they tried to activate with the children, and we were hoping that from there we could involve teachers and then proceed to a bigger transformation.

We adopted a funambulist strategy, in which our actions were marked by a back and forth over a thin line, in which we sometimes risked breaking with more evidently schooled logics, and other times we decided to give in in some aspects, considering that the transformation process could never be imposed, but progressively negotiated. In internal team meetings, we discussed these dilemmas and realized that in the initial proposal of our actions in the project, we were being more conciliating than problematizing.

It was in the group's common interest to idealize activities that potentially destabilized the issues raised previously - and to which the funambulist strategy had to conform to within the negotiation -, seeking to introduce the unexpected and collaborative work, dispelling the ideas of authorship and individual work, as well as ideas related to commitment to a result that is predefined/expected or to a "recipe" that applies for specific purposes. The idea of exploring

activities that emerged from the events, using non-formal methodologies such as adaptation to space, conversation circles and group dynamics, proved to be a possibility for us to promote work processes (rather than products), and involve children in a creation not fixed to a known result, but that adapts to their interests, rhythms and interpersonal dynamics. In this way of working, we realized that joint decision-making (involving the LABEA researchers, teachers and pupils) about the direction that the activities would take, originated moments of work that spanned several weeks (even in the absence of the LABEA members), since the voices of all the intervening groups were considered active and important.

The recognition of engrained practices in each school and, simultaneously, the establishment of a relationship with the teachers and with the children, implied a funambulist strategy, where the balance achieved would never be stable; it implied advances and setbacks, concessions and the possibility of rupture. We know that uninstalling routines is a difficult task, especially when it involves questioning a school grammar based on the principles of individualism, efficiency, productivity, and competition. The desired disrupting character would manifest itself more or less vehemently from breakdowns of a certain ambiguity or subtlety, such as neglecting individuality by proposing collectivity, or replacing two-dimensionality for three-dimensionality, or drawing to ignite conversations and gesture. A funambulist strategy thus lives on tenuousness, ambiguity and subtlety, as a way of uninstalling the known, and thus preventing a step greater than the leg that would definitely jeopardize the relational side, and also living aware of the inescapable reason of the short contact time for this project and its limiting circumstances. Funambulism is, for all these reasons, a practice that perseveres and has a distant, mediate horizon.

Final comments

If we are conscious that the LABEA project appears propelled by the aim of combating school failure, we must, first of all, question what is school failure, before it applies as a label that defines the failure of certain children from practices that necessarily exclude and will continue to exclude in the school system. The success of the students is usually understood through the demonstration of acquired schooled knowledge, pointed out in the curriculum and fulfilled by strategies conceived as effective. The presence of the arts in this equation is justified as a facilitator of this acquisition, predisposing students to receive and memorize content, meanwhile made as playful as possible. On the contrary, we understood arts education practices as the possibility of disrupting with these schooled rationalities, and we saw our-funambulist-selves involved in contradictions and ambiguities that made clear that a collaborative work is never predictable neither straightforward.

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