

2. ART-BASED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES. PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY ON COMMUNITY-BASED URBAN AND RURAL REGENERATION PROJECTS

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Abstract: *Social pedagogy stands out as an interdisciplinary field concerned with social and educational interventions, which aim to facilitate human well-being by preventing and improving the deficiencies that lead to the achievement of individual potential and adaptation to society. The practical-applicative nature of social pedagogy involves the involvement of interdisciplinary teams of specialists in approaches aimed at identifying people or communities in difficulty, including, analyzing problems and effects and outlining customized intervention strategies in order to provide experiences aimed at optimizing the capacity of social adaptation. The methodological spectrum of the intervention plans has flexibility and allows applications with different degree of amplitude following the individual axis – community – society. Given the methodological diversity of social and socio-educational intervention projects, in this paper we will focus on strategies based on artistic activities. We will bring to the fore the impact of art consumption from both perspectives, of the warm universe related to the individual creator of artistic products and the cold universe, which reflects the valences of consumerism.*

In addition, we will highlight the potential benefits of involvement in artistic activities, referring to research evidence that has confirmed the link between art and improving quality of life across multiple sectors of private or community life. Art-based interventions respond to a high degree of applicability, for this reason we have summarized to offer some examples of community projects that capture the innovative approach of urban and rural regeneration on Romanian territory.

Key words: *arts, intervention projects, social pedagogy, individual, community*

1. Social Pedagogy and Community Intervention

Current perspectives describe social pedagogy as a hybrid field, simultaneously covering a concept, a discipline of study, but also a set of practices, which can be characterized by dynamism, openness, interdisciplinarity and perpetual change (Úcar, 2013, p. 3). Social pedagogy turns its attention to both social and pedagogical domains, with strong interdisciplinary connections to social work services (Schugurensky & Silver, 2013; Stephens, 2013). At a conceptual level, a broad range of interchangeable terms can be observed which emphasize how the discipline is constituted according to traditions, thus multiple names (*basic education, lifelong education, adult education, popular or mass education, community development, mass culture*) have been observed, depending on the experiences of the socio-cultural space it targets.

All these conceptual similarities point to a common reality which is the main focus of the field, namely "*the practical action of educating people throughout their lives*". The definition by Cannan et al (1992) encapsulates the multidimensional nature of social pedagogy, as it is considered a perspective that includes both social and educational action, with the aim of promoting human well-being through care and education practices in order to prevent and ameliorate social and educational

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dysfunctions of vulnerable people to facilitate social integration and adaptation (p. 73) According to Juha Hämäläinen (2015, 2019), social pedagogy is the field of research and theory concerned with the tension between the autonomy of the individual and the demands of the society in which he or she is situated. According to the author, the main purpose of this field aims, through its practicality, to alleviate the shortcomings related to social inequalities.

According to the British approach, social pedagogy is an integrative field, built on a broad theoretical framework that includes educational, health and psychological services and employs a wide range of strategies with the intention of supporting socially maladjusted people through the training of a variety of skills, including creative and life skills (to see *Department for Education and Skills*, 2006, p. 50). Analyzing the perspective of Romanian pedagogues, we observe that the areas of interest of social pedagogy extend in two directions: firstly, the correct questioning of the causes and factors of social inequalities, and secondly, the attempt to find educational solutions appropriate to the social situation, such as those targeting poverty, marginalization, social oppressions, risk behaviors (Neacșu, 2010; Ezechilu, 2015).

Juha Hämäläinen (2012) outlines three main systems of action in social pedagogy: the pedagogical, community and social work levels, each of which has a key role in promoting social inclusion and social development. The pedagogical level focuses on embedding education in social structures and harnessing them as educational resources (Hämäläinen, 2019). In addition, Smith (2009) emphasizes the importance of the social context in developing educational practices that are adapted to the needs of the community.

From the community perspective, Hämäläinen emphasizes the role of the local community as a fundamental space for developing social cohesion and preventing discrimination, an idea also supported by Slovenko and Thompson (2016), who consider the community as a central pillar of social pedagogy with visible extensions in what we call informal education. Finally, the social work approach proposed by Hämäläinen aims at integrated interventions targeting vulnerable people to reduce social exclusion and poverty. This insight is confirmed by Payne (2014), who argues that effective social services require interdisciplinary integration between education, community and social policy. Thus, Hämäläinen's perspective reflects a holistic approach to social pedagogy, interconnecting education, community and social support to address contemporary challenges.

Intervention projects based on the principles of social pedagogy use action research to identify the needs of vulnerable communities with the aim of implementing strategies to contribute to their mitigation (Kirkwood et al., 2019). These projects are mainly aimed at promoting social inclusion and individual and collective well-being through participatory and transformative strategies (Smith, 2020). The resources involved are diverse, ranging from human (multidisciplinary teams, volunteers) to material and financial, adapted to the specifics of each intervention (Makwana & Elizabeth, 2022). The typology of strategies includes methods such as non-formal education, social counseling, advocacy and community development, all geared towards civic awareness and social change.

Therefore, social intervention projects become essential tools in building an

equitable and inclusive society (Ezechil, 2015). They are based on a rigorous analysis of the social context and the active involvement of the beneficiaries in the process of change. Analyzing the political and economic variables responsible for alleviating marginalization and social exclusion, Belfiore (2002) considers social projects based on artistic strategies as feasible "investments" for producing positive social change in disadvantaged communities in terms of adherence to democratic values such as participation and personal development.

2. Art as a socio-educational intervention strategy. Results of previous research

The value of artistic activities and aesthetic education is a topic often exposed in specialized literature. In addition to the formative dimension from the perspective of developing the individual's ability to reflect on the beautiful, by assimilating notions, frameworks of thinking, experiencing the creative and receiving the artistic products, researchers have also paid interest to the transformative impact of artistic activities when referring to the results of the educational process or the development of transversal competences analyzing these effects especially in the case of groups in disadvantaged or social maladjustment.

Studies have suggested that arts-based intervention projects help to increase school engagement of young people who are school dropouts by improving social integration (Kinder & Harland, 2004; Lowder et al., 2022; Balenzano et al., 2019). A notable example is the project "*Arts Integration From Vision to Implementation*" whose strategy was based on the design and implementation of lessons that integrate the arts, such as dance, music, visual arts, and theater over four years (Miller & Bogatova, 2019). Post-treatment results showed that among the classes of students who benefited from the intervention indicated that in addition to the quality of teaching and improvement of learning habits, a major change was observed in relation to students' involvement in school activities.

However, the results in terms of significant differences in terms of improvement in reading and math achievement were not significant. Similar findings also report broader studies, which caution that arts intervention educational strategies do not directly lead to better performance, but rather influence the dimension of cognitive skills such as working memory (Roden et al., 2016), visual and auditory attention (Degé et al., 2011), language development or the ability to interpret a read text (Hogenes et al., 2016). The application of arts-based interventions have also become important for inter- and intrapersonal skills (Schneider & Rohmann, 2021). For example, dance has been associated with increased sense of group belonging among children (Kreutzmann, 2018), and theater activities have been associated with higher levels of social sensitivity among adolescents (Köksal Akyol, 2018).

However, consistent results have been found in studies that included participants from economically disadvantaged social backgrounds. Optimal functioning in society and optimized well-being are among the positive consequences of implementing such strategies (Bux & van Schalkwyk, 2022; Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). Moreover, learning experiences that integrated arts education sequences delivered through partnerships between schools and local arts organizations or cultural institutions, as well as collaborations with professional

artists who have pedagogical training, have been associated with decreases in delinquent behaviors (Ezell & Levy, 2003; Bowen & Kisida, 2019). Art therapy-based strategies have been related to the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents and incarcerated or elderly persons suffering from depression. Findings promote the increased potential of art therapy as a solution for improving self-esteem, increasing self-control (Hartz & Thick, 2005; Persons, 2009), hope and life expectancies (Atherton et al., 2022; Dunphy et al., 2019).

3. The social impact of arts-based intervention projects

Since the 19th century, the attention of social researchers has focused on the role of local associations in promoting civic participation, conveying democratic values and developing institutions and organizations that compensatorially support community development. Community interventions have their roots in diverse settings, such as charitable organizations, rural development projects, democratic reform movements, among others, and the efforts of political and social organizations to integrate racial minorities (Murphy, 2014). Broadly defined, community intervention is a broad concept that refers to the design, implementation and evaluation of community services and policies that aim to influence the community as a whole (Reisch, 2012)

The adjacent purposes are particularized and flexible on a case-by-case basis. For example, some carry the infusion of the work of social activist Paulo Freire (1973) in terms of the formation of civic consciousness through the education of critical thinking and praxis as a result of reflection and action. Others have been inspired by the pedagogy of oppression developed by Augusto Boal (2008). Nevertheless, the applied strategies configure around common intentions aimed at increasing community competence, in other words developing the capacity of its members to identify their needs and solve problems (Ohmer & Korr, 2006).

In an OECD report, Winner et al. (2013) discussed arts-based strategies, the influences of which can be visible at both the individual and societal levels. Among the most important benefits of engaging in artistic activities the authors mention fulfilling the need for self-esteem, purpose and social competence - these emphasize the perspective of the creative individual. The enhancement of empathy and the ability to recognize the cognitions and emotions of others converge as benefits that empower the creator, as well as the passive viewer or consumer of art. The authors' perspectives capture two juxtapositions of involvement in artistic activities that equally emphasize art as a strategy for social integration: the passive art consumer juxtaposition and the art furnisher or active art consumer juxtaposition.

An issue often mentioned in the literature highlights a growing trend in promoting community arts projects as a strategy to address socio-community issues (Moura, 2008; Semenza & March, 2009; Huss et al., 2015). Matarasso (1997) argues that participation in artistic activities represents a broad opportunity that allows for personal and community development in equal measure, listing a number of benefits in this regard. According to the author, participation in community arts projects is an opportunity for personal development by optimizing confidence in one's own potential, improving professional skills and opening up opportunities by creating socio-professional connections that can increase employability and social

integration.

Recognized are also the contributions on increasing social cohesion by strengthening social networks at the local community level through the development of autonomy related to the organization and implementation of programs aimed at solving community problems. The author also cites benefits derived from other social domains such as increasing civic engagement with environmental sustainability, promoting healthy lifestyles and developing a lifestyle marked by creative organization.

Regarding the social impact, involvement in artistic activities is discussed as a flexible and cost-effective strategy for community development, proving to be a vital factor in enriching cultural life. Involvement in arts programs and projects, either as a creator or as a consumer, involves social interaction and dimanism in terms of value exchange (Merli, 2002; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Serving as a mirror of a community, art is a vector for the perpetuation of values that define geographic and cultural space, and social intervention projects that use artistic strategies encourage creative problem solving and release opportunities for artistic expression. Community art projects represent a strong cultural backbone, promoting tolerance, diversity and conflict resolution and become an open space for awareness and sensitization towards diversity (Newman et al., 2003).

Also, a theme frequently referred to in the literature concerns art as an intercultural practice that provides a space for cooperation, intergenerational communication or rehabilitation of people at risk and integration of groups in vulnerable situations such as marginalization or discrimination. Interventions centered on state art projects (theater, street music and dance, mural painting, graffiti, etc.), socio-cultural animation projects or support groups aiming to support talents or personal development through artistic activities (dance cubes, painting, poetry, photography, etc.) are just some of the ideas often implemented by associations and organizations concerned with alleviating social dysfunctions and creating conditions that facilitate the process of integration and adaptation of individuals to the community (Matos, 2025; Miller; 2006; Paris & Alim, 2014).

4. Urban and rural regeneration projects. Some examples from Romania

The term “urban regeneration”, often used interchangeably with the expressions “urban renewal”, “urban redevelopment”, “urban rehabilitation” and “urban revitalization”, refers to a process that aims to rehabilitate existing structures, modernize buildings and land or reuse them (Peng et al., 2015) in order to improve the quality of life of residents (Cerreta & La Rocca, 2021).

Urban regeneration, guided by a clear vision, also addresses various urban challenges, such as traffic congestion, lack of adequate open spaces, underdeveloped marginal areas, poor urban infrastructure, historic centers or pollution reduction. The process contributes to economic and social development, by creating jobs, improving social networks and stimulating the active participation of vulnerable groups. Urban regeneration projects also aim to improve the quality of public and private services, renovate, consolidate or rehabilitate public buildings and spaces, preserve, enhance and develop cultural and historical heritage, rethink urban mobility, improve accessibility and connections with surrounding areas, and build

social housing. Unlike a simplistic approach that most often involves demolition, urban regeneration is a complex process through which deteriorated areas or buildings are transformed by applying various methods, such as modernization or redevelopment.

Social interventions of urban regeneration through art are increasingly accepted, and studies that have analyzed their impact have identified several positive resonances. Urban regeneration through art often involves collaboration between the community and local artists, which can strengthen social relations and create a sense of solidarity. For example, mural art projects allow residents to express their shared visions of social tensions. Studies have shown that such interventions stimulate dialogue and sensitivity towards marginalized or oppressed groups (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). No less important are the implications in the field of *social inclusion*.

Participatory art can provide a space for dialogue for marginalized voices, contributing to reducing barriers to exclusion. In disadvantaged neighborhoods, public art often involves young people or people from minority groups, thus promoting equality and social inclusion (Miles, 2017; Putnam, 2000). Such initiatives have demonstrated an increased capacity to *rebuild trust and cooperation* between residents. Revitalizing cultural identity is another adjacent benefit of urban redevelopment. Art projects can reactivate local cultural heritage by integrating it into urban design (Landry, 2012). Community art helps to *preserve local traditions* and stories, making them relevant for future generations. This is essential in cities where industrialization or migration have weakened the connection with the past (Evans, 2009).

Of course, the *formative nature and the stimulation of creativity* are also mentioned as effects of urban regeneration projects through art (Roberts, 2000). Art projects are an excellent way to involve young people in *informal educational processes*. These activities can develop skills such as creative thinking, problem solving and collaboration. Furthermore, these can encourage young people to actively participate in the regeneration of their areas, giving them a sense of responsibility and belonging to the community. These results highlight that urban regeneration through art projects not only beautifies urban spaces, but also brings complex social benefits.

Zid Art is one of the well-known community intervention projects in Romania that enhances urban and social regeneration and street art. The association aims to create a social dialogue platform that stimulates participation in the cultural life of urban areas and the active involvement of the population in the community. The project develops in two directions. On the one side, the organization of an annual festival of street art festival in which young artists approach various subjects such as cultural and social values, environmental health issues, pollution and sensitive topics such as intergenerational communication, migration, solidarity or peace through murals. In addition to the emotional impact of the messages conveyed by the paintings' creativity and originality, the environmental aesthetics and air health are also of particular concern as the works have been executed on large surfaces (e.g. as walls of schools or residential buildings) in several cities across the country using air-purifying paints (see <https://www.zidart.ro>).

Rural revitalization initiatives are also becoming increasingly popular, with practices focusing on the development and transfer of competences and skills, in a community context where different actors and local communities are involved in a participatory process and heritage management. A well-known example is the *Albastrul* project (<https://www.albastru.ro>) which aimed to promote vernacular architecture. The program has two levels. An artistic one, called *Map of Blue Houses*, which aims at a wider project of documentation and promotion of old houses, natural materials and building crafts, activities that capture the atmosphere of villages and the challenges of the restoration process. The educational dimension sought to involve owners of vernacular houses or locals in training activities in an interdisciplinary approach to assimilate information and abolish the whole restoration process, as well as to inform and educate owners of old houses with heritage value to enable them to properly appreciate the values in their possession.

5. Conclusions

Through the present paper we aimed to highlight the major potential of social intervention projects centered on activities that combine the arts as a feasible solution to the applied methodology of social pedagogy. Programs to facilitate social inclusion and alleviate the problems that mark community life through the arts do not produce positive effects in the absence of rigorous benchmarks for their application, design and impact evaluation. Among the principles that increase the chances of success of the interventions, in addition to a clear definition of the aim, meticulous analysis of the problems, the target group and the identification of appropriate methods and resources, it is considered important to involve relevant community stakeholders, who can ensure the long-term success of the intervention project, as well as to ensure an optimal level of participation by raising awareness and critical consciousness.

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