

# Experiences of Using the Arts when Teaching About the Sustainable Development Goals on School Placement.

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## ABSTRACT

The literature regarding teaching about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the arts is limited, however, it does highlight that there is value when teaching this way. The literature suggests that the arts provide an accessible way to discuss complex issues in the classroom, provide an opportunity to reflect upon our daily lives, and inspire action for change (Comhlámh, 2011; Özsoy, 2016, Everett et al. 2009). This research project follows a self-study design and aims to explore my experiences of teaching about the SDGs through the arts on school placement. The study suggests that there are benefits when teaching about the SDGs through the arts, such as improved engagement, active learning, creativity, imagination, and enjoyment. Challenges include classroom management and insufficient time. Overall, this study concluded that there is value when teaching about the SDGs through the arts.

## INTRODUCTION

The motivation behind this study stems from my personal interest in the SDGs and the arts. After undertaking a specialism in Global Education, I developed a keen interest in sustainability and the SDGs. I believe it is important for children to learn about simple, everyday actions they can take to achieve the SDGs. I have also had a personal interest in drama, music, and visual arts from a young age. I recognise the importance of the arts in fostering creativity and imagination, and contributing towards the child's holistic development (Comhlámh, 2011; NCCA, 1999).

Additionally, I discovered that there is limited literature relating to teaching about the SDGs through the arts in Irish primary schools. My research may contribute towards this literature.

This research project aims to explore the ways in which the arts can be used when teaching about the SDGs. The study aims to examine the benefits and challenges of teaching in this way. It aims to identify the value, if any, of teaching about the SDGs using the arts. Finally, the study will highlight the ways in which practicing teachers, student teachers and teacher researchers can teach about the SDGs through the arts.

## FINDINGS

### Benefits of using the Arts to teach about the SDGs:

**Increased engagement, creativity, imagination, enjoyment:** The students responded creatively and imaginatively and were eager to share their personal opinions and responses. They also spoke about enjoying the lessons and looking forward to future lessons. These findings coincide with the literature, suggesting that the arts lead to increased levels of engagement, foster creativity, and imagination, and provide endless enjoyment (Arts for the Americans, 2013; Comhlámh, 2011; NCCA, 1999).

**Active learning:** Students should be provided with plenty of opportunities for active learning (NCCA, 1999). The lessons included a variety of active learning methodologies, including discussion, role play, conscience alley, musical performance, drawing, and debate. These methodologies lead to increased engagement and enhanced learning experiences.

### Challenges when using the Arts to teach about the SDGs:

**Classroom management:** The students got distracted easily which often disrupted the flow of the lessons. They occasionally lost focus and began to mess around. When this happened, it was often difficult to regain their attention.

**Insufficient time:** Each arts lesson was one hour long (NCCA, 1999). Often, activities needed to be completed in other lessons.

### How teachers can use the Arts to teach about the SDGs:

**Planning:** It was important to consider Covid-19 restrictions, resources, and differentiation when planning lessons.

### Lesson activities:

**-Drama:** teacher in role, conscience alley, and role-play.

**-Music:** body percussion and listening and responding to music.

**-Visual Art:** drawing activities and creating a comic strip outlining actions that can be taken to achieve the SDGs.

**Assessment:** Assessment of teaching and learning was vital to ensure lessons were successful and students gained knowledge

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for researchers, student teachers and practicing teachers.

**Establish effective classroom management strategies:** Set out specific and clear behavioural expectations at the beginning of each lesson, particularly if the class get distracted easily. These expectations should be linked to pre-existing class rules or a reward system to motivate the students to remain focused and on-task.

**Adopt an integrated approach to teaching about the SDGs:** Although lessons were taught in accordance with curriculum time allocation guidelines, there was often insufficient time to complete activities. It may be beneficial to teach one topic in detail throughout the week's arts lessons or integrate with another subject area, such as Geography.

### Recommendations for policymakers.

**Adapt the curriculum time allocation for the arts:** The value of the arts is widely recognised by researchers and policymakers, including the NCCA. For this reason, the time allocation for the Arts should be increased or more emphasis placed on the integration of the arts with other subject areas, and guidance provided to aid arts integration.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study used qualitative research approaches and followed a self-study design. It involved reflecting on my experiences of teaching about the SDGs through drama, music, and visual arts on school placement. The study was undertaken in November 2020 in a suburban Catholic boys' school in 4th class in the Munster region.

Qualitative data collection methods were used, including semi-structured reflective diaries which were supported by informal feedback from the class teacher and students' work samples. As children's work samples were used, I ensured an assent form was signed by the children and work samples were unidentifiable and had no names on them.

Bias and the Covid-19 pandemic were unavoidable limitations to this research project. However, I took steps to reduce bias by making use of the class teacher's feedback in the reflective diary. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was confined to conducting the research in one class of students. There may have been different outcomes if the research took place in a different age group, in a school that was not a Catholic school, or in a school with a different ethos.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study has concluded that there are benefits and challenges when using the arts to teach about the SDGs and that there certainly is value to teaching in this way. Similarly, there are many ways a teacher could teach about the SDGs through the arts. Recommendations have also been made based on my experience undertaking this study.

## KEY REFERENCES

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Figure 1: The Sustainable Development Goals