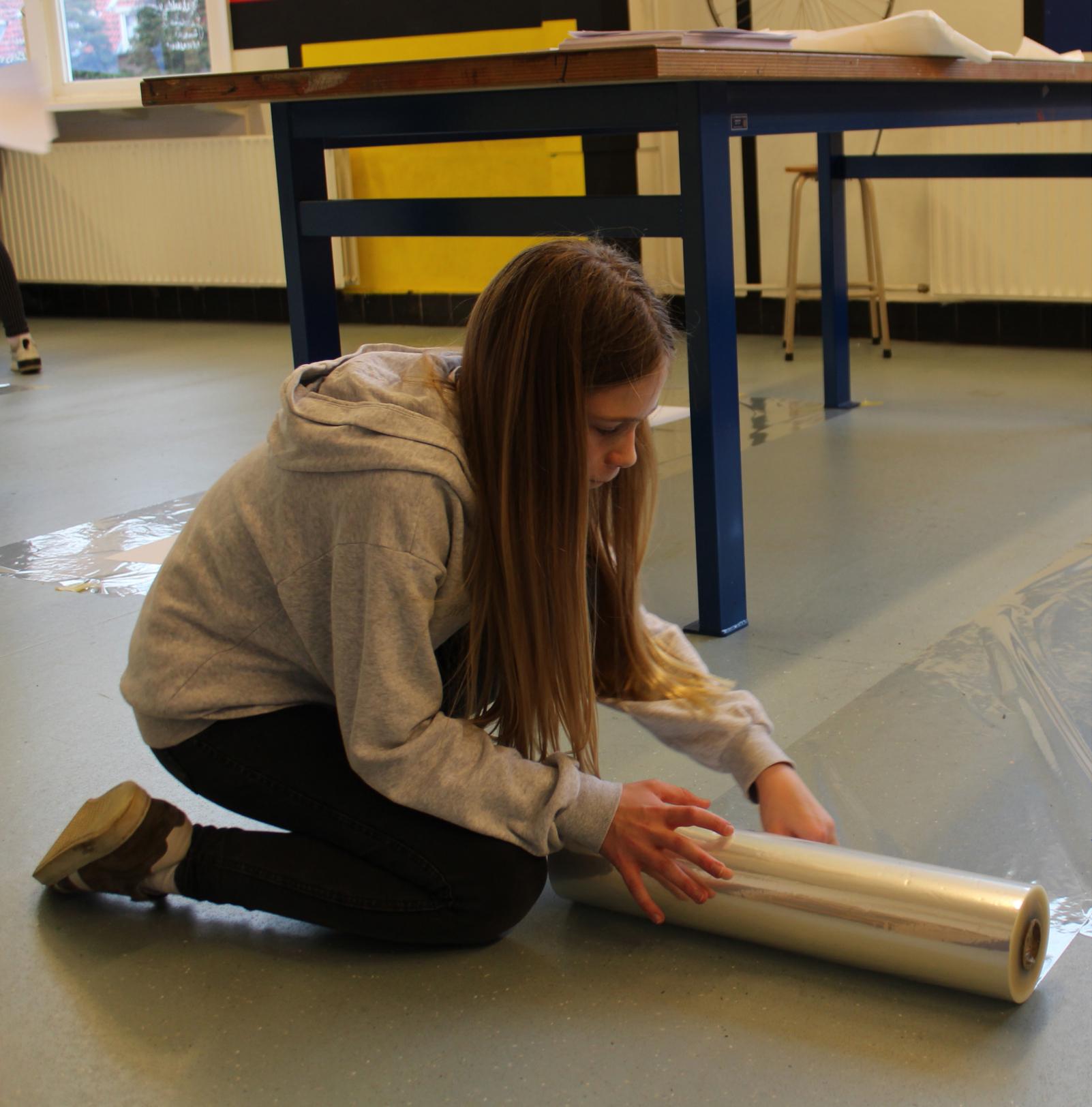




Introducing an art-educational game  
by Robert-Paul Wolters

Research thesis, MEiA, July 2020

# What if the student wore a Crown?





What if the  
student  
wore a  
**Crown?**

Let's play! 😊

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Research thesis, MEiA, July 2020

My regards to Emiel and Thijs.  
My love to Caro, Elvira and Rob.  
My respect to Michelle.  
My heart to Shannon.

Thanks for supporting me!

This document contains the theoretical foundation to a game that strives for a motivating artistic educational practice called:

*What if the student wore a Crown?*

This playful educational concept is the result of a theoretical and practical research, starting from the following research question:

*How does obtaining agency influence the artistic process of secondary school students in relation to the use of the educational space?*

The practical research took place in 2019 and first half of 2020 at the Zuider Gymnasium, Rotterdam. The students are of level atheneum (vwo) and gymnasium (vwo+). Since 2012 there is a select population of gifted students among the gymnasium students. The students who participated in interviews, experiments and who appear in the used photographic documentation were between 11 and 19 years old during this practical research.

For more information about the Zuider Gymnasium I refer to the website: [www.zuidergymnasium.nl](http://www.zuidergymnasium.nl)

# Preface:

## the challenges of a game as educational concept

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In this research I like to guide the reader through my somewhat unorthodox, even playful view on didactics and pedagogy with my secondary school students (11 – 19 years old). I am not the first to use elements of play in the classroom. I have experienced in my own practice that there is a lot of talk (or discussion) between teachers about the use of didactics like playful learning and gamification in education. However, *What if the students wore a Crown?* is designed in such a way that it is hardly a game in the more traditional sense and is significantly different from other pedagogical concepts. Although these differences will be discussed in more detail in the substantive part of my research, I would first like to dedicate a few words to redefining the words *game* and *play*, so that it is clear what I mean by these.

I was fortunate, due to circumstances, to have witnessed the creation of a play-world (a game) in a non-play-world (an art classroom). Normally, *play* can be defined as an open-ended territory in which make-believe and world-building are crucial factors, while games are confined areas that challenge the interpretation and optimizing of rules, tactics, time and space (Kampmann Walther, 2003). It goes without saying that a school is not an open-ended territory in the most *literal* sense of the word, yet the aim of this game is to disrupt the student's perception of the *physical* 'territory'. In a metaphorical sense a *mental* 'open-ended territory' can thus emerge, as the student searches for the redefinition of his own capacity to act, thus shaping artistic self-awareness and growth. This can lead to 'world-building', as long as we can see this world as a personal, *mental* world that is expanded as a result.

Students experience the school and the classrooms as a non-play-world (or a *workspace*, as I will explain in Chapter 3) in which rules apply that reduce the possibilities for free play, but these rules might also be considered as *frames of game-play*. With these rules I mean social rules, pedagogic codes and more imposed (authoritarian) rules that have to do with safety and welfare, for example, which have little or no room for manoeuvre. In the social and pedagogical rules, however, there is room for interpretation in the conception and application, which makes these rules an important basis for a playful, artistic, independent and self-responsible process. *What if the students wore a Crown?* is not only meant to let the student come to a deeper, more meaningful artistic process by means of self-reflection. It is also meant to create a different perception of the possibilities of inherent aspects of the school curriculum: time (class hours, home working time) and most of all space (a classroom or other educational space). Challenging the interpretation of these also fits in with the definition of game as mentioned earlier.

All in all, *What if the student wore a Crown?* contains a number of aspects of both game and play, though I ask the reader for an open-minded interpretation of these concepts. The rules for this game are not written in a booklet, there are no dice, no card deck, no order of play nor a game board. But at the same time: students are the players of the game, the teacher is the game leader, the classroom is the game board, the rules are mutually determined.

This being clear, I will now obtain the *agency* to theoretically substantiate my game.

*Please play along with me!*



*“I just can’t  
wait to be  
king!”*

*- Simba, 1994*



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# Introduction

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What would happen if the teacher, in the middle of a lesson with 20 students aged 13 and 14, asked the students' permission to leave the classroom, then went to the toilet, got coffee, talked to his colleague and after about 20 minutes walked back into his classroom?

Many teachers would have visions of anarchy and chaos, and wouldn't even consider letting the group of students work unsupervised for half a minute. But my pedagogical approach is not-so ordinary, and therefore this was exactly what I was experimenting with the other day.<sup>1</sup> I have to admit that the students reacted a little awkward when I asked them, "Do you boys and girls mind if I go for a pee?". After some surprised looks I got back: "Uhhh... Of course sir, no problem", after which I stayed away for almost 20 minutes. On my return, I immediately took some pictures of the situation I found, which

can be seen below. As you can see, the students were working hard, focusing in groups on their projects. Two boys were cleaning, almost polishing a table, after they had worked with wallpaper glue for a while in my absence.

For some art teachers this is an unimaginable reality, but in my practice this kind of experience is no longer rare. As a secondary school teacher in Art & Design I have been researching what happens when students obtain agency of their artistic process in relation to the use of the educational space. My research and experiments took place over the length of almost 2 years and (spoiler) my students now feel included, they are more motivated and feel more challenged. Moreover they feel seen and known, which has also improved the professional relationship with my students.



One of the main problems for every educator is that usually students *dislike* school. When I talk to some of my own students, they experience not much flexibility, tedious tasks, high pressure to deliver and little empathy in education, leading them to a lack of motivation. This is a national and growing problem among secondary school students, and this is widely recognised among teachers, educational management and the inspectorate.<sup>2</sup> At my own school, both the giftedness-coordinator and the management indicate there is still a lot of room for motivational practices, especially when it comes to the population of highly and multiple gifted children. In the context of my research, the following remark of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education concerning a lack of autonomy for the student stands out:

*“Students are hardly stimulated to use higher thinking skills. In general, the content of the lessons is aimed at reproducing and applying knowledge. Much less atten-*

*tion is paid to creating, analysing or evaluating something themselves. Students have little control over their own learning process. Sometimes students are allowed to decide for themselves the order in which they carry out the assignments in the lessons, but students have almost no influence on the content of the material”*

(Vogelenzang, 2019)

The fact that the inspectorate includes the above among the hardly ever occurring motivational characteristics is significant. Apparently, in practice it is difficult for students to take agency of their own learning process.

This game, *What if the Student wore a Crown?*, wants to prove that this is not as difficult as it seems and can even be achieved in a very playful way. This document is the theoretical foundation of this educational concept. It revolves around three key concepts that are discussed in detail in the various chapters, but which

I would like to mention and explain briefly here in the interest of a good understanding. These concept are the *Artistic Self*, *Agency* and the *Educational Space*:

1. That art and art education make a valuable contribution to the development of students, no one will dispute that. But the art profession also offers an excellent opportunity to go further than many other subjects. As I will explain in Chapter 1, an artistic process implicitly requires skills that many of my students are not familiar with. By stimulating students to experiencing this process, the *Artistic Self* is





*“Hopefully in this way  
others can share in the  
positive experiences I  
have had in my own  
practice.”*



formed. This Artistic Self can become essential if it is formed in such a way that it raises complex, personal issues that appeal to the student's own capacity to act. Reflecting on this or making the student aware of it on the other hand creates a very valuable piece of self-knowledge, as I will substantiate in Chapter 1.

2. Agency is in itself a complex concept, mainly used in a sociological context, but which needs to be redefined in the educational context. In this context, a relationship is established between the student's capacity to act and concepts such as *freedom* and *responsibility*. Chapter 2 explores this in-depth and also explains why the Crown is an appropriate metaphor for this concept.

3. The *Educational Space*, in the practice of secondary education usually the art classroom, is a fixed fact... Or isn't? By disrupting the perception of this space, by broadening the idea of the space as a workspace, the educational space can become a key determinant of students' motivation and the extent to which they can take agency over their own artistic process. This is further described in Chapter 3.

My research and experiences have provided me with insights contrary to the observance of the inspectorate. These insights have led me to create *What if the student wore a Crown?*. This game provides tools for other (art) teachers to experiment with the students ability to obtain agency of the learning process and in relation to the educational space. Hopefully in this way others can share in the positive experiences I have had in my own practice.

Robert-Paul Wolters  
Rotterdam, July 2020





# Chapter 1

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# The ARTISTIC SELF

In this chapter I explain the value I attach to the artistic process of secondary school students, which culminates in the development of the artistic Self. Through the motivational characteristics of secondary education, I will formulate a connection with autonomy as a means to arrive at the artistic Self. From here a search begins, by means of a classroom experiment, in which the students' autonomy is no longer a directed autonomy; whether students can let go of the fixed social structure and pedagogic codes that normally prevail within a classroom, and through autonomous structure thus take agency of the classroom in service of their artistic Self.



## Chapter 1: The ARTISTIC SELF

### The fretsaw issue: an introduction

It is a well-known fact in psychology that not every human choice is necessarily directly accountable. However, in situations where there are consequences for the people around us, it is necessary to explain yourself and be accountable for the things you do. I am an advocate of a permanent self-critical state: why do I act this way, why do I give this assignment, why do I assign homework or not, etc.? In my 12 years of being a teacher in Art & Design in secondary education, I have become increasingly aware that these seemingly small everyday choices have an enormous impact on how students examine the school, the art class or me as a teacher. This awareness has contributed to the development of a student-oriented vision on secondary artistic education. This started about 7 years ago, when a first-year student raised her finger during a lesson in which they were creating a 3-dimensional object using fretsaws. As soon as I had noticed her, she asked me:

*“Sir, can you explain why we have to learn how to use fretsaws?”*

I blinked my eyes, thought, and came to the conclusion that I couldn't give the answer. I could explain that learning to use a fretsaw is a means to achieve certain educational goals, such as learning elementary skills to explore the expressiveness of different artistic disciplines or learning to communicate with one's own visual work<sup>3</sup>, but is using a fretsaw an 'elementary skill' and is it a fixed technique to achieve these goals? The more I got into it, the more I became convinced this wasn't the case. This example points out one of the weaker aspects of art and cultural education as I knew (and practiced) it until recently. The importance of art, both

theory and practice, is widely emphasized. But art is also elusive, it is difficult to define. In the present day art can be considered so broadly that almost everything is art ('anything goes') and thus there is no social unanimity regarding the theory of what is and what is not art (Van Heusden, 2010). The theoretical objectives of secondary artistic education are consciously formulated in such a way that the teacher can give his or her own interpretation of what art is, which makes it difficult to find uniformity in learning objectives in practice. And if everyone sets their own trajectory, then the question is what art education is about? What's more, in practice the goal is often the making itself, the creating, in order to 'express oneself' without any direct (or indirect) underlying objective at all:

*“From the pupil's perspective, art education becomes non-committal, something that is 'pretty much' fun to do, especially if you happen to feel like it, but which is hardly relevant, has little to do with anything and therefore ultimately does not really matter.”*

(Van Heusden, 2010)

I must confess that because of the latter, my first years as an art teacher were full of uncertainties. Unconsciously I copied the didactics and assignments of teachers who taught me at secondary school in my younger years (which might be something that many young, insecure teachers do?), but sometimes seemingly small events, such as the fretsaw issue, are the beginning of rigorous changes in the organization of educational practice.

### Defining Art and deriving the Artistic Self

*“For me, art education is about looking from different perspectives and learning new techniques. It contributes to my personal development, because I start to see*



things in art or everyday life that I normally never saw, or appreciate things that I normally never appreciated. I also look at social developments from a broader perspective, because this not only has an influence on e.g. politics, but also on the art, films and music we make.”

– Judith (16)

An artistic process requires skills that many of my students are not familiar with when they enter my class the first time. Most of them are cognitively strong (they call themselves smart) but that mostly consists of general knowledge (facts) and the ability to reproduce knowledge quite easily. I see in the subject Art & Design, and the artistic process involved, a challenge for these smart children to get more out of themselves. Developing motoric skills, understanding materials and techniques and then looking for creative applications are very valuable in themselves, but what I personally find really valuable are the insights about the artistic Self that emerges from this. This might ask for some clarification. For me, art is not only about objects of more or less aesthetic value, whether or not related to a historical context. Art is also not only about skills, which provide refinement and amazement if only by mastery of great craftsmanship. What makes art special is that it is about people. By means of art objects and art expressions, the maker gives a glimpse into the personal sphere, into the Self. This requires a deep form of self-awareness and in order to achieve this state, in which experiences, emotions and self-reflection engage in an internal dialogue:

*“Selves are conscious individuals who have developed a sense of social identity through experience, emotion and reflection in a process of internal dialogue”*

(Larkins, 2019)

I also derived the concept of the Self from John Johnston, who works both as researcher, teacher and artist and uses the term in a more (artistic) pedagogical context:

*“[...] difference becomes a field of reproduction where pedagogic practice takes place. My aim is to disrupt this field by placing an emphasis on the process of production as a pedagogic approach that enhances the development of critical understanding. In doing so my approach aims to create ruptures in existing predications of Self and Other.”*

(Johnston, 2018)

It is precisely the visualisation of the Self, that deeper part in which personalities form ideas and concepts, make choices and make decisions, that is worth bringing to light.

In this I follow the pedagogical artistic vision of Wouter Pols, who works at the Knowledge Centre for Talent Development of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. He divides the plural meaning of the word ‘education’, derived from the Latin words *educare* (to learn, to educate = material and practical resources) and *educere* (bring to light, bringing out = mental and spiritual resources) (Pols, 2015). In this way, Pols formulates what the art teacher aims for - or should aim for - and with this he also indicates the unique educational meaning of the artistic process for these secondary school students. In addition to practical and creative skills, the artistic process provides Self-insight (spiritual, social and metacognitive), thus shaping an artistic Self. This shaping is linked, if not conditional, to the extent to which pupils are able to grasp agency in their artistic process (on which I will elaborate in Chapter 2).

Surprisingly, students at my own school know how to interpret the stated values of the art subject in practice. During an introductory lesson Art History in cluster 5G2 this has been discussed with students Job, Lizzy, Azra, Rafia, Judith, Christoffer and Livi. They have been following my art classes since the first grade and thus have a good idea of the artistic process that I value. They indicated that for them the artistic process is

mainly about learning unique skills that are not taught in other subjects, thanks to a sense of autonomy and freedom, which for them helps to develop the artistic Self:

*“I like the fact that there is room in the art classes to make mistakes, that there is actually no right or wrong. I feel a lot of freedom to develop and try out new ideas.”*

-Job (17)

*“For other courses, it must always be within the lines, for example according to the textbook or at a fixed pace. With art, we start from our own interpretation much more. It is great that we can also work outside the lines.”*

-Lizzy (16)

As we can deduct from the above, visual assignments in particular require a different way of thinking than



is common in many other subjects. It is particularly through imagination that students are stimulated to think on a completely different, personal level: how do I imagine something, what do I want to share with others, and how do I like to share it? By using creation as a medium, additional questions are raised, which are also of a technical nature: how do I want to imagine this, do I already master this technique, what do I need and what is my plan of action? Starting from such reflective questions, it is somewhere logical that the student also thinks about other important questions such as: what would I like to express, in what way do I want to express myself and what do I have to create to prove that I have learned to express something in a certain way? And with that detour I slowly come to what for me is at the heart of my artistic education: the student's own influence on the artistic process, in the broadest sense. In my practice, the student does not take the lessons as a consumer, but actively participates and owns his process, and reflects on it thus

constantly shaping the artistic Self. Although with all of the above it is undoubtedly possible for the reader to contextualize the concept of the artistic Self, I would like to come to a more explicit vision of this concept. After all, it is one of the key concepts in my educational practice as well as in this theoretical framework:

*The Artistic Self is a self-image of the students' personal identity in which he or she shows a certain degree of awareness of his/her own artistic capacity to act, obtained by approaching the artistic process (self-)reflectively and with a certain degree of autonomy.*



## Motivational practices

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At the time of the fretsaw issue, as an art educator, I found it particularly valuable for students to develop craftsmanship and artistic-aesthetic skills, without attaching much value to the process and its impact on deeper personal development. It is only since two years that I stimulate students to acquire more freedom to experiment and to make mistakes in the process. If the relationship with the student is such that naming mistakes and giving feedback does not feel like a correction but a valuable source from which to learn, then the student will probably also feel safe to take this freedom (Jones, 2007).

However this shift has made my lessons a lot more

interesting, it remains a strongly directed freedom. It is my direction that determines which assignments are done, which objectives or materials we deal with, etc. Actually, I am just open to their input and initiatives. The student is free to make use of this, but in practice students often choose not to. Especially first year students, who are not yet familiar with my somewhat idiosyncratic approach. They also think it's ok to just take the required steps and thus play it safe. This being said, for these students art has no extra value. My question was: can experiences of the 5th grade students (by 'growing with me' in my approach) be realized right at the start of an artistic learning process?

To find out, I recently had a conversation with my first year students.<sup>4</sup> I asked them why most classes are no



fun to attend? In other words, what are the demotivating factors they experience? It led to these aspects:

Lessons are demotivating (D):

- a. If they're monotonous and always the same
- b. When there is little freedom
- c. If children are loud or noisy
- d. In the case of 'closed assignments'
- e. If assignments and/or tests are too difficult

On the other hand, my students experience lessons are motivating (M):

- f. If there is room for play
- g. If there's a challenge
- h. If there are achievable goals
- i. If good grades are achieved

If we compare this input of first-year students with the results of the Inspectorate of Education based on extensive desk research and data analysis as motivating characteristics for education (Vogelenzang, 2019) we

notice that a number of the points mentioned (A. up to E. in the schedule below) are directly related with the points mentioned by my first-year students (a. up to i. in the schedule below).

Within my recent practice I have tried to use experiments to address precisely these five points in order to arrive at a challenging, motivating artistic process for all my students, but especially for those first-year students who aren't familiar with the freedom of the artistic process I have in mind. Moreover, I wanted to go a step further: instead of a directed freedom, I wanted to look for a much more student-led form of freedom. I start from the premise that when students control their own learning process (E), they challenge and stimulate themselves (A, B) and will experience success while doing so (C). The relational aspect (D) is an underlying condition for these experiments to be successful (which I will explain in Chapter 2).

Within these experiments, the actual definition of agency starts, therefore these experiences have made a valuable contribution to the development of the game as it is.

A) The school offers a challenging curriculum:

(D) Monotonous lessons (a) & (M) Challenge (g)

B) The students are stimulated to use 'higher thinking skills':

(D) Closed assignments (d)

C) Students gain success experiences:

(D) Too difficult (e) & (M) Achievable goals (h) - (M) Good grades (i)

D) There is a positive relationship between the school and the students:

(D) Being too loud/noisy<sup>5</sup> (c)

E) Students are in control of their learning process:

(D) Little freedom (b) & (M) Room for play (f)



## Designing an art class

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Before describing these experiences, I believe it to be interesting to take note of the existing debate within social science concerning the primacy of structure or agency in shaping human behaviour (aka the Structure-Agency-Debate). Within this debate, structure is the recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available. In sociology, agency can be defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Barker, 2005). The Structure-Agency-Debate may be understood as an issue of socialization against autonomy in determining whether an individual acts as a free agent or in a manner dictated by social structure. This is roughly what I wanted to investigate within this experiment, but on the scale of the classroom. The aim was to determine to what extent students can let go the fixed social structure that normally prevails within a classroom (that of the ‘authoritarian teacher’ who directs and leads, which refers to the concept of directed freedom mentioned before), and thus acquire a degree of agency over the classroom themselves. In this way, the experiment encompasses both investigating the changing role of both student and teacher and an exploration of the (young) student’s capacity for artistic autonomy and whether they can be in control of the learning process themselves.

I carried out this experiment at the end of 2019 with a class of first-year students who never had such a degree of control over the structure and content of the lesson themselves. So it was quite a surprise for them when I asked them this question:

“Suppose you get my 80 minutes of class. In those 80 minutes, you get a full art class of your own. Anything goes. Use the space as you like. The only rules of the game are: it has to be safe, it has to be educational from an artistic point of view, and when you leave the classroom, the room is completely clean and tidy. What would you do?”

For practical reasons as well as the desire for dialogue, I asked the students to form small groups of 4-5 people. Although the concept of the artistic Self sounds like something purely individual, I am convinced of the value of the peers that serve as a mirror, with which through dialogue new ideas can be developed and new Self-insights can be realised. I have to admit this idea is not unique and refers to the ideas of dialogical learning, as described by Gert Biesta (among others). Biesta's vision of the dialogue potential of education is related to the ability to communicate openly as a generative process of participation in which collectivity occurs (Biesta, 2015). These ideas can be translated into applications within art education, in which the dialogue can be multiple: dialogue with oneself (self-reflection), dialogue with others (reflection on others) and the dialogue with a work of art (reflection on the work of artists), which are each Core Objectives according to the SLO (Van de Kamp, 2015).

After a brainstorming session each group was allowed to present the collective idea to the class. This led to 5 sheets with suggested assignments, with corresponding learning goals, actions and a certain idea about the use of the educational space. What struck me was that 3 of the 5 groups had quite traditional images about both the assignment and the use of the classroom. By this I mean that the assignments may have differed in theme, but did not directly ask for a different medium. 'Drawing caricatures', for example, was one of the invented assignments, where the tables were in straight rows (as usual). "Anything goes" seems not to guarantee wild or imaginative ideas. Only after they were confronted with the other 2 ideas, it became clear to them that the boundaries were much wider than they expected. This might be considered a practical example of dialogical learning as mentioned above, which makes the students immediately aware of their artistic Self in relation to others. The fact that some ideas were not as imaginative was not considered a fail, but proved to be an opportunity for critical reflection

and conversation.

One of the groups wanted to design a game. With four tables they wanted to build a stage. On this stage students could depict a certain art-related word or concept, which could then be guessed by two students at a table. If they did not guess it within the set time (1 minute), the group in the back of the classroom would be allowed to try. The points would be scored per group and kept on a whiteboard. The students who came up with this concept indicated that their learning goals were to work together to come up with creative solutions to express artistic concepts. The game element in which points could be scored also contributed to motivation, active participation and fun. Their own role was that of game leader: providing groups with words, keeping track of time and scores.

The second group wanted to organise a lesson in action painting. They wanted to do this by means of an ingenious table arrangement, in which students lay down on the tables and, thanks to the use of gravity, could drip and splash in a slightly targeted manner. Moreover, the students would first be given a short presentation on the art historical value of action painting and abstract art in general, as well as an instruction on how and with what they would work safe and as clean as possible. These students indicated that the aim of this concept was to get acquainted with abstract art and to explore it by means of their own creation (and reflection). Motivating was the fact that students were able to participate in a different, active way in which they could not directly settle on talent, skill, cleanliness or precision. Although the assignment was somewhat closed, it felt like something very free and playful. Their own role was that of presenter, facilitator and ultimately also as those who were responsible for the cleanliness of the classroom.

The ability of students of this age to achieve such complex learning structures is remarkable. The fact

that these lessons did not lead to anarchy and chaos is all the more remarkable. Although I have been present during these lessons as an observer and reporter, I have not taken on any of the regular teacher roles. I have not intervened, explained anything or been involved in any other way, until the moment of evaluation. This very much touches on the question of where the teachers' authority begins or ends. The concept of authority is closely linked to the fixed structures (or pedagogic codes) that students experience at school and, in my experience, are not simply ignored. This again links to the Structure-Agency-Debate (Barker 2005), however, within a school structure, of course, any teacher can play with using a degree of authority and as long as there are conditions that facilitate it properly, such as creating a safe atmosphere, the students might still feel stimulated to acquire agency themselves. I will explore these conditions and the Structure-Agency-Debate further on in Chapter 2.



The images from the first lesson on these pages speak for themselves. There was laughter, there was participation, there was cooperation and there was involvement. I thought it was great to notice that some people dared to go far beyond their comfort zone by making openly crazy gestures or adopting bizarre poses. In fact, there was no one who indicated that they didn't want to participate in any part of this lesson, which affects a number of aspects of both (conditions for) obtaining agency and the perception of the classroom as a (safe) workplace. They knew that this lesson would not be graded, so that being a compelling motivation was absent. Which group scored the most points was not directly relevant to the learning objective (although the winners were of course cheering for fun). In the evaluation I asked the group if this had been a good art class and why? In other words, what had they learned from this lesson? I noted down the following statements:

- "This lesson was great fun, we had freedom and we could playfully learn artistic concepts that we use in art classes." - Sem (12)
- "I thought it was a good thing we had to learn to work together to clarify a concept as soon as possible" - Marleen (12)
- "Some notions were very difficult to portray. "Secondary colours," for example, or "Abstract art." It takes a lot of creativity to show those concepts with your body." - Stacey (11)
- "I thought it was good that we had to learn to communicate without words, as a kind of sign language" - Chiel<sup>6</sup> (11)





*“It was amazing that these young students seemed to grab a complex concept like abstract expressionism quite easily.”*

One week after this lesson, the second group was allowed to facilitate the lesson in action painting. I have to admit I was a little tense. Although the first lesson had a surprising result when it came to the students' capacity for artistic autonomy, the lesson needed little resources other than a certain table arrangement, a whiteboard, cards and active participation of the students. The next lesson would be much more challenging in terms of medium (painting materials) and classroom cleanliness. Of course I was searching for the limits of autonomy, not only with regard to the artistic process, but also with regard to self-responsibility, which, without my clear tutorial role, is strongly dependent on free will, in which students are addressed by the critical Self. These aspects together could show me to what extent taking agency is not only related to the artistic process, but also related to the educational space. The picture on the left speaks for itself. The three students who were going to teach this lesson, Nikita, Megan and Stacey, had already prepared the classroom in advance (during the break). Plastic on the floor would absorb most of the splashes. The stools would serve as paint tables. Aprons for each student were prepared. After a short presentation (which in my opinion could perhaps have been a bit more substantial) the students were allowed to lie down on the tables and went to work, dripping and splashing. And of course they also splashed next to the plastic sheet, after which they also walked through it. I forced myself to purely analyse and not act according the role of a teacher. But what turned out to be the case? After half an hour of pleasant splashing (and the first students starting to complain about hanging head-down) the works were collected on a large table and the students initiated to clean up. Even though I had asked them to consider the cleanliness of the classroom when determining the assignment, their positive attitude and sense of responsibility came as a surprise. They removed plastic, cleaned brushes and went looking for wipes and mops to get the classroom back to its glory.

The final 15 minutes I wanted to use for evaluation, in which I was relating their paintings to the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock. While analysing and reflecting we had a substantive conversation in which there was active participation and involvement. It was amazing that these young students seemed to grab a complex concept like abstract expressionism quite easily. Normally I only do this with 5th year students, but these first year students understood the power of abstraction to visualize non-visual concepts, such as feelings, almost immediately. Maybe I have great students who are exceptions to their peers, but frankly I don't think so. Much more I believe, and I use the words of John Johnston (from whom I have also borrowed the concept of the Self), that even in a completely free learning situation, students attach great value to implicit 'pedagogic codes' that exist within 'formal and informal educational spaces'.<sup>7</sup> What happened is that students cling towards some sort of structure, which in this state cannot be defined nor explained. It looks like students do seem to act according to pedagogic codes, perhaps also according to social expectations. After all, the actions and behaviours the students show within these type of artclasses are, in a way, a means of showing the artistic Self. By 'shaking up' the regular pedagogic codes within my art lessons, students became more aware of their artistic Self, which for example increases the development of critical thinking and understanding. Within my adjusted form of teaching, students took a degree of agency that I have never observed before, but which is highly interesting in the context of personal development, which is also a major task of secondary education (as propagated by Biesta<sup>8</sup>, among others), and of the pedagogical value ('bringing to light') of the art subject in particular (Pols, 2015). Having said this, I think it is time to take a more critical approach to this concept. And while doing so, who would have expected that a Crown would be involved...?





# Chapter 2

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# AQUIRING AGENCY

This chapter starts with the accidental emergence of the Crown, being a metaphor for the concept of agency, and therefore a possible tool for students to acquire agency. I divide the additional effects of the Crown into 6 related aspects which lead to me defining the concept of agency within this artistic context accurate and detailed. In doing so, I try extending the common (sociological) definition of agency with relevant concepts about the social and metacognitive Self. Then, in practice, we see that it is not enough to simply offer students self-directed elements, but also to create awareness that students have full control over their own artistic process. Finally, I state that applying play might be a useful tool to create this awareness, while at the same time it provides motivation, involvement, lightness and fun.



## Chapter 2: ACQUIRING AGENCY

### The Crown

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During my research I experimented a lot with the personal input of students, based on the hypothesis that it is motivating for students to have a certain feeling of control over their learning process (Vogelenzang, 2019). From October 2019 I was looking at how students would influence the course of the lesson when I gave them the opportunity<sup>9</sup> to arrange the classroom layout themselves, by shifting tables and stools. In practice, this simply meant that if students entered my classroom, I would randomly choose one of them to re-arrange the classroom. Within a few weeks a paper crown suddenly appeared. This crown was easily put together by a few first grade students and which was carried by the person who was picked to 'control' the space. The word *control* is between quotation marks for a reason. While observing the redesigns, the student with the crown was not necessarily in control. Other students helped or worked against, depending on their wishes, interests and expectations. The student with the crown had the possibility to act on the basis of authority (as a teacher could do), but this seldom or never happened, at most in a playful way (which I will come back to later). Quite unexpectedly, the student with the crown appeared to act on the basis of responsibility: conversations were held, questions were asked, and personal interests were taken into account:

*“During art Mr. Wolters gave us a crown. This crown indicated that you were the boss for a while. You were allowed to change the room as you wished. The tables were moved, the chairs moved. The funny thing about this was that hardly anybody put the tables on his side or stacked tables. As if there were unwritten rules in the room. Why is this? You notice that when Mr. Wolters says something, some children don't listen, but continue to work. So apparently children like art, and*

*want the classroom to be set up in such a way that you can just work.”<sup>10</sup>*

-Nikita (12)

Instead of being a metaphor for an authoritarian position, the Crown turned out to be much more of a tool to make students aware of the present social structure and the pedagogic codes bound (consciously or unconsciously) to the educational space. For me, this became clear during an incident with a second year group. Where until then no one had done really unusual things with the tables, like tilting or blocking parts of the room, they started stacking two tables. In itself, this was a risky experiment: these tables weigh at least 300 pounds and if something had gone wrong, I as a teacher would undoubtedly have been responsible<sup>11</sup>. I was a bit tense when a group of boys managed to get the tables on top of each other. The most striking, however, were the reactions of some classmates after this feat had been performed. They reacted angrily and the boys got blamed like: *“This is super unsafe!”*, *“Ok, and where should we work now!?”* and *“Do you know how much time you've wasted!?”*. The boys reacted a bit shocked and worked the rest of the lesson on the lowest of the two tables. Afterwards, I took the tables apart again with the help of the caretaker.

### Additional effects

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The examples mentioned gave me a number of important insights into the additional effects of the Crown regarding the behaviour of students in relation to the use of the educational space:

1. The students master the ability to come up with solutions suitable for almost everyone, independently, without supervision or intervention, in freedom. They showed a certain degree of autonomy in the process.
2. The students adhere to the expectations (or rules)

that are (unconsciously) bound to the educational space. Breaking these *pedagogic codes* leads to resistance and/or confusion and therefore working against these codes is not encouraged.

3. The students do not act on the basis of authority. They take the wishes and/or expectations of their classmates into account to a greater or lesser extent. The prevailing *social structure* does not appear to be broken.

4. The students act from a sense of *responsibility*. Their free choices largely determine the course of the lesson and the possibilities for activity within it.

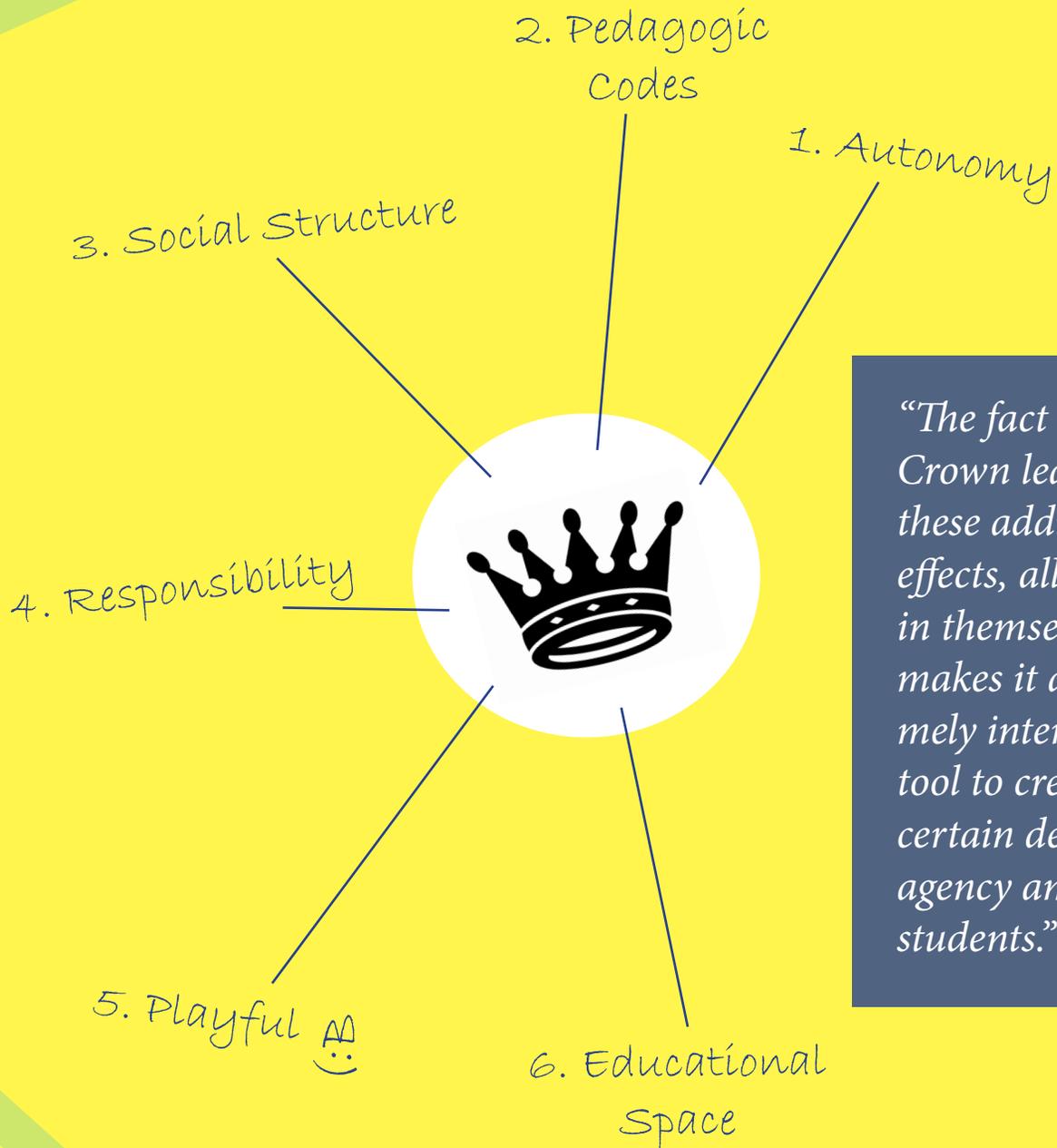
5. The students experience the possibility of influencing the space as *playful*. They visibly enjoy the freedom offered and react accordingly, for example by adding aspects of role play (such as the Crown)

6. The students use the educational space and its codes to redesign the space with the idea of making it useful as a workspace, what makes students create a state of awareness about the space.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the Crown leads to these additional effects, all valuable in themselves, makes it an extremely interesting tool to create a certain degree of agency among students. We have seen before that students are capable of autonomy, responsibility and like to stick to unwritten 'rules', such as the pedagogic codes and the social structure. The Crown feels like a kind of 'centre' for all these important concepts and at the same time as a metaphor for creating a degree of agency among students. This makes that I would like to further explain the concept of 'agency' and its valuable meaning in relation to the artistic process. This might give a clarified picture of what 'acquiring agency' means to me as an art teacher within the context of my practise (and the context of the Crown).



*“These tables weigh at least 300 pounds and if something had gone wrong, I as a teacher would undoubtedly have been responsible...”*



*“The fact that the Crown leads to these additional effects, all valuable in themselves, makes it an extremely interesting tool to create a certain degree of agency among students.”*

## Defining agency within the context of the Crown

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In advance, it is important to state that agency is not an object, nor something that is, or is not. It is related to a *certain degree of human acting* and has therefore been investigated mainly by sociologists (often related to the *Structure-Agency Debate* mentioned earlier) and arriving at this point, I can't avoid going into this a little bit. Anyone looking for common definitions of agency (related to children and young people) will find agency being commonly defined as something like 'the capability of the individual to reflect, to decide on a course of action and to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.'<sup>13</sup> However, this ignores the fact that within secondary education students act both from (or against) a pedagogic code (being a certain expectation within the educational context) and within a social structure of parents, teachers and peers, which makes the above definition too simple, simply because these aspects affect the freedom of personal capability to act. Following on from this, researcher Cath Larkins defines an additional shortcoming of the stated definition which arises from the fact that students work and live within a complex social structure:

*"It is difficult to acknowledge at all that (relatively young) students are able to take agency when there is controversy about the extent to which children's actions can result in influence because children themselves are often dismissed as insignificant or incapable of informed decision-making."*

(Larkins, 2019)

It is exactly this that demotivates many secondary school students; again, a lack of confidence from teachers (being adults) to act from freedom and responsibility. It is for this reason that I attach great importance to the development of the prementioned artistic Self

within the artistic practice of my students. I see the development of the Self as a very important condition for the previously outlined definition to be relevant in artistic practice (or educational practice in general). I have previously linked the definition of the artistic Self to the theory of Wouter Pols (see Chapter 1), where I emphasize that in addition to practical and creative skills, the artistic process provides a lot of Self-insight (spiritual, social and metacognitive). Both the *social Self* and the *metacognitive Self* are thus essential in the context of the Crown (and the development of the game with it), and both should therefore be added as conditions to the definition of agency (in this context).

The *social Self* determines from which of their multiple roles students act and the extent to which they are committed to their role. Young people use their multiple roles as a way of describing themselves (Larkins, 2019) and therefore, being a metaphor for acquiring agency, the Crown indirectly offers students the opportunity to safely show themselves from a deep underlying Self, questioning: who am I, how do I act, what relationships do I enter into and how do I choose to behave in this situation...? This reminds me of the words of socially engaged artist Anthony Schrag<sup>14</sup>:

*"Art is not in the object, it is in relations"*

The *metacognitive Self* is a second addition to the definition of agency in this context. The personal capacity for Self-reflective and Self-regulating action coincides with the knowledge students have of their own abilities, i.e. learning strategies and (cognitive) processes, and can be summarized as the personal capacity for regulation, process monitoring and evaluation (Oostdam, Peetsma, Derriks & Van Gelderen, 2006). Related to this is the extent to which students are stimulated to take responsibility for their own process (which is thus related to the previously discussed motivational factors that students are expected to apply 'higher thinking skills' and to be in control of their own learning pro-



cess), commonly referred to in pedagogy as activated learning:

“Learning should be seen as an active constructive process in which learners solve problems they encounter. Learning from new learning: case studies in secondary education teach us about self-responsible learning in the sense that pupils are given more responsibility in setting their own learning goals and regulating their own learning process. This means that active and exploratory learning in particular, in which the learner himself plays a major role, should be emphasised in the educational learning process”.

(Oostdam, Peetsma, Derriks & Van Gelderen, 2006)

Having said all this, agency in the context of the Crown can be defined as:

Agency is the capacity of the artistic self to act in freedom and responsibility, in accordance with the prevailing social structure and pedagogic codes, and thus to apply self-directed and self-regulating adjustments to the existing artistic process through awareness of and reflection on one's own actions.

## Focus on awareness

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From the above I started experimenting with giving freedom and responsibility by shaping the art lessons in such a way that there was a lot of room for self-directed and self-regulating elements. Until recently this has led to very positive experiences with students (as mentioned before), which in my practice has enriched the development of the artistic Self (which I value most) as well as creating deeper involvement, motivation, relationship and fun. But that this is not just a hymn of praise for the experiments done, was proven after I broadened the experiments over multiple classes with different dynamics and (possibly) different expectations of the artistic process. And with that also a different result came up. In some classes, students appeared to be poorly able to formulate their own learning goals, or to regulate themselves, which resulted in being constantly distracted by their phones (and each other). As part of the experiment, I decided to let this happen, but it has been interesting to research why not all students are able to work directly self-directing and self-regulating in a relatively free class situation. If they could not be responsible to act responsible, this would have major implications for the validity of the experiments involving the Crown; what if it just doesn't work? Although research shows that self-direction of the learning process for students has a positive effect on competence development (concerning specific skills of both body and mind), it must be clear that students really feel that those possibilities are there and that they *really have something to choose from* (Khaled, 2013). Thus, in the practice of art education it is not enough to offer students self-directed elements, but above all to make them aware of the fact that they also have control over it and can thus control their own artistic process.

In other words: the fact that I experimented with giving freedom and responsibility, did not automatically create the condition that students became aware of the implications for their own actions.





*“Many students are completely focused on the fact that school is a place that makes demands, where strict rules apply and above all where there is no room for fun.”*

## Applying play

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The latter became very insightful during one of the times that a student with the Crown was a bit fed up with a student named Koen, for he was interfering with her responsible and autonomous task. Koen gave unsolicited suggestions and if they were not followed up, he commented on her choices. With a grumpy look, she waved her arm to the side towards my storage space and said: "You are banished!"; after which Koen drove off and withdrew. Until then, I had mainly observed the rest of the classroom and the resulting table arrangement, when I suddenly sensed Koen, sitting in the storage space between a chair and a few sheets of Styrofoam. While the class was following the Crown's last 'orders' and getting ready to go to work, I asked in amazement what he was doing there. "I'm banished, sir. So I made my own dungeon." Koen presented me with a difficult pedagogical choice. Normally it is not possible for a student to withdraw from the teaching situation. But in this case, it didn't feel right to correct Koen in his behaviour. After all, Koen only adopted the role play and took the next step. By correcting him, I might also disqualify the other game elements, and why embrace one game element and not the other? After all, game is (in theory) an important tool in socialisation as well as education, but that is often ignored in practice (Bettelheim, 1972)<sup>15</sup>. In the same practice, we fill the days of students with other activities and tasks to such an extent that there is hardly any room for play. Maybe that's why the game element offered by the Crown was immediately embraced by students. The time that was lost at the beginning of the lesson by shifting tables and 'handing out orders' was more than made up for by the fact that after the first few minutes the students went to work smoothly and independently. They felt motivated to go continue their tasks. But now there was Koen. While I thought I should embrace the game element he added, just like the students embraced the Crown, I also wanted him to devote his time to his artistic process. That's why

I asked him: "What shall we do Koen? You're in the dungeon now, but your piece of work is still in the box. Shall I take it, so you can continue working in your dungeon?". Koen thought for a moment and answered: "No, that's not necessary. I'll sit here for a while, and then I'll go back to my normal place, and then I'll go and work there." Koen showed awareness in this last remark, and yes, he did go to work very concise and independent for the rest of the time given. One way to create awareness among students seemed not to approach the situations too frenetically, even playfully. Many students are completely focused on the fact that school is a place that makes demands, where strict rules apply and above all where there is no room for fun:

*"In school we don't play very often, almost only when there are parties or in the gym as an endgame. It's often something you have fun with. In class there are mini-games where you have to think. For example, who is quicker to answer the question. I would like to think more playfully at school."*<sup>16</sup>

- Melissa (12)

In this context, offering freedom and responsibility is a break with expectations and is not seen as a serious opportunity to take control of one's own actions in order to achieve significant change. Nevertheless, as a teacher it is surprising to offer space for game elements, because they can be stimulating to the extent that students become aware of the agency they can and may take on the teaching situation. After all, in a game everything is safer and the consequences are less harsh. Apart from the fact that as a teacher one should have an open mindset to this, there must also be space for it to implement. However, that space is often limited and has its own possibilities and impossibilities. Perhaps this is a good time to consider the role and influence of the educational space on the above.





# Chapter 3

## The EDUCATIONAL SPACE

This chapter starts with a few surprising quotes from students who make a connection between meaningful art education and the physical space where it takes place. From here the link is made with a paradox students experience when it comes to implementing play in a school environment. It looks at aspects that disrupt students' perceptions of the educational space, how the Crown can help and why it is important to create the right physical conditions for students to obtain agency. By analysing the visions of art education professionals, the importance of disrupting this perception is reinforced by striving for a clear balance in the perception as workspace, living space and retreat space. Finally, there is a recommendation for unimpeded use of the space, on condition that students act from complete



## Chapter 3: The EDUCATIONAL SPACE

### The students' experience of an artistic space

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For the purpose of defining the artistic Self (see chapter 1) I conducted an online interview with a group of students from class 5 and 6.<sup>17</sup> These are students who have been familiar with my somewhat idiosyncratic didactics for a long time. I asked them, among other things, about the importance of the art subject in relation to other subjects in order to be able to formulate its unique educational value more clearly. But as I said before, students always know how to surprise. And I was surprised when several students linked the educational importance of the art subject directly or indirectly to a physical space:

*“For me, meaningful art education is a **space** where I learn to master artistic techniques and forms of expression and go through a creative process in order to eventually put it into practice”* - Serena (16)

*“For me, art education is about building up a process of theoretical knowledge so that I can apply it in practice in all kinds of forms. A **space** where I have the opportunity to develop my artistic side”* - Ella (15)

*“Meaningful art education is for me a **space** to learn artistic techniques and forms of expression so that I can become better in practice. Also learning to look at art and to learn the underlying meanings that may be useful later on”* - Lisa (16)

Apparently the physical artistic space, in my case my classroom, and the possibilities, facilities and codes present there have a greater impact on the experience of these students than I could have suspected beforehand. As a teacher, I am convinced that the physical

space in itself can have an enormously motivating (or stimulating) effect on students. But the opposite is also true: the space can also distract, or worse. In my opinion, it has a lot to do with certain expectations of students. Apparently, a classroom can be experienced as a pleasant place, where a student can experiment in freedom, almost in a playful way. But this usually goes against all students' expectations, as a second interview with my first grade students revealed.

### The major paradox (and how the Crown may take advantage of it)

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As indicated at the end of the previous chapter, students generally experience a paradox as soon as play takes on a role in the school environment. Anyone with an interest in contemporary didactics knows the theory of playful learning, which is aimed at making learning more attractive for students, with the aim of creating more motivation for learning because students do not recognise 'obligational' learning as such. This can be seen, for example, in the theory of Developmental Education, in which playing is seen as an essential part in a child's personal development and therefore deserves a self-evident place in education:

*“... Developmental Education is not satisfied when pupils 'know' it and is always aimed at helping each pupil to make what they have learned personally meaningful. How? By embedding it in the participation in activities, for example working (playing) in a bakery. By participating, pupils experience that knowledge and skills can help to structure their actions and thinking and to achieve better results. As a result, learning is not experienced as an 'obligation' and the learning outcomes do not remain in isolation but play a role in the overall development of the learner's person - not just the cognitive side of it”*

(Wardekker, 2013)



However, this is largely just theory. *Playing* and the school environment are so paradoxical for students that the illusion of learning through play is quite easily punctured. Most of my first grade students at my own school only associate playing with sports & play activities in the lessons of gymnastics and physical education:

*“Playing - doing something you like and that makes you happy. I don’t find school a place to play because you’re working on your future at school and that’s pretty serious. But you can play a game in gym class.”*<sup>18</sup>  
- Caresse (12)

As Caresse points out in this quote, school is too serious for playful activities. At least, that’s how Caresse and most of her classmates experience it. Still, I know from colleagues that there is room for play activities during class. I once paid a visit to an English language teacher who used that lesson to teach English words through multiple classroom games using the digi-board. Strangely enough, an experience like that doesn’t stick as a play-activity. I suspect strongly because aspects of playful learning are missing two aspects that my students strongly associate with playing:

*“Playing = doing what you feel like.”*<sup>18</sup>  
- Megan (11)

*“Playing= an activity that is fun to do.”*<sup>18</sup>  
- Pepijn (11)

I think now is a good moment to emphasize that my research does not focus on playful learning. There is also a difference with what is called *gamification* in recent didactics. Gamification generally aims to increase the involvement and motivation of students by inserting (digital) game elements. By directing the behaviour of students, learning objectives can then be achieved. Although gamification aims to increase motivation by allowing students to have fun, it remains a strongly directed, goal bound form of education. This

not only has its limitations, but it also carries dangers, for example because the game elements are too difficult for some, or because competition becomes more important than the social structure:

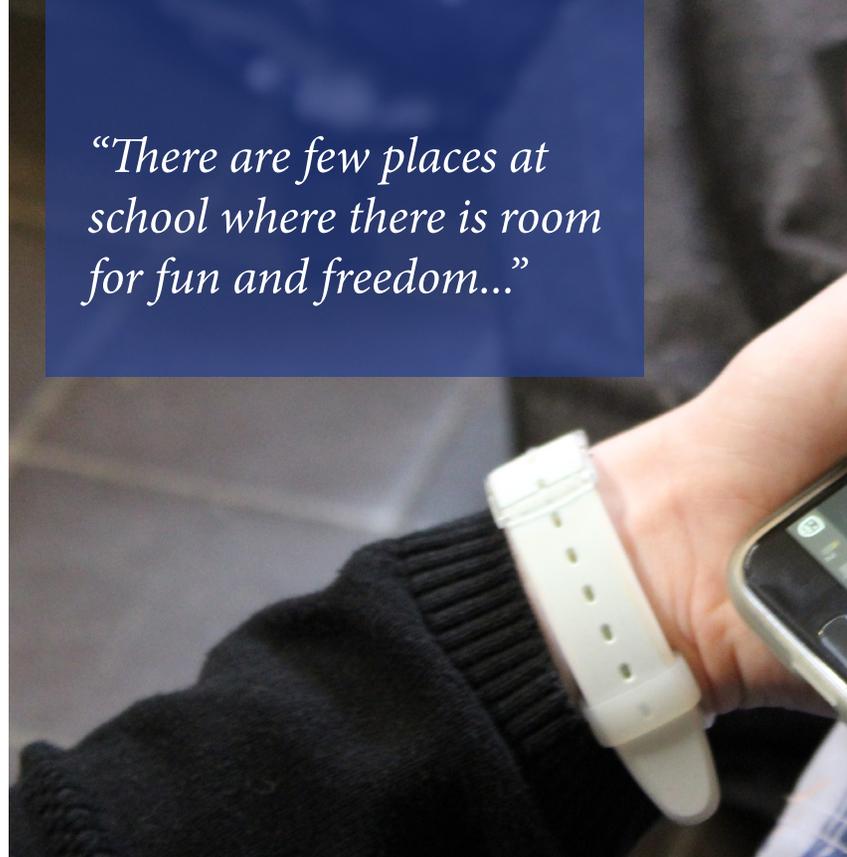
*“Using a specific type of [game] element can trigger different reactions from students and when not used correctly, gamification may backfire on the instructor. For example, to complete a stage, a student may be required to acquire certain abilities and skills. However, if the stage is difficult, [...] students may be intimidated by the task at hand when learning something new. Also if they are put into a community environment right away, they may become discouraged as they are constantly being compared to others.”*

(Hsin-Yuan Huang, Soman – 2013)

As Megan and Pepijn point out, *doing what you feel like* as well as *having fun* are aspects that my students strongly associate with their personal definition of playing. These aspects, especially *doing what you feel like*, are not reflected in the common definitions of playful learning, nor in gamification, in which the teacher determines which subject matter on a certain moment is covered and is thus directed in such a way that it is not necessarily enjoyable for the student.

Please be aware that students play a lot at school. I often see students playing games on their smartphones in the school hall. During the lunch hours, the table football game at the lockers is not idle for a second. And if there's a break, they know to find the playing field just next to the school to play on the climbing frame, the swing or just play football. For students, however, these game activities are independent of the lesson content, which often takes place exclusively inside what they see as educational spaces (aka classrooms). That is, until the Crown made its entrance, after which, as indicated in the previous chapter, the game element was embraced by the students inside the classroom. Again, this game element has nothing to do with

*“There are few places at school where there is room for fun and freedom...”*

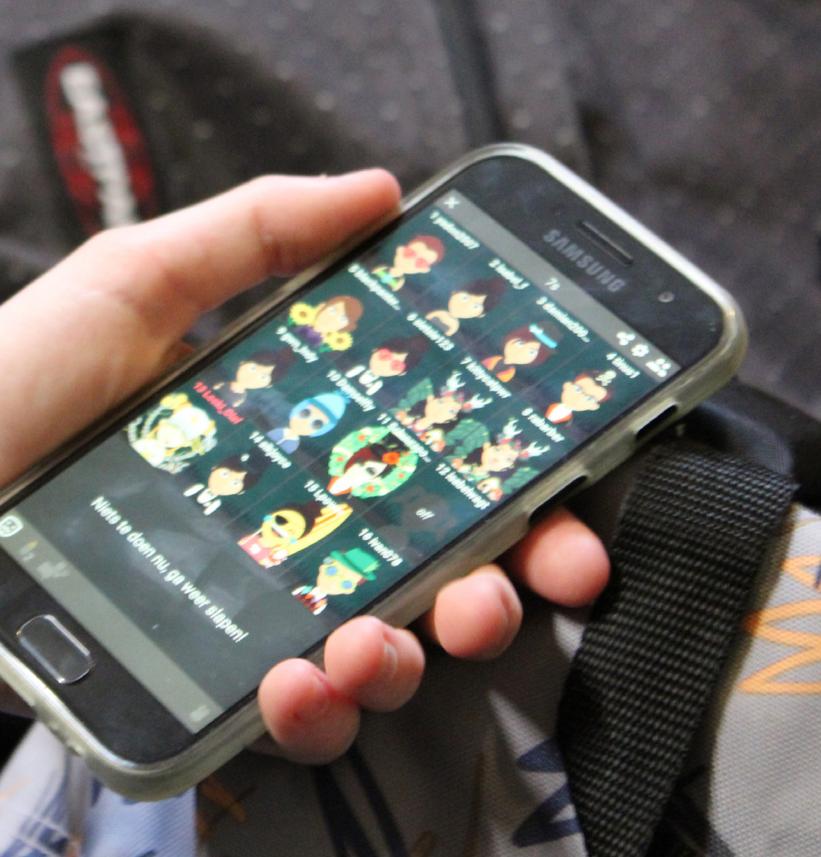


playful learning, but everything with agency as defined before. If students take agency over their own learning process, then it is only logical that students choose actions that they *feel like doing* and that are *enjoyable* to do. In other words, actions that have implemented elements of play.<sup>19</sup> And yes, here it is important that there is awareness about the impact of the physical educational space on students' agency.

## Disrupting the perception of the educational space

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From the moment students enter the school grounds, something changes in their consciousness. After all, they are then in a physical environment where different rules apply. Rules that are related to the expectations of parents, teachers and school leaders. These rules



are directed, if not dictated, and are therefore only negotiable to a limited extent. As said before, there are few places at school where there is room for fun and freedom, something that the rules and expectations of teachers and others often do not stand for. It is good that teachers realise that it is not only their didactics or pedagogical approach that can make the difference, but also providing students with agency concerning the space. The latter is again a paradox with common theories about classroom design. It is good to realize that in almost all literature concerning the determination of classroom layout, it is primarily the teacher who has the authority. The starting point is that the purpose of the room in relation to the lesson is determined by the teacher, as well as the degree and form of participation by students and the mutual interaction (in relation to teaching activities) by students. Researcher Jo Earp makes a revealing statement writing

that 'the teacher's educational philosophy will be reflected in the layout of the classroom',<sup>20</sup> which is of course true, although there may be a misconception that the teacher is therefore by definition also the one who should determine the layout. Also when students obtain agency over the classroom, this says a great deal about the educational philosophy of the teacher in question. Though I have to admit that it is not easy to achieve the latter and it is for this reason that the game element with the Crown can be a valuable addition. This is because when students make the space their own (as an end in themselves or as a means to take agency about another aspect of the lesson), and in that process take into account the previously mentioned social structure and pedagogic codes<sup>21</sup>, a totally new experience of the school environment is created.

In order to give the game with the Crown a chance, the teacher in question must first be aware that students tend to experience the classroom as a workspace. Students experience different spaces as different types of space (*retreat space, living space, workspace*), consciously or unconsciously, and that can hinder or help us. It is good to realize that the student combines retreat space, living space and workspace at home, for example in the bedroom or living room, but that a secondary school usually does not combine these three functions of the space. I deliberately say secondary school because especially in the primary school, children have more difficulty seeing spaces as places of different functions, so that the design often takes the various functions into account (Medaer & De Fré, 2001). It is for this reason that in many primary schools the layout and decoration of the space is such that it also imitates a living room atmosphere (which refers to *living space*) and in which there are often niches or corners with seats which are often screened off (which refers to *retreat space*). The latter, Medaer & De Fré argue, is a right to personal intimacy which should not be forgotten in a school environment, but which is usually lacking in classrooms at secondary schools.<sup>22</sup>

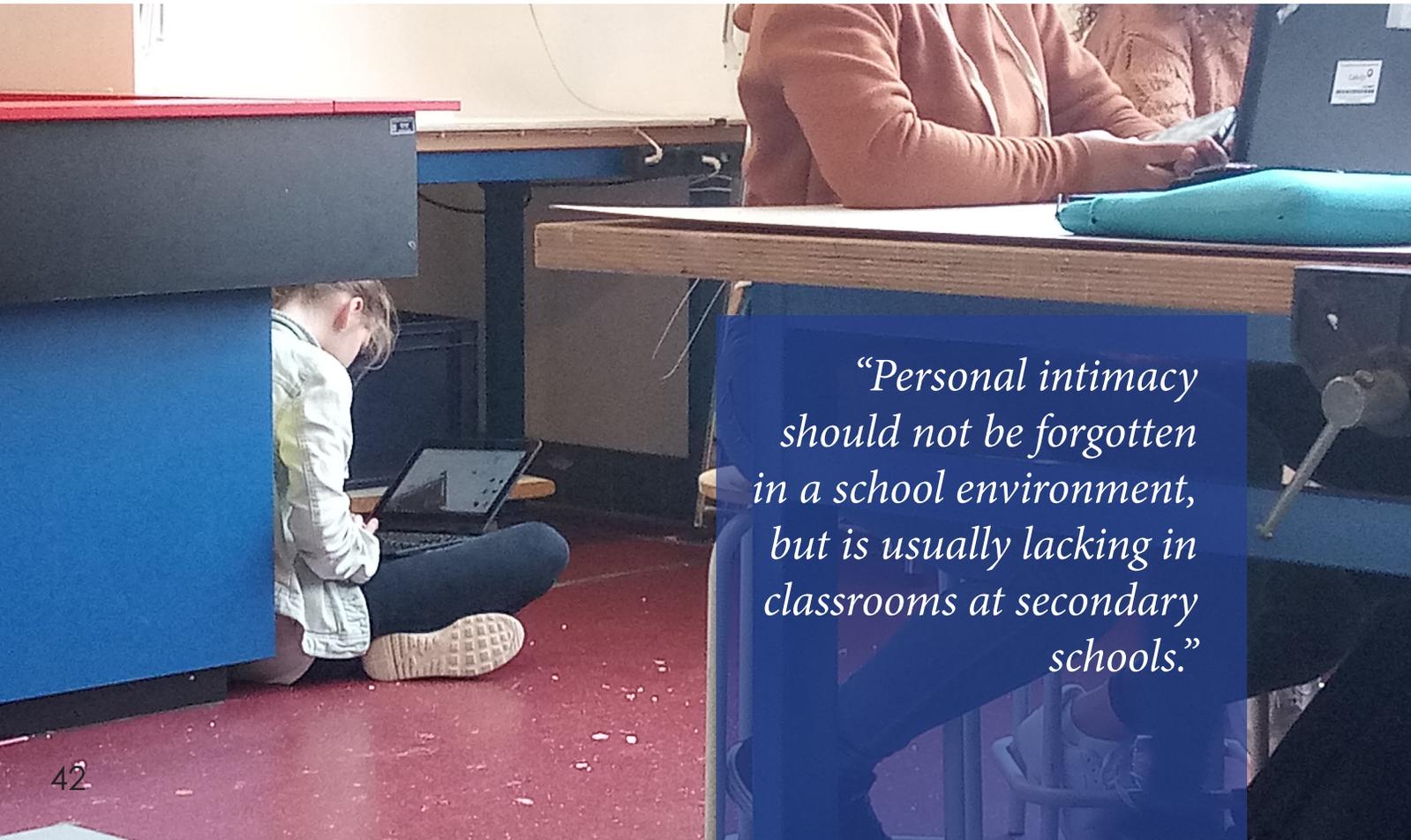
Secondary students tend not to see the classrooms as living space, just as workspace, which might explain why students do play at school, but only in the living areas such as the canteen, locker room, communal areas, etc. The fact that the classroom is seen as a workspace is therefore both a blessing (the pedagogical code states that work is done on education-related matters), but can also be an obstacle in the sense that the classroom in itself brings little motivation to deliver the work. Because of this paradox, teachers must be aware that the perception of the educational space must be disrupted. Students will need the educational space to act from agency, but that space might not work to their advantage. I am aware that with this I have gone through complex psychological processes that are not specific to artistic education, but this theory can of

course be applied to it. Personally, I think that the art teacher could play a pioneering role in the disrupting process, given the importance of the previously described role of the art profession and the student's awareness of the artistic Self. It is therefore up to the teacher to break down the barrier and to indicate that the space is not meant to hinder students in their artistic process, but is 'at the service' of it. But how...?

### An experiment with art education professionals

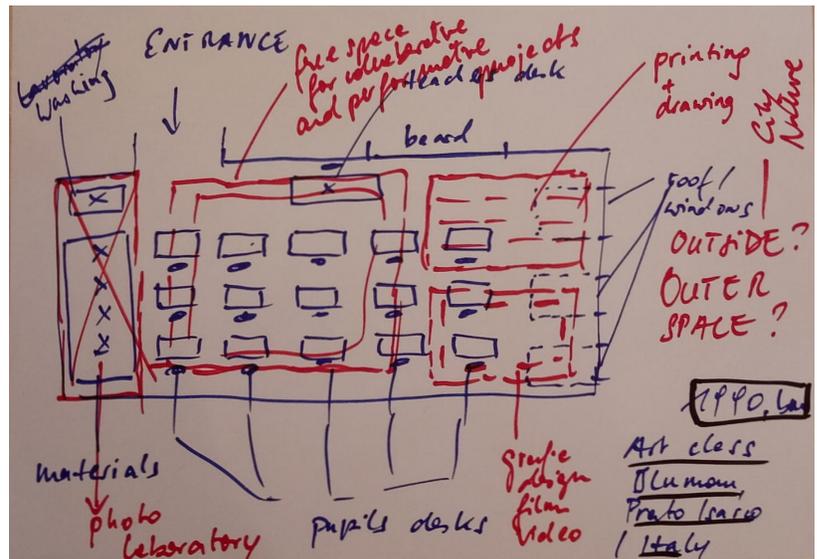
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In order to answer the 'how'-question, I had to remind myself of an experiment that I set up at an early stage of my research to assess the extent to which art edu-



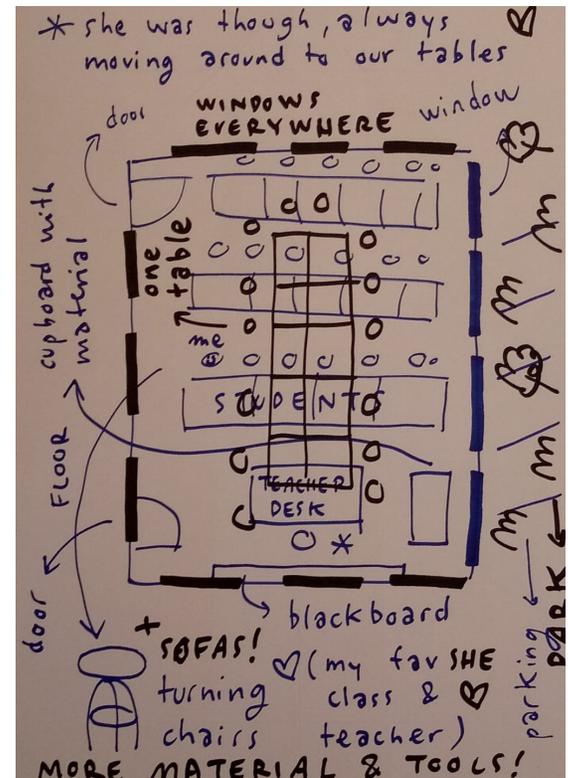
*“Personal intimacy  
should not be forgotten  
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classrooms at secondary  
schools.”*

cators are aware of the (im)possibilities of a classroom for their education and its impact on students. The experiment was set up among 9 fellow students (and 2 teachers) at the Master Education of Arts (PZI/WdKA, Rotterdam). This group of open-minded but critical professionals are each engaged in issues focused on art education in a broad sense and thus form an ideal platform for exchanging visions. Although I carried out this experiment early in 2019 and did not necessarily aim to prove the serving role of space with it, the analysis of the results of this research does allow an appropriate conclusion to be drawn, as I hope to show later on. As a start of my analysis, I asked the participants to reflect on the classroom



Drawing made by Barbara

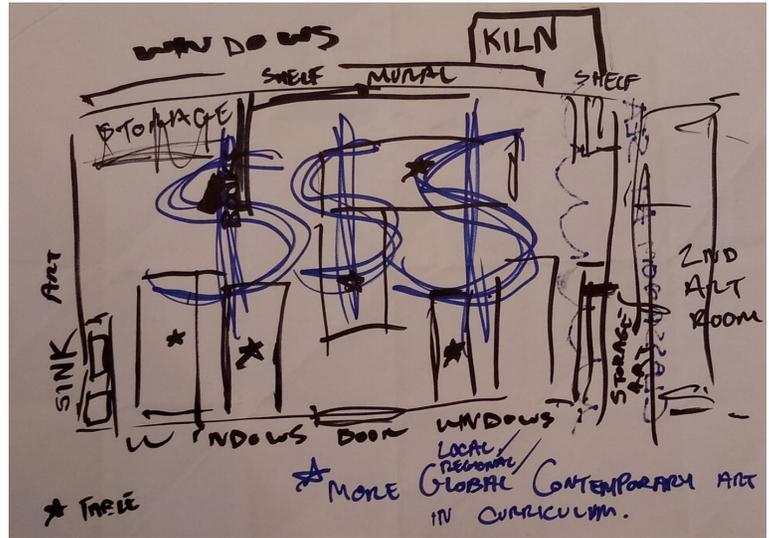
of visual arts and design in which they themselves have been educated during their secondary school years. I asked them to go back in thought to their 14 year old Self and draw this classroom as a floor plan on a sheet of paper. After these drawings were complete, I asked them to take a different colour pen and draw again to answer the following question: if they would place themselves back in this classroom, but with the agency to change things according to their current insights and vision of art education, what changes in physical space would this produce? The drawings produced are well worth analysing, although in this context it goes a bit far to deal with them all in depth. In short, it is worth noting that the most participants make adjustments to the original classroom space. But there is a difference in the argumentation with which the space needs to be adapted. As an example I would like to mention the table arrangement. Both participants Carmen and Barbara change the 'disciplined' arrangement in rows<sup>23</sup> but with a different goal: Carmen strives for collectivity and collaboration, Barbara looks for a more functional approach to the space that suits her own ideas about art education and thus ends up with a few large 'blocks', each with a different practical goal. It was funny to see that everyone reflects and links their own vision to each other's drawings. For example, Maud starts from a different starting point (with tables in blocks) but, just like Carmen, she searches for collectivity



Drawing made by Carmen

through one large central table and, remarkably, no desk for the teacher.<sup>24</sup> Also remarkable is that out of 11, only Adam was satisfied with the original physical design. His drawing already initially contained elements that were missed by others. Adam therefore focuses in his changes on matters indirectly related to space: changes in the curriculum offered and the available financial resources. Adam mentions the following advantages of the physical space as drawn by him:

- Separate workstations for students
- Large work tables
- Studio appearance
- Enough work by students on display<sup>25</sup>
- Place for withdrawal

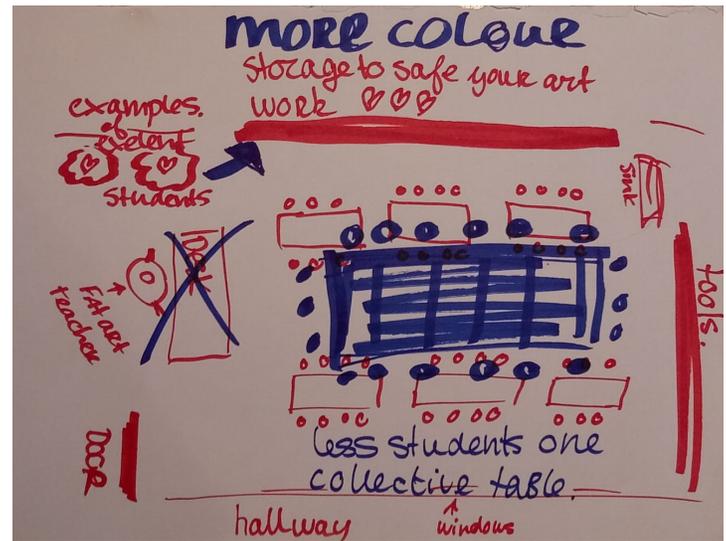


Drawing made by Adam

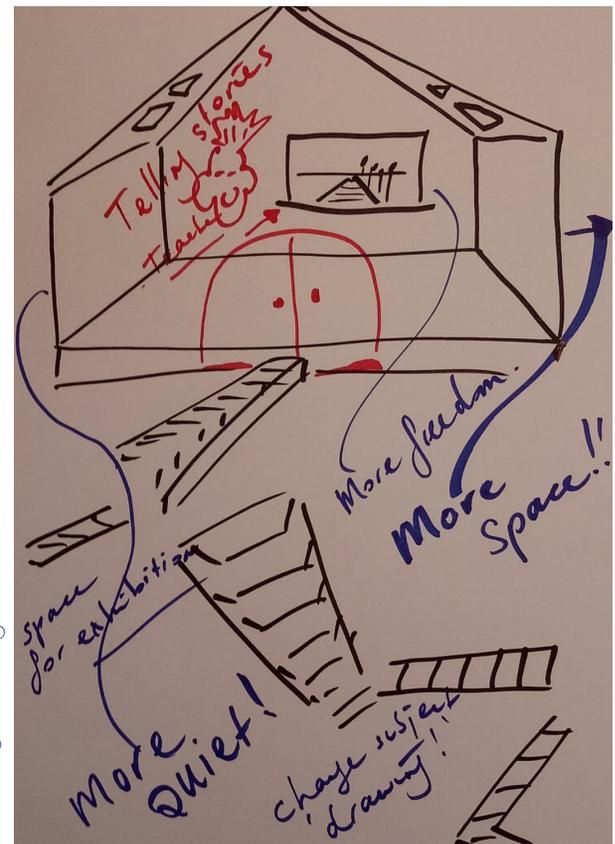
Unwittingly Adam touches on the core concepts as formulated by Medaer & De Fré as mentioned earlier. Schematically this can be formulated like this:

Adam's points	General concept	Pedagogical value	Core concept (Medear & De Fré)
Separate workstations for students	Position in the classroom	Relationship with others	Workspace (1)
Large work tables	Size of tables and classroom	Functionality of the classroom	Workspace (2)
Studio appearance	Atmosphere	The students' 'voice' and experience	Living space (1)
Enough work by students on display	Choice of decoration	A feeling of recognition/ownership	Living space (2)
Place for withdrawal	Sense of privacy	A feeling of security	Retreat space

Adam's drawing can be seen as a somewhat general concept for the design of an art classroom, which is of course independent of personal preferences of both didactic and artistic nature. For example: Carmen misses in her original drawing the presence of sofas to rest (living space 1) and a private space (retreat space). Cerile would like more space between the work tables (workspace 1) but also more privacy (retreat space). Jolande would like to exhibit more student work (living space 2), while Elvira lacks the physical space to exhibit work (workspace 2). Barbara would like a more studio-style interior, with a photo studio and space for performative practices (workspace 2). As one can see, all desired adjustments can be traced back to the core concepts mentioned above. It is important that all the core concepts have been considered, with the core concepts of workspace and living space split into (1) and (2), because both aspects of the same concept determine the experience of the space by the users. All participants showed in their drawings that they made choices that touch on these core concepts, which underlines the importance of these aspects as I argued earlier in the previous paragraph. This reveals another striking feature: participants who distance themselves from space as a fixed entity. This goes so far that some even refuse to see space as a place over which they themselves have authority (or grip). This goes against the usual idea that the authoritarian teacher is 'king' over space. If we analyse the drawings again, we see, for example, that Jo not only demands more flexibility from the space, but also explicitly puts a cross through the work tables ('space is too restricted') and wants to make more use of the outside space ('go outside'), and she is not alone in this. Elvira also makes remarks that indicate a greater need than the limited space can offer ('more freedom, more space') while Lydia also sees a clear role for the students in the use of the space ('students change it'). All analyses together point to an appropriate, but perhaps also somewhat simple conclusion. These art education professionals each have specific preferences with regard to



Drawing made by Maud

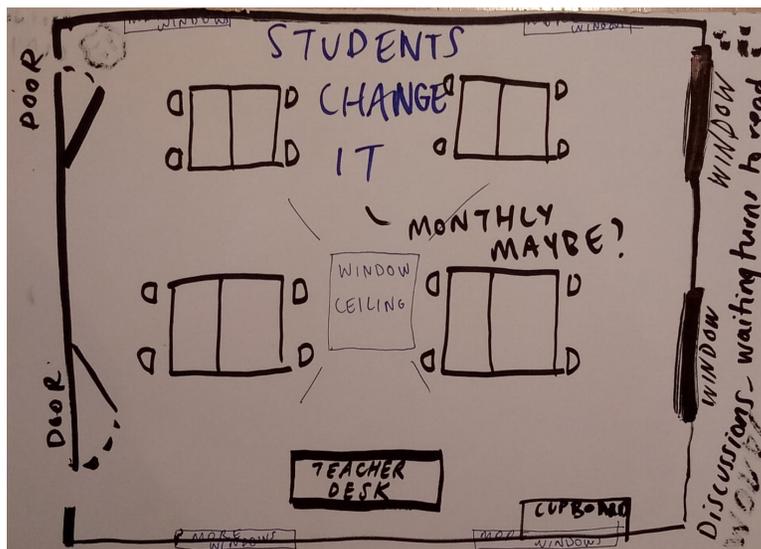


Drawing made by Elvira

space, based on their own didactic and artistic desires, but each of them sees the importance of a good balance between the classroom as a workspace, living space and retreat space. In addition, they also see that the space is always a restriction, which requires an open mind and a search for flexibility within the space, as well as possibilities outside the space. The most important thing is that these professionals each want to have the agency in a broad sense regarding the educational space. And that last point brings me to an important fact: the teacher must first have the feeling of having an agency over the space before that agency can be shared or handed over to the students.

## The unimpeded use of space (and the opportunity for the Crown)

Art teachers should be creating a place where students are encouraged, enabled and empowered to shape the spaces as needed. In other words: creating a space that is made to be handed over to the students, trusting them to take the agency to act in freedom and responsibility, in accordance with the prevailing social structure and pedagogic codes. If the relationship between students and teacher is right and the expectations are clearly communicated, the space can be used unimpeded and at service of the artistic process in the broadest sense. It is interesting to see what conditions there are to realise students' agency within an educational space. 'Handing over the classroom' may seem like a big step, but it is not the case in practice. If we look at schools where this process is already taking place, such as in so-called Agora education, we can see that classrooms are spacious, open and transparent and with a lot of flexible design possibilities. Here students often take the initiative, depending on their activities, to make the workspace their own. In addition, the spaces and their interrelationships are such that students can move almost limitlessly between (what they experi-



Drawing made by Lydia



Drawing made by Jo

ence as) living space, retreat space, and work space. I have spoken with students at Agora education and of course, they are and remain puddles with all their quirks about school, but at the same time they seem to feel comfortable and safe in the offered spaces. I hasten to say that Agora education is an interaction in which

the student's agency does not only consist of controlling the space, but also the chosen subject matter, the subjects themselves, the planning, the homework and all other aspects of regular secondary education.

In Agora education, this has been implemented as a holistic concept in education, both didactically, pedagogically and physically. But what about more conventional secondary education? I can still remember that in my own secondary school period there was a lot to do about the introduction of the so-called 'studiehuis' (study house), which was actually the physical implementation of the Second Phase education, a pedagogical and didactical renewal of the upper grades of havo and vwo education from the perspective of achieving a better connection to higher education. In 1998 and 1999 almost all secondary schools were prepared for a new, more independent way of learning, for example by setting up teaching spaces as study areas or media libraries, or by widening the functions of spaces, for example by integrating workplaces in corridors. We still see this effect today, even in newly built schools: the design is such that students are expected to work independently. In the latter lies again a paradox: the self-directed student became the new norm, but was imposed by means of a top-down vision, as a result of which there was little evidence of agency on the part of the student with regard to the use of the possibilities:

*“The desire for independent learning is mainly expressed by educational policymakers, particularly at the level of national educational policy, but also in institutions at management level. The legitimacy for this greater focus on independent learning is found in new concepts of learning and new demands of higher education and modern society.”*

(Veugelers, 2001, p.19)

It is only thanks to the innovative pedagogy of teachers that it was (and still is) the case, in exceptions,

that the student is stimulated to consider the possibilities of physical space to the full, but that is absolutely not common even anno 2020. On many schools with conventional secondary education there is a chance that the art teacher might still become a real pioneer in disrupting the perception of the use of physical space. And that is exactly what I'm trying to target with *What if the student wore a Crown?* Yes, this is difficult when a classroom has to be shared with a colleague who is not aware of the impact the physical educational space has on students' agency, or when the management is steering it and is not open to such an experimental approach. This brings me back to the Crown as a means of experimenting with these aspects in an accessible, playful manner. With the theory above it is possible to substantiate to colleagues and managers what implications there are for the use of space when the Crown is used as a playful medium. The conclusion is therefore that it is about time to *unfold the Crown* and bring it into educational practice, whereby if it is a bit 'scary' to completely hand over the physical space, it is also possible to start with small steps.

Are you ready to play?



# Conclusions

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This research was based on the question:

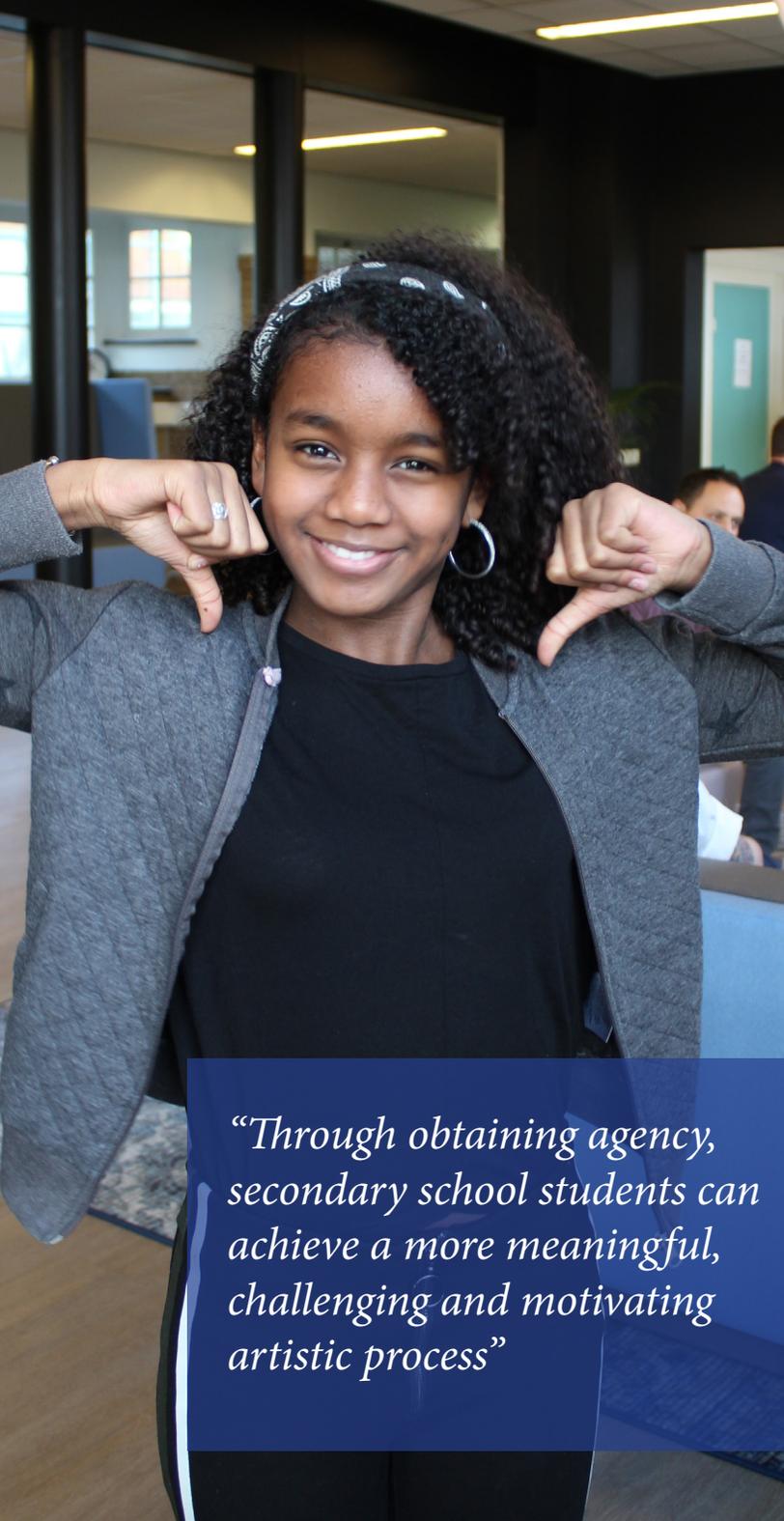
*How does obtaining agency influence the artistic process of secondary school students in relation to the use of the educational space?*

Secondary school students usually feel very limited in their freedom at school because of the directed education they experience. Especially within art education there is an opportunity to break with working 'within the lines'. Students feel more familiar and recognize when the teacher offers space. This may be unnatural for the teacher who tends to 'guard control'. Students experience the possibility to freely form ideas and make their own choices as liberating and more meaningful than directed assignments with little or no freedom of choice of their own. In addition, a self-directed artistic process leads to very essential questions in relation to planning, technique, material and eloquence. By reflecting on these questions, whether or not with the help of others, the student can come to a deep self-insight and thus form the artistic Self as part of his/her own identity.

For the art teacher it is good to realise that students not only find this self-direction liberating and meaningful, but that it can also contribute to active participation and higher involvement during class, because,

according to both students and the Education Inspectorate the premise that students control their own learning process is an important motivating factor. With this in mind, students can search for their own stimulating challenges and success experiences. If the student learns to take into account the prevailing social structure and pedagogical codes that apply in a certain place or in a certain group, then this can result in acquiring agency of the artistic process. At least, when the student is also able to reflect on choices made, both artistic and social, and is aware of the fact that there is also freedom of choice, including its implications. This awareness is an important condition, and in practice the teacher must build up a positive relationship in which expectations are expressed and in which there is constant room for reflection instead of correction and direction.

The Crown was a result of this agency, but also a metaphor for it. It was also a first aspect of playing that made its entry into my teaching practice, something that according to my students is a strong motivating factor that in practice is not or hardly associated with school, with which I mean both curriculum and school as a physical place. The teacher can choose to let students experience the artistic process in a playful way, without detracting from the students' agency. On the contrary, students also seem to know their own



*“Through obtaining agency, secondary school students can achieve a more meaningful, challenging and motivating artistic process”*

responsibility when they have the freedom to learn about their own learning process, which means that playing can be at the service of the artistic process.

On top of that, however, students experience the space as a workspace (a non-play area), which can be an obstacle in being at the service of the artistic process. The latter is not surprising, because both students and teachers often see the space as a fixed fact, with fixed functions. Students often look for other spaces, inside or outside the school building, to have fun, only not to experience this fun in classrooms. (Art) teachers could choose to disrupt the perception as a workspace and look for space in which there is a balance between workspace, living space and retreat space in which freedom, fun and agency are possible for the student. An additional and important condition is that teachers first have the feeling that they themselves have agency regarding the educational space, before they can share it with or hand it over to their students. With this handing over, the Crown can offer a helping hand to implement this agency in a teaching situation in a playful way.

The answer to the research question is thus complex, but can be summarized as follows:

Through obtaining agency, secondary school students can achieve a more meaningful, challenging and motivating artistic process in which they find the possibility to develop their artistic Self. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to disrupt the usual perception of the educational space, so that a balance is created between the space as a workspace, living space and retreat space, in which freedom, fun and agency are possible for the student.



## Epilogue: The Crown in non-art classrooms

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In this book I have always talked about 'the art teacher' in a general sense, perhaps suggesting that *What if the student wore a Crown?* is specifically meant for teachers of visual arts and design. Before I disprove, maybe it's a good idea to emphasize that I personally distinguish the 'art teacher' from the 'teaching artist'. Both occur in secondary education, and both can be excellent (or bad) in what they do, but it is valuable to discern the difference in this context, as I'll substantiate.

I read an interview with Lynda Monick-Isenberg, artist and educator, who defines what a teaching artist is:

*"A teaching artist is a practicing professional artist/designer with the complementary skills of an educator, who can effectively engage a wide range of people in learning experiences in and through the arts."*<sup>26</sup>

The complementary skills of the artist are obvious, and as a first suggestion for follow-up research it would be a very interesting starting point to do further research into the distinction between art teachers and teaching artists, but for me, in the context of this research, there is one elementary fact that is important:

I consider myself an art teacher and not a teaching artist.

This means that my heart lies with the practice of teaching, even with the hectic pace of secondary education, and that I do not have my own (commercial or ideological) artistic practice in addition to my work as a teacher. I want to emphasize this because it says something about the context in which this research came about, namely according to a *pedagogical didac-*

*tic vision and not from an artistic vision. I consciously disqualify myself as an artist, because I believe this to be important for the broader employability of this game.*

I want the reader to understand that this game is not just an ideological project. My aim is to teach the rea-



der something about the abilities of my students (and hopefully their students as well), their wishes and frustrations, in order to arrive at a different, challenging, motivating and more stimulating form of educational practice.

It is for this reason that the reader will be able to trace many of my theories back to more general pedagogy and didactics which, with appropriate adaptations, can be used also in non-art classrooms as well. This is also the ultimate goal of this game. I have tried, both in my formulation and design, to make it possible to adapt a personal vision of the practice of *What if the student wore a Crown?* quite easily.



Therefore, my second suggestion for follow-up research would focus on the experiences of these teachers, in order to gain deeper insights into the (artistic) Self, the agency of students or the relationship with physical space. I am very curious about their experiences and their visions will undoubtedly lead to refinements or adaptations of the game. That's not a bad thing: pedagogy is not a fixed fact. Thank goodness.

### Other suggestions for follow-up research

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Personally, I am above average interested in the building of physical schools. In my hometown Rotterdam, where I also work, schools are working closely with the municipality to realize innovative educational locations within

the next decade. This offers a lot of opportunities. It is in building schools that many ideas concerning the agency of students can be taken into account at an early stage, and it would be appropriate to investigate this further in the near future, so both students and teachers can benefit.

A fourth suggestion for further research is the use of the classroom as living space. How far can a school go with regard to giving agency to students, if there should at all times be an incentive to use the space as a working space? And then there are other pedagogical consequences of using it as a living space, for example as I pointed out in footnote 25: what is the influence on the motivation of students by exhibiting students' artistic work? I think many teachers may underestimate the impact of this and therefore it might be worth researching.

A fifth and final suggestion is of a more sociological nature and is related to the more general defined agency of (young) children and students. While I was experimenting with the Crown and the concept of agency I noticed that I had certain expectations of the students' self-responsibility. In sociology, however, there is a difference of opinion whether students can be held responsible for acting responsibly and to what extent they can or should take agency in this as well. This is a question that is also about an almost ethical dilemma: can and should a teacher put the responsibility on the student's shoulders?





## Footnotes

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1. Experiment carried out on Monday 03.02.2020, with class 2G1, approximately from 12.00 - 12.20 hrs.

2. Derived from Vogelenzang, Monique (2019): Motivation to learn, Motivational characteristics of secondary education (Inspectorate of Education).

3. Which are derived from the Core Objectives Art & Culture for junior secondary school havo-vwo, as formulated by the SLO (Core Objective no. 48): [http://leerplaninbeeld.slo.nl/havo\\_vwo\\_onderbouw/kunst-en-cultuur/beeldend/kunstbeeldende-vorming-po-havo-vwo/](http://leerplaninbeeld.slo.nl/havo_vwo_onderbouw/kunst-en-cultuur/beeldend/kunstbeeldende-vorming-po-havo-vwo/)

4. Conversation on Tuesday 04.02.2020, with class 1G4, approximately from 14.40 – 15.10 hrs.

5. It's a somewhat disputable connection, yet is derived from the explanation 'The teacher as pedagogue' from the book '5 roles of the teacher' by Martie Slooter:

*"A positive relationship leads to a good working atmosphere in which the teacher as pedagogue directs the students' behaviour"*

(Slooter, 2019)

6. A special remark because Chiel is a student with a hearing impairment. His remark led to empathetic reactions from the group, which was great to observe. This refers to the given artistic concept of Anthony Schrag:

*"Art is not in the object, it is in relations"*

(Schrag, 2015)

7. Derived from Johnston, John (2018): 'Critical Visual Arts Education' A Pedagogy of Conflict Transformation In Search of the 'Moral Imagination.' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Sutherland)

8. Which refers to Biesta, Gert J.J. (2016): *Persoonsvorming in het onderwijs: Socialisatie of subjectificatie?* (SLO)

9. The word *opportunity* might have been replaced by the word *freedom*; however, this is again what I mentioned earlier as a *directed freedom*, while here the prelude is made to a freedom of a different order, related to full autonomy.

10. Derived from an interview with 1G4, 03.03.2020.

11. As for the comment that the student with the Crown is acting on the basis of responsibility, this immediately calls into question. 'In general' should therefore be added to the previous comment about this. The experiment thus also raises questions about *whether students can be held responsible for acting responsibly and to what extent they can or should take agency in this as well?*

12. Point 6, however, is a complex concept in the sense that it is not only about acting, but also about the (im)possibilities, opportunities and shortcomings of the physical (or non-physical) educational space. For this reason, point 6 is further dealt with in the separate Chapter 3.

13. This definition has been derived from a reference by Cath Larkins to Giddens A.(1984) *The Constitution of Society*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).

14. In my desire for students to take the opportunity to obtain agency on their artistic process, I personally see similarities in this with visual artists who seek interac-

tion with the public to have their work influenced and changed, which makes the outcomes often far more interesting and less predictable. Socially engaged artist Anthony Gordon Schrag, for example, is aware of his own position with regard to interaction with various people or groups. He embraces the differences (and different visions) of people to position himself more consciously, more self-critically (Schrag, 2015). The input of others on his work, their reactions or actions are an essential part of his artistic practice. "Art is more interesting when people have the opportunity to change it", says Schrag. And: "Art is not in the object, it is in relations". Schrag's vision is inspiring for me as an art educator. His words can be applied to both art and art education, without affecting its value. Just like the visual arts, the art lessons are also made more interesting by surprising input from students.

15. Although Bruno Bettelheim's words are very dated, it is surprising how relevant they still are. His remark fits in perfectly with what I observe in my daily practice and what I receive confirmation of in conversations with students.

16. Derived from an interview with 1G4, 03.03.2020.

17. This interview was conducted among 34 students of class 5 and 20 students of class 6 on 01.04.2020.

18. Derived from an online-interview with class 1G4 students, 05.04.2020

19. What makes sense given the outcome of determining the motivational and demotivating factors as stated by my students, see Chapter 1: *Motivational Practices*.

20. Quote refers to: Jo Earp, 2017 - *Classroom layout – what does the research say?* (Teacher Magazine Australia, online)



21. Under the above mentioned online article by Jo Earp one can read a reaction of Lesley Stace, which I like to quote here. Her reaction exposes the shortcomings of research based on the authoritarian position of the teacher, as well as the importance of the students awareness of the social structure and pedagogic codes:

*“What is not considered in this article are the social-emotional aspects of classroom seating. Without clear seating allocations often students, even older ones, feel anxious at the uncertainty when entering a room especially if they aren’t there first. Students can feel or are isolated whereas teachers can facilitate the building of relationships. Students in a non-allocated seating classroom can also then impose their own perceived ownership of a seating and bully others if they dare to sit there. Nothing’s ever simple. Tis why a good teacher is aware and makes thousands of decisions a day which, negatively or positively impact upon children’s lives as well as their learning.”*

22. For all teachers who wonder why students want to visit the toilet so often during class, in this theory the answer may be found. And although this seems like a totally irrelevant addition to the above, it is striking that some schools (including the one where I work) have a kind of ‘lock down’ policy where students are given absolutely no space at all to, for example, go to the toilet (whether or not to pee, chat, check their phone, etc). If teachers and school leaders were to realise that students have a very natural need for a retreat space (one more than the other, one more often than the other) then this could be very motivating for students and could give ‘air’ to teachers who struggle with this. In any case, my insights have led me to ignore my school’s policy in this area and make my own pedagogical choices.

23. Which, from a didactic point of view, is very suitable for the traditional frontal instruction by the teacher, in which students distract each other as little

as possible (Jo Earp, 2017) but which is anno 2020 almost no longer used in art classrooms because of didactic limitations.

24. An arrangement that bears great resemblance to a textile design classroom I visited at the Mare College in Leiden and which was very appealing in terms of design, decoration and general functionality. The teacher who managed this room spoke about exactly the same considerations as Maud did in her explanation of her drawing, for example the fact that she wanted to move around and among the students instead of having a fixed position (desk).

25. *Enough* is a somewhat unfortunate term here. When is enough? That’s a personal consideration. A teacher might choose some eye-catching works that set an example for others (and thus suggest a high standard to the casual visitor), but this also reminds me of the mentioned textile design classroom at the Mare College in Leiden, where the teacher exhibited all of the students’ works. According to her, this was the only way to make students *feel that they matter*. An interesting idea when it comes to motivating characteristics and therefore might be a possible starting point for follow-up research.

26. Derived from an interview conducted by Marcia LaCerte: *A Teaching Artist, Not an Art Teacher* (MCAD.edu website, online)





*“Let us not take ourselves too seriously. None of us has a monopoly on wisdom.”*

*- Queen Elisabeth II*

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Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs is meer van hetzelfde, WAAR OF  
NIET WAAR? (Didactief)





*"In 2019 and 2020 I conducted a study around the following main question:*

*How does obtaining agency influence the artistic process of secondary school students in relation to the use of the educational space?*

*From this question, the game that is now in your hands was created. This game is meant for secondary school teachers.*

*Although it was designed on the basis of my own vision as an art teacher, I also warmly invite all teachers of different subjects to read the content and put the game into practice.*



*This game is mainly a game with the student's agency and the role that the educational space plays in this. In three chapters I will take the reader past the core concepts from the main question, stimulating and encouraging them to try out the ideas and findings in their own practice. In a playful way of course.*

*In the meantime, this game has become the basis for the professional Art & Design format at the secondary school where I am happy to work.*

*Within a few years we will move as a school into a historic building, completely renovated to offer future proof education to many students from Rotterdam and surroundings. I am proud to have been able to contribute to the design of this building at the same time as I was able to carry out and write this research. In this building, a number of key concepts from this research were physically implemented at an early stage. This guarantees that the theory studied and the experiments carried out will find their resonance in the practice of the students."*

*Robert-Paul Wolters  
Rotterdam, July 2020*

