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The I-TAP-PD project experience Building relationships through arts in education

Manja Eland in conversation with Betty Giannouli and Nassia Choleva



The International Teacher-Artist Partnership – Professional Development (I-TAP-PD) programme, as its title suggests, focuses on creative synergies between teachers and artists in the classroom. The Erasmus+ project, implemented by four partner organisations from Ireland, the Netherlands, Serbia and Greece, started in 2021 and ended in September 2023. Educators and artists designed and implemented interdisciplinary collaborative intervention programmes. The results were very positive for the preschool and primary student populations who participated in all four countries. The benefits of the TAP methodology were equally important for the artists themselves and the teachers involved, in terms of their professional development. In the following interview, Manja Eland, member of the I-TAP-PD coordination and research team, trainer and representative of the Dutch partner Stichting Kopa, shares her findings and conclusions about the possibilities of education and arts partnerships created through this programme.

Betty Giannouli and Nassia Choleva: *You participate in the I-TAP-PD project representing the Dutch partner, Stichting Kopa. Is this your first time getting involved in a project which focuses on the equitable collaboration¹ between artists and teachers in an educational framework?*

Manja Eland: Actually, we do and have been doing a lot of work within an educational framework, and collaboration is at the core of the way we work. But it has been in formats different to the Teacher-Artist Partnership (TAP) model. Let me tell you a bit about our organisation first. Kopa is an NGO that aims to build a connection between professionals in arts education, the educational system, cultural organisations and social initiatives.

In the projects we initiate, creativity is the spark, the means and often the goal. But what is creativity? The way we view it, creativity is not about one art discipline, or making something pretty. Rather than that, creativity is about daring to try, not shying away from possible failure and allowing new ideas to grow in that process. The tools we use to make that happen are rooted in fashion, design and (visual) arts. Experiencing and exploring your own creativity is empowering, instilling a sense of agency over your own life. Agency is the sense of control that you feel in your life, your capacity to influence your own thoughts and behaviour and have faith in your ability to handle a wide range of tasks and situations. That's why we place creativity at the core of everything we do.

You know what is funny in the context of our dialogue today, even the name Kopa means collaboration. It dates back to 2012, when the founders, Linda Rosink and myself (Manja Eland), started a creative partnership with de Pijlstaart primary school. At that time this was common practice in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands, facilitated by local government. Schools and cultural organisations could apply for funding if they made a plan together. In this case, the teachers and school leader were looking for a way to enhance their visual arts education. They wished for more than a visiting artist and hoped to develop their own practice. Can you help us go beyond this flat piece of paper? How can we bring more creativity into the classroom and work in different and challenging 3D techniques?

This resulted in a one-year project, where we could use an empty classroom as a studio. A class would visit and we would facilitate a workshop. Teachers would join and do creative challenges together with pupils. We would point out to them what we saw happening in the creative process of pupils. This was then anchored by team training and by sharing the lesson plans so they could use them and make variations for their own practice. De Pijlstaart still is one of our partner schools after all this time and we have co-created many different projects. We have learned a lot from each other over the years.

This first experience with creative partnership led to collaborating with several partnerschools in a citywide network called *Creatief Vermogen Utrecht*. At the moment we have four schools we are working with.

B.G. & N.Ch.: *What is your experience in this specific project? Which element(s) would you consider particularly distinct in I-TAP-PD?*

M.E.: Collaboration comes in many shapes and sizes. I outlined before how Kopa has been working with schools and other organisations on different levels. In the context of our dialogue today, you could see that as a more top-down approach, connecting the ambitions of several organisations. Within the educational framework, this then trickles down to the individual teacher by means of projects, educational materials, team training and co-teaching, for example.

I-TAP-PD focuses specifically on the partnership between a teacher and an artist, aiming to facilitate a strong foundation of relationship and inspiration before working together in the classroom. I would say this is more of a bottom-up approach. The methodology we developed with this cross-disciplinary, creative, intense and condensed training programme sparks enthusiasm in the participants. They then take this enthusiasm back to their workspace, together with new skills, inspiration and connections. This, and the residencies, will have a ripple effect, we hope, infusing the rest of the organisation with creativity and opening the door to new ways of working together.

The title I-TAP-PD is short for International Teacher-Artist Partnership – Professional Development. As you may know, it was inspired by the Irish TAP model. In our project, this is taken to a new level by co-creating on an international level. The partners in this Erasmus+ project are from Ireland, Serbia, Greece and the Netherlands. This deepens the experience, because in the training programme we can reflect on our daily work context through the lens of contrast. Things that I consider to be a standard procedure are not necessarily the same in our partner countries. There are differences in our educational systems and the place of arts in society. In getting to know each other and exploring these differences, we also find a lot of similarities in our challenges and ambitions. What brings our organisations and participants together is the belief that by joining forces as teachers and artists, within an educational framework, we can co-create a valuable learning experience for our students.

The process of developing a methodology to enhance Teacher-Artist Partnership in an international collaboration has been inspirational to me and my organisation, Kopa. We all bring different qualities, experiences and arts disciplines to the project, which makes it a really rich experience, both on the macro level of the project and the micro level, the intimate, personal experiences during the pilots of the training programme.



B.G. & N.Ch.: *I-TAP-PD invested in the creation of a focus group, which monitored the formation of pilot training between the four partner countries. As a focus group member, could you share a few words about the mentality and the vision behind this?*

M.E.: This was an interesting phase in our project. We knew what we were working towards: an international model for Teacher-Artist Partnership, with a training programme that would work across different countries. The resources for this programme were to be made publicly available and shared with as many people as possible. The programme should contribute to building effective partnerships between a teacher and an artist, by nurturing creativity, enhancing our own practice in the process.

Now imagine, we started I-TAP-PD in a world in lockdown due to the pandemic. We were constructing a training programme about partnership with partner organisations we could not meet in the flesh at that time. So we were trying to understand each other's expertise and art discipline by talking online. But how do you explain what happens in the embodied experience of a dance exercise? How do you transfer in writing how the soul is touched when you share your story in the Life Map activity? How can you understand the acceleration of imagination when two ladies in a lab coat introduce tiny creatures called "Creativos Genialos"?

After each partner contributed their favourite activities, tried and tested in their own projects, by writing them down, we had a whole bank of activities,

but no programme just yet. That is when we decided to create the focus group, with one representative from each country. Jennifer Buggie from Ireland, Andja Jovic from Serbia, Eirini Marna from Greece and myself representing the Netherlands.

The task of the focus group was to design a cohesive training programme, working towards Teacher-Artist Partnership, using the collected activities. I would describe it as a process similar to cooking. We had the best ingredients, in the shape of said activities in different arts disciplines, and we knew we were planning for a five course meal, since the training would be five days. But we had a challenge, in the sense that there were more ingredients than we could use if we did not want to overfeed our guests. But everyone was invested in the ingredients they contributed. So how do you decide together whether to have the apple or the pear as the main course? Will the apple feel excluded if we only use it as a side dish? How much chocolate is healthy for our guests?

It took some time to get clear on how to piece everything together, in a way that best contributed to facilitating partnership and also felt balanced in representing all the partners. What helped the focus group pick the best combination of flavours was defining a leading question for each day.

Day one, when teachers and artists first arrive, they are curious, maybe a little apprehensive about what is to come. We get to know the group and share personal stories. "Who are we and why are we here?" Connecting with yourself so that you can connect with another person. With the question



“Who do you think I am and what can we do together?” in mind, we use creative and reflective processes to connect with the self and the other on day two. We expected day three to be tough, since the topic was the curriculum and educational system in the partner countries. But a sincere interest for each other’s work context and the playful creative challenges around the question “How do we (re)imagine the box?” kept participants engaged and connected. Now, of course, no journey or joint effort is without obstacles. On day four, we ask ourselves “What are the entanglements of partnership? What do we need to let go?” leading to the final question on day five: “What adventure do you hear calling?”

Within the training, couples are made, one teacher and one artist from the same country. They are invited to co-create a tiny adventure, a residency where the artist visits the teacher and they work together with children. The activities they design are inspired by the art discipline of the artist, the topics that are of interest to the teacher and the school, and potentially the rollercoaster of fast-paced creative activities they are immersed in during the I-TAP-PD programme. Both bring their expertise and specific skills to the co-creation, which opens a whole new world of potential.

B.G. & N.Ch.: *During project discussions as well as repeatedly in our conversations, time comes up as a significant parameter to our work within I-TAP-PD. How do you think the parameter of time affects our project on different levels?*

M.E.: We all know the feeling of being behind on schedule. It seems like feeling rushed and busy is a standard these days for many people. The lack of time to do everything that is expected when working with children during a school year was something that was recognised across all partner countries. This pressure within the educational system has an effect on the room that is felt when working with an artist in the classroom. Unfortunately, across subjects, priority is often given to science and math rather than artistic and creative exploration. Though in different forms, we all feel that we have to keep challenging the system to make time and space for creativity.

There is a difference, I guess, between lived time and clock time, a concept explored by many philosophers. How we experience time is something we can explore, play with and use to our advantage in a creative process. In the training, for example, many of the activities were quite short. On day three, after exploring the curricula by discussing them in small international groups, each group would get an excerpt from a curriculum text. The challenge was to make a performance together, but in a tight time frame. You are welcome to perform in 20 minutes. Good luck. This condensed creative process called for quick decisions and action. When reflecting on how the training was experienced, several of the participants shared that it was a bit stressful at first, but they got the hang of it soon enough. Through this “pressure cooker”, they reconnected to their intuition. Learning by doing and trusting yourself is a sought-after side effect of this way of working.

And then, of course, there are the moments of slowing down, of mindful focus in the moment. Moments to check in with yourself and to reflect on everything happening in and around you. When you can manage this, it is a powerful tool in educational settings as well. Giving incubation time so ideas can grow is so valuable. Practically, this can be organised in small steps. Ask an open question and request one or two minutes of silence before answering. Share an inspirational story to kick start a creative process before lunch and start making after lunch. And for yourself, if you have a problem to solve or a text to write and you feel stuck: go for a walk, take a shower or take the question to bed for a good night's sleep. Often, the answer is just around the corner. It just needs a relaxed state of mind to emerge.

One last element concerning time that is key to the I-TAP-PD project is to really take the time to get to know each other. Slowing down for a real encounter. Building a relationship before designing a plan. This process is facilitated by the activities during training, using different arts disciplines. But just as important are the breaks, the cracks in the programme. Meeting one another in the in-between, the undefined, the lingering evenings. We must not underestimate the impact that it has on a solid foundation for Teacher-Artist Partnership.

B.G. & N.Ch.: *I-TAP-PD stands for interdisciplinary approaches between teachers and artists of different disciplines and art forms. This deliberate approach was adopted for both the initial training of teachers and artists and the actual implementations in schools. As a visual artist yourself, what is your view and experience on this?*

M.E.: As a visual artist, I have always been inspired and influenced by other arts disciplines. I have a love for storytelling and stories, and stories can be communicated in many languages. Dance, theatre, music and image are all ways to communicate tales and meaning. For some stories, I will grab my pencils and paintbrush, but sometimes written or spoken word or my photo camera are the best tools. With every craft I get familiar with, I stretch my options for experiencing and transferring meaning. I am grateful for the ease that the internet brings. We have a world of inspiration at our fingertips, even if it can be a bit of a rabbit hole.

Actually, I think a primary school teacher is also a bit of an interdisciplinary unit in themselves. You are teaching different topics, while managing a class full of children that have their own lovely quirks and challenges. And all this within a system that has its demands too. So, instead of saying that they are not that creative, as some teachers say about

themselves, I would like to state that they are: pulling this off is pure creative problem solving.

That said, inviting an artist into the world that is their classroom may feel a bit intimidating. This links back to the perspective on creativity I described earlier. Too many people think creativity equals the skill to make something beautiful. But that is something else. Up to a certain point a skill, or craft, can be learned. Creativity is shown in the way you apply the craft.

I believe the most important thing about bringing arts and creativity into a classroom is allowing space for curiosity and an open-ended process. Art can be a place where questions lead to multiple answers. So, you don't have to be an expert. You have to have the guts to not know, together with your pupils, where your journey ends. And then to explore, experiment, reflect and refine. Celebrating how everyone finds their own answer.

I don't mean total freedom without boundaries. Actually, having a clear framework with room to play within that frame will probably accelerate creativity much more. It's all about balance. Giving words to what it is I do, on so many levels, when I step into a classroom as an artist has been a personal journey and one I have made with my colleagues at Kopa. We did find the words in "PIONIER! Kunst op school", the name of the arts education curriculum we designed for primary schools. PIONIER! translates to pioneer, someone we know as an explorer, venturing into new and unknown territories, much like a creative process. Each letter represents a facet of the attitude required to facilitate this journey:

- *Proces voorop*> Process first. Focus on the creative process rather than the end result.
- *Inspiratie*> Inspire. Kick start the creative process with inspirational work by artists or a good story. When looking at art, invite your pupils to share what they see.
- *Open vragen*> Open questions. Ask open questions, it gives you a window into the thoughts and associations of the other.
- *Nieuwsgierigheid*> Curiosity. Beware of your own assumptions when looking at what someone is making. Try asking questions. There are many ways to ask a question, and some are more inviting than others. An example from my own practice is when children are drawing with charcoal, the assignment is to draw an island with a hidden treasure. I like to ask them, "What obstacles do I have to conquer to reach your treasure?" This leads to wonderfully wild stories about traps, tigers, pirates and so on. That then gives me room to give a tip about contrast or perspective that would make it even harder to reach the treasure.



Beyond the technical skill, the drawing technique now has a function in delivering a story.

- *Ik durf ook*> I am brave. Lead by example. We are all wired with mirror neurons. The mindset, curiosity and guts you bring to the creative process in the classroom is more important than any instruction you give.
- *Eigenheid*> Individuality. Everyone is different, hurray! Making art and reflecting on art are a safe space to show and discover your individuality.
- *Ruimte geven*> Give space. Give space and time. Incubation time, as mentioned before, and time to tinker and experiment before helping with a solution.
- *!Hoge verwachtingen*> Expect more! Because children will often perform as you unconsciously expect. This has been recorded in studies where teachers got an arbitrary heads-up about the potential of their new students. By the end of the schoolyear, the children framed as high potential had lived up to that and got high grades; the other way around had a negative impact. This was not correlated to the actual ability and potential of these children. The bias had changed something in the teachers' approach. Fortunately, experiments like this are no longer done, but it illustrates the importance of being aware of your expectations.

Sharing the tools of the trade and co-creating between teachers and artists bring an extra to the learning experience. It is engaging and enriching. In this triangle, everyone is learning. With an open mind, artist, teacher and students can all learn from each other.

B.G. & N.Ch.: *You hold different posts in this project, i.e. trainer, artist, member of the research group, processing and analysing data deriving from the Dutch schools. Could you share elements of your findings which were unexpected or surprising for you?*

M.E.: Yes, I love that about this project, that I can contribute different skills. One of the things that fascinated me in collecting the data for the research is the hybrid nature of the Dutch participants. What I mean is that they come from different backgrounds and most of them have been working both in education and the arts. So, most of them chose a role for their residency, as their main perspective and focus, but it was a bit fluid. Working in partnership is like a dance to me. You have to be receptive of the direction and movement of your partner. You have to be able to step up and lead and to take a step back and follow. When the relationship is good, this often comes natural. You respect each other and make an effort to communicate clearly. Being a hybrid, having experience both as an artist and



teacher, generates extra flexibility. This was an enrichment to the partnerships, but also a challenge, since relatively few participants had a classroom at hand to work with.

In spite of these challenges, many beautiful collaborative plans have been made. Some of them have been adapted to other settings, such as a museum. Some of the projects have taken place and some are waiting for an opportunity to find a school that has space and time. One artist even decided to switch careers and is now a full-time teacher in secondary education.

I was touched to hear that the experience of the I-TAP-PD training programme has been an inspiration on a personal and professional level for many of the participants. The creative and interdisciplinary approach sparked a playfulness that was integrated in the approach of their own work, especially for some artists. Others emphasised the importance of making time to connect and grow a relationship before diving into plans and projects. Being able to do this project with you and our other partner countries was a good mirror. I guess the Dutch have the habit of being content and goal-driven. And though that is important, the value of taking a step back before diving into the work at hand is something they take away from this. So, I would say the two words that stood out most for me were playfulness and relationship.

B.G. & N.Ch.: *As we are heading towards the completion of I-TAP-PD and moving forward, which areas and elements of the TAP model of work would you consider in planning future actions/programmes?*

M.E.: Yes, we are close to the end of this journey we made together. At the moment, we are working towards making all materials available to our colleagues around Europe. After piloting the I-TAP-PD training programme in Greece, Serbia, Ireland and the Netherlands, the methodology is now ready to share. It will be published as a training manual that can be used and adapted to different contexts. It really is a valuable tool.

Then, of course, we have the publication of the research coming up. We will present this in Athens in summer 2023. This should be interesting for people who work in the intersection of art and education. Eventually, the research documents and training manual will be available to download from the website (<https://i-tap-pd.net/>), so keep an eye out for that.

Meanwhile, while waiting for this output, I would like to invite readers to listen to the podcast *Tapping into creativity*. Kopa produced the podcast for I-TAP-PD and talked with many international guests about the magic that happens when creativity, art and education meet. You can find it on your favorite podcast platform under the title *Tapping into creativity* and here: <https://tappingintocreativity.captivate.fm/>

Regarding your question about what I would consider in planning future actions or programmes, I would say that the key elements that support a sustainable partnership, on a personal level, between the teacher and artist are: A willingness to work together, because enthusiasm is a driving force and the energy will be needed to keep going against all odds. Having or making enough time for working together in the classroom, but also for reflecting on the process in order to fine-tune plans for the future help. Investing enough time in getting to know each other's drive and expertise makes for a solid foundation to build on. In the process of collaboration, trusting one's own skills and creativity combined with open communication and respect are helpful.

In order to make this work possible, local government and school leaders need to give permission, and facilitate time and resources. If the passion of individuals is the only driving force, this is a threat to the sustainability of programmes.

With effort and the right circumstances, a partnership can keep deepening over a period of years, so I would advise, and wish for them to keep in touch with each other.

To outline how this may grow: Kopa's partnership with de Pijlstaart has evolved into a living lab, where many art-in-education activities have been developed and tested. Projects like Chilling with art, a method for slow looking at art, rooted in mindfulness, for example. And Chilling with heritage, where the same method inspired a project that explores the history of local heritage leading to creating and imagining the future. Making abstract concepts relatable for the pupils involved. The whole team of this primary school works with the creative curriculum Kopa designed now. To facilitate professional development, Kopa's artists co-teach one or two workshops every school year. Combined with short inspiration sessions for the team, this secures, matches and expands the creative climate in school.

Actually, we are looking forward to some new developments in this partnership, since the headmaster is involved in starting a new school. Kopa has been invited to design theme-based art classes to enhance the new curriculum that is under construction at the moment. That way, creativity will be an integral part of the topics taught.

Projects like I-TAP-PD are an important impulse to our professional development. I hope to bring the cross-disciplinary approach and new friendships with me into future projects. I learned that working together across borders adds new depths and inspiration to my work, so it is with eye and heart open to new adventures calling that we do the work that finalises I-TAP-PD.

Note

1. In an equitable collaboration, all the participating organisations feel they have an equal voice and that their knowledge and contributions are valued and legitimate contributions to the shared goals of the effort.

Manja Eland is a visual artist, graphic recorder, designer of arts education and trainer. She specialises in mindset and the potential and needs of gifted children. Storytelling and (enhancing) the power of imagination are driving forces in her work. Sparking creativity and curiosity in participants, it is a great way to kick start a creative process. Manja tries to lead by example, embracing the playfulness, vulnerability and grit involved in a creative endeavour, and encourages teachers to do the same, recognising that actions speak louder than words when it comes to imparting knowledge. She believes the core of facilitating a creative process is igniting curiosity, then taking a step back to allow the child to make their own journey. Manja represents the Dutch partner Stichting Kopa, where she is Head of Education.

Read more about Kopa: www.kopakan.nl/english/
Manja's illustration portfolio: www.manjaeland.com