

## Visual Arts Activities as an Important Element in the Development of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities

### Zajęcia plastyczne jako istotny element w procesie rozwoju młodzieży z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną

**Agnieszka Żabińska**

Casimir Pulaski Radom  
University, Poland

a.zabinska@urad.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2035-491X>

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**Abstract:** This text is a review of the methodology of visual arts and the importance of visual arts activities for the overall development of young people with intellectual disabilities. Visual arts education is of great importance not only because of the exercise of disturbed functions, but it also allows for a bolder entry into the world of the able-bodied by showing the ability and possibility to be a perpetrator of socially accepted actions. Cultural and aesthetic development definitely raises the possibility to participate more fully in the life of the community and therefore has a positive impact on self-esteem and self-awareness. Specialists in special education, but also connoisseurs and patrons of the arts are increasingly paying attention to the creative possibilities of people with intellectual disabilities. Thus, the need to promote knowledge on this subject among both special educators and people who are not professionally involved with students with intellectual disabilities is still valid.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability, art teaching, adolescents, art-making

**Abstrakt:** Tekst ma charakter przeglądowy, w którym podjęte zostało zagadnienie dotyczące metodyki plastyki i znaczenia działań plastycznych dla ogólnego rozwoju młodzieży z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Edukacja plastyczna ma ogromne znaczenie nie tylko ze względu na ćwiczenie zaburzonych funkcji, ale także pozwala odważniej wejść w świat osób sprawnych poprzez ukazanie zdolności i możliwości bycia sprawcą działania akceptowanego społecznie. Rozwój kulturalny i estetyczny zdecydowanie podnosi możliwości pełniejszego uczestnictwa w życiu społeczności i, co za tym idzie, wpływa pozytywnie na samoocenę i samoświadomość. Specjaliści z zakresu pedagogiki specjalnej, ale także koneserzy i mecenas sztuki coraz częściej zwracają uwagę na możliwości twórcze osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Tak więc ciągle aktualna jest potrzeba propagowania wiedzy na ten temat zarówno wśród pedagogów specjalnych, jak i osób niezwiązanych zawodowo z uczniami z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną..

**Słowa kluczowe:** niepełnosprawność intelektualna, nauczanie plastyki, młodzież, twórczość plastyczna



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## INTRODUCTION

Working with young people with intellectual disabilities is not only based on imparting educational content. Special pedagogy in its scopes points to the all-round development of the individual, including aesthetic and cultural development. Apart from the obvious benefits concerning improvement and correction, art classes aim precisely at the development of the young person at higher levels. The

visual arts, through non-verbal means, make it possible to express one's opinions, tastes and show in individual vision of the world.

Drawing attention to the artistic talents of young people with disabilities is of great importance from the perspective of building self-esteem, self-determination and the possibility of self-expression, but also social inclusion through participation in cultural events. This text aims to emphasise the importance of educational and revalidating artistic activities centred around the visual arts together with a methodological basis for developing visual talents and a love of art.

#### 1. YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES – OUTLINE OF GENERAL METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

When starting didactic-educational-revalidation work with a student with intellectual disabilities, one should be guided by certain principles that determine the path of a special educator. A number of prominent theoreticians have written about these principles of teaching in special education, Kupisiewicz (1978, 131) writes as follows: 'those norms of didactic conduct, the observance of which enables the teacher to familiarise pupils with the attitudes of systematised knowledge, to develop their interests and cognitive abilities, to instil in them a scientific view of the world and to inculcate them into self-education.' The principles in question are primarily:

1. a thorough knowledge of children and coming to their sensible, specialised assistance,
2. adaptation of the pedagogical measures to the possibilities and needs of the children and the environmental conditions,
3. active and conscious participation of the child in the pedagogical work,
4. comprehensive view and example,
5. integrated pedagogical influence,
6. the sustainability of achievements, the ability to use and further improve them.

These principles should form the basis and starting point for developing a programme of educational and revalidation activities designed for people with intellectual disabilities. When analysing and implementing the above, special attention should be paid to important didactic facts. First of all, get to know the student and his/her environment comprehensively, i.e. know the degree of deficit (type and

degree of disability) and the emotional and social experiences of the student. Observe behaviour and reactions and establish the best possible contact with the pupil (if verbal contact is not possible – looking for ways to communicate non-verbally). It is important to apply the principle of individualisation with the individual pupil, due to his/her different psycho-physical state, work pace, degree of fatigue and manual dexterity. It is also important to ensure that information and instructions are accessible, using short, clear and unambiguous messages. Describing verbally in a clear way the activities performed – verbal activation of the learner (if possible). Verbal methods should also be reduced in favour of visuality, which means that the more sensory receptors are involved in the perception of phenomena and objects, the more accurate the image formed in the child's mind. Linking the content discussed in lessons to the pupil's experience and experiences and to practical action. Graduating difficulty by moving from simple to more difficult things, which involves experiencing 'small' successes but, above all, creating the opportunity to better understand the topic under discussion, is important. Removing stimuli that can disrupt the flow of the lesson and distract (for example, the radio playing in the background). Classes with a specific teacher should include elements of ritual and small routines for the type of lesson (e.g. greeting, looking at work from the previous lesson together, preparing workstations by choosing art materials independently). Creating situations that allow for repetition and systematisation of mastered skills and encouraging the student to undertake a variety of activities, e.g. using a mastered skill in a new task situation and using various types of positive reinforcement (e.g. verbal praise, displaying the child's work in a school exhibition). Organising as many opportunities as possible for contact with peers, both with and without disabilities, e.g. by organising and taking part in joint picnics, exhibitions, competitions.

## 2. YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN THE WORLD OF FINE ARTS – AIMS AND MEANING

In addition to the principles outlined above, the teaching of subjects containing elements of creativity, which stimulate creativity, uses specific goals, which Golka (2008, 89) defines as chief artistic, workshop, professional and psycho-social dispositions. These dispositions form the basis of the student's independent activity and are acquired during learning, and are realised in the course of art teaching:

- ‘the provision of knowledge, skills, assistance in development, improvement of talent, etc.
- preparing for a profession, teaching artistic craftsmanship,
- providing traditions and ..,
- breaking tradition,
- limiting individuality and ..,
- developing that individuality,
- imparting artistic mythology and teaching social roles,
- providing personal role models for young art students’.

From the objectives outlined, there are many similarities with the teaching principles used in special education and with the principles of inclusion for people with disabilities. Art, therefore, is an element in teaching which is an important path of education regardless of the type or degree of disability. Art can be enjoyed by all, there are no better or worse for it, participation in its creation should not be an elitist activity. Everyone can use it and choose for themselves what gives them pleasure or makes them feel better. The creation of artworks is accompanied by very different emotions: from euphoria and joy to rage and discouragement, according to Pilecka (2006, 417-418): ‘the essence of the creative presence of people with disabilities is to dynamise the personal development of the other person, i.e. to awaken and strengthen their motivation to be creative themselves in relation to the world, themselves and their lives.’

The creative process, and thus the creative activity of pupils with intellectual disabilities, can be a guided activity, i.e. the creation of situations by the teacher in which the pupil should solve an artistic task on his/her own, choosing means and techniques while using familiar ways of implementation. Task situations are the starting point of the pupil’s activity, they are meant to inspire and stimulate. The teacher’s vision should not be imposed, but the pupil should be allowed to create his or her own image of the world – the world as he or she feels and sees it. So art should be a self-generated and imaginative phenomenon, often it is the person with an intellectual disability or the child who sees a detail of a painting that has escaped or was irrelevant to the adult art connoisseur. The child sees a mark, a dot of colour, a gesture, a tiny detail of an outfit or landscape, and gives that very element great significance.

According to Piszczek (2009, 54), therapy through art can provide a means to explore, order, express and understand one’s own emotions, to relieve excessive tension in a socially acceptable way. The

cultivation of creativity provides an opportunity to experience a more complex world, provokes independent effort and stabilises attention on its effects. The author points out that: Before this is possible, the child should:

1. 'Reach an appropriate level of neuromuscular maturity and master the movements and gestures that make drawing and painting possible;
2. detect the relationship that exists between the movements of the painting and drawing tools and the marks left on the paper;
3. adapt their movements to the techniques used and the working tools;
4. subordinate one's movements to the goal and to the perceptual impressions that arise during its realisation (adapt one's actions to the visible effects).'

According to Zinker (1991, 227-232), creative action begins with movement, which breaks down resistance to expression and then leads into the realm of increasing integration – both of what we call psychic life and of what we call the work of art. The author concludes that three stages can be distinguished in the development of non-professional artistic activity:

- In the first, resistance to drawing or painting is overcome. The resulting works are quite primitive, the middle of the page is often painted over, the individual marks are random and far apart.
- In the second, the drawings are more daring, covering the entire space of the sheet of paper. Shapes begin to emerge from the initially homogeneous background, the individual fields become increasingly clear.
- In the third – the themes of the drawings are more developed, the space is filled with many details integrated into the whole. The work begins to have a rich, contrapuntal structure.

Undoubtedly, when conducting art classes with young people with intellectual disabilities, one should strive to reach the third stage, as this activity, next to physical and musical activity, is the most natural need in human life. On the other hand, Borowicz and Nalaskowski (1991, 154) believe that: 'while creative predispositions and aptitudes are internal and located inside the human being, activity is founded on going beyond the individual and taking action to change what is already there. Thus, activity is a certain innovative (for the individual, the community, the nation or the world) intervention.' Visual arts tasks play a significant role in developing and activating students. This role is crucial as it exercises and improves the following functions:

1. sensitises the hands,
2. improves visual perception (by creating symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions, creating illustrations, adding elements to the composition),
3. relaxes muscular tension (e.g. painting circular forms),
4. improves fingertips (working with plastic masses, finger painting),
5. gives them graphic training (filling in contours with colour – drawn, glued with string or marked with paint, painting over stencils).

It is essential to remember that the most important thing in the classes is the experience itself, even if it is the use of different tools and materials, and not the final result of the classes – the product of the child's artistic activity. Each pupil can participate in the activities, using them in his or her own individual way. What is important is participation in the act of creation and the creative process itself. The resulting products are not assessed in terms of aesthetics, and in the context of the importance of the creative act and the aesthetic evaluation of the product, the concept of everyday creativity of Limont (2003, 18) can be recalled: 'The concept of everyday creativity makes it possible to consider as creative every solution to a task, every manifestation of activity that, even to a minimum extent, changes the existing internal and external situation. This concept also shifts the focus from the characteristic of the product to the internal activity of the subject.' Motivational and emotional factors play an important role in artistic activity. Every manifestation of creativity should therefore be praised, even if it is simply the seemingly independent choice of a crayon for drawing. Approval encourages further attempts, engages and stimulates curiosity, which is the basis for the development of the child's imagination. A child's imagination and creativity should be developed, they are not gifts bestowed only on artists, they are the natural needs of every human being – the ability to be captivated, to be curious, to observe. Pupils with intellectual disabilities are generally keen to participate in art activities, but for this to happen: 'it is important to create conditions in which, in addition to functional pleasure, it is possible to experience satisfaction; to experience the joy of the achieved effect and participation and the pleasure of communing with form and colour' (Żabińska and Papaj 2011, 7).

### 3. PREFERRED ART METHODS AND TECHNIQUES USED IN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Imparting a variety of content to young people with intellectual disabilities requires a variety of teaching methods that are primarily effective and helpful for mastering the teaching material. The methods chosen are also intended to ensure that the goals set by the teacher are achieved. In addition, the use of the chosen method requires the use of didactic aids appropriate to the disability in question, art techniques and adherence to teaching principles. The choice of teaching method depends largely on the age of the pupil and the type of disability, but also on the curricular content to be imparted and to be mastered by the pupils. Furthermore, the methods should activate, engage and stimulate the senses. Trochimiak (2009, 109) believes that 'training in the use of newly learnt plastic means connects the virtual world of the student's mental cognition with physical reality and leads to the creation of a plastic product. The pupil should start his/her activity in class with the simplest tasks as a foundation for learning more complex means, which he/she will use as far as possible independently.' The appropriate selection of teaching aids and resources is very important in learning the language of visual arts. As Burno-Nowakowa and Polkowska (1988, 96) state: 'The dexterity of the hands, the habits and habits acquired in art classes, the learning of good organisation of work, the development of aesthetic taste and sensitivity to the beauty of the surroundings contribute to a high degree to the achievement of the revalidation goals.' All models, sculptures and bas-reliefs are useful. The teacher's verbal message can be supplemented by computer technology, in the form of presentations and multimedia programmes on art history and art methodology.

The task of didactic aids is to provide and facilitate direct and indirect cognition of the surrounding reality. Various types of objects providing sensory stimuli (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) are necessary for the correct transmission of messages. In the teaching process, didactic aids have the following three functions: they serve the direct learning by pupils of certain fragments of reality (cognitive function), they are a tool for the development of cognitive abilities and are an important source for the acquisition of knowledge and skills by pupils, performing a formative function, and they facilitate the consolidation of the material covered and the checking of the degree of mastery of knowledge



(didactic function). For pupils with limited linguistic abilities, with difficulties in expressing their emotions verbally, art provides a bridge to understanding, to establish a dialogue with the audience. For pupils with intellectual disabilities, all artistic techniques that expose and use the texture of the material, sensitise them to its variability, similarities and contrasts, teach them to compare and distinguish, are useful in the classroom. These include techniques such as:

- semi-flat – elements of relief, i.e. pasting different types of material (not necessarily plastic) onto paper, fabric, sandpaper, etc;
- relief – also based on bas-relief, but in a more classical way referring to this technique, i.e. gouging in soft clay, plasticine, or pressing natural materials into plastic masses: leaves, seeds, grains or other available objects and materials: ribbons, beads, etc.; and
- macramé elements: ornaments tied with materials of different thicknesses and textures, such as threads, strings, ribbons, paper rolls. Wooden beads of different sizes, fragments of wood, roots, shells, stones, leaves cut out of paper can be used as supplementary elements;
- weaving: making a fabric from yarn by hand, using a weaving frame, loom.
- The following techniques are most often used in didactic and art therapy work with young people with intellectual disabilities:
- pastel and chalk techniques, where the intensity of the colours and the palpable trace that oil pastels leave on the page are of great importance,
- enriched drawing techniques, including candle drawing, pouring contour pictures using sand, grit and grains, drawing with thread and yarn, scratchwork,
- decorative painting techniques (tools and aids used – combining paint with scent, sand, grit, etc.; combining painted compositions with paper, fabric, foil and decorative adhesives – collage),
- painting techniques using stencils, filling in contours,
- linear techniques (scratching, gouging),
- spatial solid forming techniques (salt mass, clay, plaster, plasticine, modelling clay),
- papermaking techniques – making decorative and utilitarian objects from paper and paper pulp, using handmade paper techniques,
- papercraft techniques – making decorative and utilitarian objects from paper and paper pulp, using the handmade paper technique, cut-outs and paper stained glass elements,
- printmaking techniques (e.g. fabric, leaf, thread and string prints – frottage),
- techniques using the textures of different materials – creating pictures from scraps of fabric.

A technique appropriately selected to the student's psychophysical capabilities, with the cooperation and involvement of the teacher, will create unique opportunities for artistic expression. When planning art activities with young people with intellectual disabilities, one should not limit oneself only to the above-mentioned techniques. It is a good idea to refer to handbooks, textbooks and websites



containing new artistic ideas. It is also important to know the specifics of working with other types of disabilities and to combine and use proposals from other sub-disciplines of special education in practice. For example, in teaching practice with visually impaired students, Piłat (2001, 278-280) suggests:

- making works from recyclable materials: plasticine, clay, modelling clay, salt pulp, paper pulp for filling in contours, creating full and half-full forms;
- filling in contours prepared by the pupil or the teacher. Depending on the degree of disability, contours are prepared from string, plasticine, crayons, yarn and loose materials, among others;
- collage – a technique involving the juxtaposition of different materials with different textures;
- glass painting;
- knitting and weaving;
- macramé, i.e. string knotting;
- origami, the art of paper folding;
- wickerwork, or work with natural materials;
- woodworking: making simple functional forms;
- metalwork.

Taking into account the specific nature of the group with which one conducts classes, perhaps some of the above suggestions can be applied in classes with young people with intellectual disabilities. It should also be remembered that the basic form of spontaneous human visual expression is drawing (Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2003). It is a branch of visual arts in which the line constructed with the help of various tools is the most distinct means of expression. In drawing, the author presents the result of an intellectual elaboration of fragments of reality that are relevant at a given moment. In drawing, therefore, he or she contains his or her emotional attitude to reality (Lowenfeld and Brittain 1977). The second plastic form is painting, in which colour is the primary means of expression organising the plane (Hohense-Ciszewska 1991, 50). The use of colour develops colour sensitivity and also develops sensitivity to the use of colour in relation to an emotional state. Sculptural techniques are the least frequently used: modelling in plastic masses. Creating in sculpture develops spatial imagination and technical ingenuity in relation to the subject matter. It is precisely sculpting techniques, i.e. modelling and sculpting in plasticine, modelling

clay, salt and paper paste, clay, that pupils with disabilities like to create in. As Lowenfeld and Brittain (1977, 11) state: 'Touching, seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting involves the active participation of the individual.' It should be borne in mind that the more instructions and commitments the implementer receives, the less original and innovative the task will be. Andrukowicz (1999, 144) points out the above aspect: 'The flexibility and operability of thinking, acting is then lowered, and the sense of anxiety from a possible failure to fulfil the obligations undertaken is increased. The very awareness of being observed, controlled or evaluated lowers the level of activity, especially creative activity.' Thus, it is extremely important that the teacher – the guide to the world of creativity and art – does not impose time frames or even his/her views and visions, that he/she gives creative freedom to the pupils – only then will he/she obtain artworks full of true emotions and a sense of agency.

#### 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR THE SELF-REALISATION AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

In the literature on the subject the terms art therapy most often mean all therapeutic activities directed at the person, using aspects of creative – visual – activities as therapy tools. Creativity, on the other hand, is a self-directed activity, not relying on the support of a therapist, but giving people the opportunity to realise their own individual visions. In Poland, the idea of education through art was promoted by Wojnar (1997, 17), who argued that educational activities are intertwined with life, with a person's personal experiences, while art and artistic creations are an inseparable element of a person's functioning in culture. According to the author: 'art is as much a product, a work as it is activity, creativity, action.'

In addition to their therapeutic function, the activities in the classes make use of the cultural and artistic heritage of well-known artists or produce works of art on the basis of the student's abilities and predispositions. Such activities can contribute to the expansion and disclosure of hitherto unnoticed abilities, and can be an element in the formation of qualitatively new relations with the environment. Artistic activity is a transformation of the reality seen, it is a reflection of what the pupil knows about the surrounding world, but also of his or her own self. It is a non-verbal statement about individual experiences and thoughts, about how the world viewed is experienced. Art fosters cognition of reality –

it opens the pupil's psyche to auditory, visual, gustatory and tactile sensations. Creativity is a record of human feelings, it allows one to learn, to express oneself in a socially acceptable way. According to Braun (2009, 49), the works of art created in class are a potential for success, the experiencing of which supports recognition and appreciation by adults: 'Feelings that are directly related to the visible product lead to identification with the work. Creative achievement manifests itself in this product, in which the child recognises himself and discovers his identity. It is a unique product of his or her own self.'

Quite often the creativity and art of people with disabilities is identified with the type and degree of disability, yet art is a product of imagination, feelings and emotions, as Hulek (1986, 21-22) wrote: 'this is not to say that the type, the degree of disability does not have any influence, but it has a secondary effect and influences rather the working conditions of the creator, the artist, the amateur.' It is important not to distinguish between the art of the disabled and the art of the non-disabled, especially in the reception, because, by definition, a work of art can please or displease the viewer – regardless of the dysfunction of the creator. In addition to their educational tasks, art classes play a therapeutic and compensatory role, i.e. they trigger creative activity and compensate for psycho-physical limitations. They are also an excellent example of subject correlation. Learning about the surrounding reality is more difficult for a student with intellectual disabilities and requires more time, commitment and effort. Educational difficulties are often not the only ones, very often there can also be problems in terms of establishing contacts with peers. It is therefore important to go beyond the walls of the studio or school with the art of people with disabilities. Showing the results of creative work to a wide audience, because as Zinker (1991, 8) wrote: 'creation is the realisation of one's own perfection, the feeling that one is capable of doing anything. Creating is the apotheosis of life – one's own life! (...) Creativity is not only the production of an idea or belief, but also the very process and act of culminating something that is important, that needs to be expressed. It is not only the expression of the full range of a person's experiences, feelings and sense of uniqueness, but also a social act – the sharing with all other people of this celebration, this emphasis on living life to the full.' In other words, Pichalski (2012, 21) puts it: 'for the crowning achievement of the creative act should be to show the effects of the creator's work to a wider audience. The positive evaluation and recognition of the audience are for him the most important

confirmation of his own worth. It also gives meaning to his work and a sense of fulfilment.' Therefore, it is worth showing the parents of the students, their family, teachers and complete strangers how important a person with disabilities is – living their own good and interesting life. The creation of artworks, therefore, is primarily aimed at shaping a sense of the usefulness of artistic expression occurring in contact with everyday life, but also with 'Great Art,' i.e. developing self-acceptance, uniqueness of one's own expression and aesthetics. According to Ploch (2010, 248): 'Arranged creatively inclusive activities should be based on the assumption that artists with disabilities are guided in their activity by the satisfaction of needs such as: belonging, enhancement of self-identity and self-esteem, security, recognition, self-determination, self-realisation.' The author also draws attention to the likelihood of the emergence of certain risks, which he interprets as: 'the widespread under-participation of a group of people with disabilities in cultural institutions and, at the same time, due to the dominance of the current social order with its rejectionist tendencies, ignoring or even considering them as undesirable by artistic circles. These are factors that make it difficult for the group of people in question to define their own identity, which in turn is a source of tensions that limit the possibilities of adaptation, social inclusion devoid of stigmatisation' (Ploch 2014, 85).

Contrary to the stigmatising stereotypes of people with disabilities, creativity is a quality that is also available to these people, despite individual developmental limitations. Disability or dysfunction often hinders daily functioning, but does not preclude the possibility of developing creative potential. Self-concept and self-esteem are formed by people with disabilities largely on the basis of individual experiences in the environment. Sometimes people with disabilities exaggerate the effects of their limitations and often perceive their person as incapable of any activity, identifying themselves as useless beings. Art is a necessary way of achieving a balance between the organism and the environment, but it is also a way of compensating for the deficiencies felt in real life, satisfying unrealised desires and needs. In creative activity, the disabled person creates a platform for self-realisation and penetration into society, integrates, therefore, in a positive way, thus overcoming feelings of alienation, separateness and loneliness. Creative activity provides opportunities for self-realisation and a sense of agency. According to Andrukowicz (1999, 144): 'the striving for proficiency is a natural feature of every human being. The

sense of agency affects not only the level of performance, but also the degree of determination in solving problem situations.’ The practice of art and its presentation is therefore an indispensable part of the education and revalidation of young people with intellectual disabilities. It influences the holistic development of the individual and promotes better functioning in society.

## CONCLUSION

Taking into account the importance and possibilities offered by art classes, special educators should attach great importance not only to the better functioning of students with intellectual disabilities in everyday life, but also pay attention to their cultural and aesthetic development. Experimentation and the search for the optimum working technique in art classes can have extremely positive effects in terms of curiosity, engagement and finding a niche for oneself in society. Promoting artistic talent and achievement, in addition to social inclusion, also influences self-esteem and a sense of belonging to a prestigious group of artists. Artistic activities contribute significantly to the learning of people with disabilities about the world around them. According to Burno-Nowakowa and Polkowska (1988, 96): ‘Through experience and action, children expand their knowledge, vocabulary, learn to use tools, materials, and acquire respect for human labour and its products. In these activities children learn perseverance, consensual, teamwork, camaraderie.’

An empathetic, supportive special educator is undoubtedly an important link in the life of a young person with intellectual disabilities. Apart from organisational support, he or she can give a sense of creative freedom and a deeper sense of existence, and the artistic creations created can become valuable works of art. The above considerations can be summarised in the words of Kłosińska (2000, 10): ‘a lot can be done in the everyday contacts of teachers with students during ordinary didactic classes, without costly expenditures and authorisations of various superior authorities, provided that the teacher himself is and wants to be creative.’

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