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Art-Based Research in Pedagogy in the Context of Individual and Institutional Change: A Study on the Mandala as Expression of School Difficulties

Art-Based Research w pedagogice wobec zmiany indywidualnej i instytucjonalnej. Badania nad mandalą w kontekście wyrażania trudności szkolnych

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore how the process of creating mandalas can support young people in coping with school-related difficulties. The study considers this process at both the individual and institutional levels, focusing on students' emotional and reflective experiences as well as on its potential to enrich school-based support practices. Such phenomena can be captured thanks to the evocative nature of the Art-Based Research (ABR) framework, which is presented here as a new, creative research perspective in pedagogy.

The article discusses the role of the mandala in art therapy, including its Jungian interpretation, its use as a means of expression, and its function as an intermediary strategy for helping young people cope with difficulties in the school environment. The proposed research

model integrated various forms of artistic expression, including visual, poetic, musical, and movement-based forms. The study relied on participatory and projective methods, emphasizing the importance of artistic translation, recipients' responses, and the role of the researcher as both participant and interpreter of the process.

The results indicated the potential of art therapy using mandalas to reveal and organize inner experiences. The findings suggest that the process of creating a mandala by people facing difficulties in the school environment serves not only as a tool for self-understanding but also becomes a mediator in their process of coping with challenges. The creative, participatory, and reflective nature of ABR promotes knowledge of the studied reality and its transformation through a reciprocal process of evocation and strengthened dialogue between theory and practice.

ABSTRAKT

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób proces tworzenia mandali może wspierać młodych ludzi w radzeniu sobie z trudnościami szkolnymi. Omówione w artykule badanie uwzględnia ten proces zarówno na poziomie indywidualnym, jak i instytucjonalnym, koncentrując się na emocjonalnych i refleksyjnych doświadczeniach uczniów, a także na potencjale wzbogacania szkolnych praktyk wsparcia młodych ludzi. Zjawiska te można uchwycić dzięki ewokacyjnemu charakterowi badań opartych na sztuce (Art-Based Research – ABR), które zostały ukazane w tym artykule jako nowa, kreatywna perspektywa badawcza w pedagogice.

Artykuł przedstawia rolę mandali w arteterapii, w tym jej jungowską interpretację, jej zastosowanie jako środek ekspresji oraz jako strategii pośredniczącej w pomaganiu młodzieży w radzeniu sobie z trudnościami w środowisku szkolnym. Proponowany model badawczy zakładał integrację różnych form ekspresji artystycznej – wizualnej, poetyckiej, muzycznej i ruchowej. Badania oparto na metodach partycypacyjnych i projekcyjnych, podkreślając znaczenie przekładu artystycznego, reakcji odbiorcy oraz roli badacza jako uczestnika i interpretatora procesu. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na potencjał arteterapii z wykorzystaniem mandali w ujawnianiu i porządkowaniu doświadczeń wewnętrznych. Wnioski z badania wskazały, że proces tworzenia mandali przez osoby zmagające się z trudnościami w środowisku szkolnym służy nie tylko samopoznaniu, ale staje się także mediatorem w radzeniu sobie z trudnościami. Kreatywny, partycypacyjny i refleksyjny charakter

ABR sprzyja zarówno poznaniu badanej rzeczywistości, jak i jej transformacji poprzez dwukierunkowy proces ewokacji i wzmacniania dialogu między teorią a praktyką.

Introduction

The creation of both art and scientific work is driven by the desire to find meaning, order, and opportunities for creative expression. Aspects that seem to separate these disciplines—such as the subjectivity associated with art and the objectivity associated with science—are, according to Frances Kaplan, not what should truly distinguish them. In Kaplan's view, subjectivity and objectivity should be conceived of as existing on a continuum, and complete objectivity is impossible to achieve despite scholars' efforts. Identifying the points of convergence between science and art, as proposed by Kaplan (2000: 14), makes it possible to integrate theory with art therapy practice and to study the therapeutic process more comprehensively.

Among the new research approaches developed within pedagogy, one notable model is Arts-Based Research (ABR), proposed by Patricia Leavy (2018a). According to Leavy, ABR brings together multiple research traditions that share the use of art as a meaningful component of the scientific process. Art may take various forms, such as music, poetry, or film, which the researcher treats as distinct methods (Leavy 2018b: 72–73). Because of their unique features, these forms create and convey symbolism while also fostering critical attitudes and raising awareness about a given topic. Leavy (2018a: 4) and other scholars view ABR not only as a set of methodological tools but as a new paradigm, which differs from both quantitative and qualitative research.

From an ontological point of view, Meng Tian (2023: 12–13) describes ABR in educational research as adopting a perspective similar to relational materialism, in which the creative process is understood as a space of cooperation between humans and non-human elements—artistic materials, the school environment, tools, gestures, and language. According to the author, meanings do not exist only in the minds of participants but emerge through their engagement in artistic activity, which becomes a tool for epistemic insight. From Tian's (2023: 14) perspective, to address the increasingly complex

challenges in education, researchers can no longer rely on traditional methods, as their reductive nature makes it difficult to reveal how interdependent factors create meaning in institutional contexts.

This article presents an original concept of practicing ABR as an example of a methodological path for researchers interested in combining scientific reflection with the creative process. The proposed approach is illustrated through a study that seeks to answer the question of how young people coping with difficulties in the school environment experience the process of creating mandalas. Artistic creation can foster self-awareness and critical reflection among students, while its exhibition to a wider audience—namely, the school community—has the potential to inspire others by opening a space for understanding their experiences. In this way, the article demonstrates how ABR can support a transition from individual perspectives to institutional narratives.

Theoretical basis

Art can have an educational, formative, and therapeutic dimension. Paweł Skrzydlewski (2025) describes the educational and formative mission of art as becoming evident when the artwork itself—and the encounter with it—leads a person to catharsis. From his perspective, art can be considered part of culture and a tool of classical education only when it is based on the truth about the human person and oriented toward genuine good, not only toward entertainment. It engages the whole human being—intellect, will, emotions, senses, imagination, memory, and social relations—and thus offers a uniquely holistic educational experience (Skrzydlewski 2025: 24–25).

Art therapy, understood as therapy through art, is not easy to define, as the term can be interpreted in either a narrower or broader sense. Its meaning depends on whether it refers only to the visual arts or extends to other artistic activities. The most important aspect of art therapy, which unites all its forms, is that art is treated not as an end in itself but as a means of achieving positive change (Gładyszewska-Cylulko 2011: 8). The functioning of art therapy in school settings has been described, for instance, by Beth Gonzalez-Dolginko (2020), drawing on the experiences of eight practicing art therapists. These professionals used art to support students in recognizing

and expressing emotions, improving peer interactions, increasing acceptance of special education students, and strengthening a sense of community in the classroom. Notably, art therapy interventions also helped identify children with emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties through the analysis of their artwork, which enabled early intervention, including referral to specialists and—in some cases—hospitalization.

One of the therapeutic tools used in art therapy is the mandala. The term comes from Sanskrit, meaning *circle*, considered in Indian beliefs to be a sacred space (Buchalter 2013: 11). It is also a composition whose center, according to Sarah Corey (2012: 15), can be perceived as radiating outward, creating a luminous effect. She emphasizes that many cultures recognize the center of the mandala as a symbol of the place from which all creation began, and therefore humans may metaphysically connect with it. The Jungian understanding of the mandala is the theoretical foundation and inspiration for the research project described in this article. Carl Gustav Jung (1975: 6114) regarded this symbolic structure as a work that gradually emerges through the use of active imagination in situations of psychological imbalance. In Jung's view, the mandala represents the central point of the psyche, which connects and organizes all its parts, and its creation fosters inner integration (Miller 2005: 166).

In art therapy, the mandala is treated as a safe way of expressing emotional states and beliefs, as its creators often feel comfortable working in a circular, clearly structured form (Buchalter 2013: 11). In mandala-based art therapy, Susan Buchalter (2013: 15) proposes various artistic techniques, such as drawing and three-dimensional collages made from feathers, film posters, beads, and CDs. This diversity of methods is indicative of the different purposes for which mandalas are used, such as reducing anxiety or building self-awareness, which Buchalter (2013: 109) understands as insight into one's desires, beliefs, values, strengths, and weaknesses.

Creating mandalas as a tool for self-discovery can support young people in coping with difficulties in the school environment. According to Elżbieta Talik (2011: 128–129), many young people experience stressful situations at school related to learning difficulties, lack of motivation, problems in teacher–student relationships, high expectations from guardians, and peer competition. Their coping strategies

may involve monitoring the activity of the stressor, seeking information about it, attempting to control it, distancing themselves from it, or reinterpreting difficulties and seeking support (ibid.: 129). These strategies can be supported through visual arts. In Jungian therapy, images express fundamental aspects of human experience and act as mediators between the person and their problem, creating psychological distance from individual difficulties (Edwards 2004: 33).

In the literature, several experimental studies demonstrate the impact of mandalas on reducing anxiety in young people. These include studies by Yufang Bi and Yongfang Liu (2019), Leslie Becerra et al. (2022), Nadezhda Kostyunina and Albina Drozdikova--Zaripova (2016), and Anahita Khodabakhshi Koolaee and Faezeh Darestani-Farahani (2020). These authors identified benefits of art creation such as reduced anxiety, improved social skills, and increased motivation. However, the predominantly quantitative approach of most studies does not reveal the full scope of the phenomenon associated with creating mandalas. While confirming the effectiveness of this symbolic form in art therapy, such studies fail to capture the creative process itself and the unique characteristics of this type of artistic expression. The original research described in this article and utilizing ABR may help fill this gap by providing a multidimensional analysis of students' mandala-creation process and offering researchers an innovative approach to scientific practice. Moreover, the context in which the artworks are presented will also be significant: students who often struggle with school-related difficulties will have the chance to share their creations with the entire school community, which may shape both how their work is received and how the research findings are interpreted.

Community-engaging art has been described by Dariusz Kubinowski (2015: 346–347) as a process of creative collaboration involving professionals as well as members of local communities. Their crucial role lies in the creative process itself, not just in its final outcome. According to Kubinowski, community art develops on three levels—geographical, relational, and identity-based—allowing participants to express their experiences and emotions in a group context. He also emphasizes the role of the community animator or artist as a facilitator of the creative process. This perspective closely parallels the principles of ABR, in which the researcher likewise

plays a supportive and interpretive role, enabling participants to construct meaning through artistic engagement.

Research methods and tools

The subject of research within pedagogy, according to Janusz Gnitecki (2008: 36), may include all activities, processes, and conditions that foster human development. This understanding of individual growth is associated with gaining greater insight into one's relationship with the world, as well as an increased sense of agency and control over one's own behavior. The original study focuses on supporting students' development through an art therapy intervention. The research problem, formulated as a question, involves understanding how young people experiencing school difficulties—who constitute the subjects of the research—experience the process of creating a mandala.

Each project developed using the ABR methodology has a unique structure and orientation, shaped by the researcher's individual communication style. The analyses generated within the project should not be viewed as separate, but as an organic and continuous flow of information that interacts with other research activities (Leavy 2018a: 10). It is important to note that the researcher does not *collect* data but *generates* it, as they actively participate in its creation through the research project (Leavy 2018b: 77). The original research project involved conducting and evaluating art therapy workshops. These workshops took place at a Kraków high school and consisted of two one-and-a-half–hour sessions. Their aim was to provide students with multidimensional self-exploration through various forms of artistic expression based on the mandala and to equip them with a tool to support coping with difficulties experienced in the school environment.

The applied research practices were based on visual arts and fell within the category of participatory methods. These include drawing, painting, photography, collage, puppetry, and many other activities (Leavy 2018b: 314). They were treated as data, providing access to tacit knowledge. Such knowledge, due to its symbolic character, reveals internal experience, enabling it to be understood and given meaning (Leavy 2018b: 340). The tools used in the research project

included art therapy interventions presented through various forms of artistic expression in the process of creating mandalas—based on movement and music, visual arts, and poetry. Additionally, relaxation, drawing, painting, assemblage, and blackout poetry techniques were employed. *Assemblage* involves the use of objects to create multidimensional collages (Rajna 2013: 96). *Blackout poetry* consists of obscuring words in a pre-existing prose text so that a poem emerges from the remaining visible words (Ramser 2020: 3).

An intensified and multimodal researcher presence was maintained during the observation of the students' creative process. His reflections were recorded in a research journal, guided primarily by intuition and moral sensitivity. Given the unique characteristics of the workshops, the following criteria for analysis were distinguished:

- the student's choice of mandala and its placement in the classroom—which could indicate what the student was feeling at that moment and what needs they had;
- the choice of objects used to create the assemblage and their arrangement—which could signal what was important to the student at the time;
- the symbolism of shapes, colors, and numbers in self-portraits and visualization exercises—which could suggest how the student perceived themselves and their relationship with their own body;
- identification of the lyrical subject in the poem and interpretation of its feelings—the emotions expressed by the lyrical subject could reflect the emotions of the student;
- determining a distinguishing feature for each participant through poetic exploration of a common motif across all their works—which could provide a new perspective on the participant's artistic output (Bułat 2024: 34).

The analysis of mandalas from a Jungian perspective utilizes criteria inspired by aspects identified by Ryszarda Bernacka and Ewa Turska (2011) and Susan Fincher (1994), who based their work on Jung's writings. These authors emphasize the significance of the colors and shapes used in a mandala, as well as their number.

To evaluate the workshops and gather feedback from participants on the process of creating mandalas, an exhibition of the students' works produced during the sessions was organized. The school

community took part in the vernissage. Visitors attached notes with comments to the exhibition space to share their reflections. The participant's encounter with others' responses to their creative process is an important element of Jungian art therapy. Jung introduced the concept of the *persona*, which reflects how individuals are perceived by others. The *persona* serves as a link between the subjective inner world and the objective external reality (Swan-Foster 2018: 61). Its dual function enables self-reflection and personal growth and fosters transformation at the institutional level by raising social awareness and empathy. According to Leavy (2018b: 368), the audience's reaction to a given artwork is an important criterion for the analysis and evaluation of a research project because art, through its evocative nature, has the capacity to elicit memories, evoke emotions, and provoke change. Moreover, it allows research findings to reach audiences beyond academia.

Additionally, the study employed the aesthetic criterion proposed by Leavy (2018b: 364–379), which concerns the extent to which a particular work captures the essence of the issue it addresses, allowing for a broader understanding of it and revealing its impact in the audience's response. Characteristic features were sought in the mandalas created by workshop participants through original poetic research. The use of this method corresponds with the creative strategies of artistic translation identified by Elizabeth Manders and Gioia Chilton (2013), in which one form of art is represented through another to add meaning and reveal the essence of the subject (Leavy 2018b: 293). Such a practice was used, for example, by Carolyn Jongeward (2018), who created visual portraits of her participants to convey the complexity of their personalities and experiences. Analogously, the intention in this study was to present the profiles of the workshop participants through original artistic creations.

In ABR, art should be present at every stage of the research process, from problem formulation, data generation, and analysis to interpretation and evaluation of results (Leavy 2018b: 108). Artistic activities are not merely illustrations or additions to scholarly content but an equal and integral component, helping to capture hidden meanings and experiences.

Research results

This section presents a summary of the most important research findings—those that most accurately reflect the issues under study. A complete and more detailed analysis, along with the artistic works of the participants subjected to scholarly reflection, is presented in the author's thesis (Bułat 2024). The school counselor assisted in selecting study participants. Seven girls took part in the workshops, and their artistic works were analyzed and interpreted. For anonymity, the participants were given new names and artistic pseudonyms. Below is a summary of the analysis and interpretation of the works of three students, the only ones who attended all workshop sessions.

Iwona (Safe Penguin)

To summarize the analysis and interpretation of Iwona's artistic works, their characteristic feature is the recurring theme of the need for autonomy and a sense of control. This motif was visible in the assemblage that she created, in which a helmeted penguin was moving beyond a designated area, suggested by the perspective that she chose to photograph her work; in the self-portrait, where a web was being woven, signaling the independent realization of a new project, and where a large eye symbolizing the "Self" was awakening; and in the mandala depicting visualization experiences, where a swing detached from the ground appeared.

> In her works, Iwona indicated her needs and expressed, through the assemblage with the helmeted penguin leaving the area, her readiness to cross boundaries and change, provided that she felt comfortable and safe. The motifs present in her work take on new meaning in light of her struggles with Tourette's syndrome. The tics she experiences may draw others' attention and heighten a sense of being observed, as conveyed through the self-portrait mandala. From her expressed need for autonomy, one may infer her desire to become independent and gain control over the disorder. Trust and care, symbolized by the green color used in most of her works, may relate to her feelings toward those who support her when tics occur. When symptoms of Tourette's appear at school, she may go to the nurse's office or visit the school psychologist and counselor, who provide her with support, as the researcher learned through conversations with these professionals. From the conclusion that Iwona illustrates the need for autonomy in the context of illness, one can infer

that art therapy activities based on mandalas—and using techniques such as assemblage, self-portrait, visualization experiences, and blackout poetry—may serve to reveal participants' needs and help them cope with their disorder. (Bułat 2024: 46, own translation)

Karolina (Colorful Jupiter)

Summarizing the analysis and interpretation of Karolina's artworks, her creativity—composed of a mandala, a self-portrait, and a visualization of herself as a tree—is characterized by the use of many colorful, vivid, and bright elements. From the complexity of her visual works and her assemblage, which included several objects representing her passions, one can infer her need to search for what fascinates her most and her attempt to combine different aspects of her personality into a whole. This suggests that art therapy activities involving mandala creation and techniques, such as assemblage, self-portrait, visualization, and blackout poetry, may help her make sense of the multiplicity that she discovers within herself. Karolina's poem revealed that the process of self-discovery is accompanied by fears, inferred from the lyrical subject who kept away from others out of fear of being hurt. This implies that art therapy activities involving blackout poetry may facilitate the expression of participants' fears regarding acceptance. (Bułat 2024: 54, own translation)

Julia (Tempted Tiger)

Summarizing the analysis and interpretation of Julia's works, her creativity is characterized by the use of sharp-edged shapes, visible in the mandala, the self-portrait, and the visualization of herself as a tree. Julia eagerly created and titled her works, but she rarely verbalized her experiences. However, through the creative process, she was able to express the intensely felt emotions that can be inferred from the titles she gave her pieces, such as *Explosion of Feeling, Hunger, Thirst, and Apathy,* and *I Was Afraid, and Then I Was Even More Afraid.* From Julia's works, such as the assemblage of personal objects showing a human restraining a tiger from temptations and the self-portrait featuring the motif of being tempted by a snake, one can infer that the intense emotions she experiences often have an ambivalent character, that she feels controlled, and that she must constantly restrain her desires. This leads to the implication that art therapy activities involving mandala creation may provide a space for expressing what is difficult to verbalize, either because it has a contradictory nature for the participant or because it evokes discomfort. (Bułat 2024: 62, own translation)

The recipients' reactions to the students' artworks, collected during the post-workshop exhibition, were categorized into four groups of associations: emotional, scientific, those related to objects/phenomena, and those expressing appreciation. To distinguish these categories, collages were created (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4).
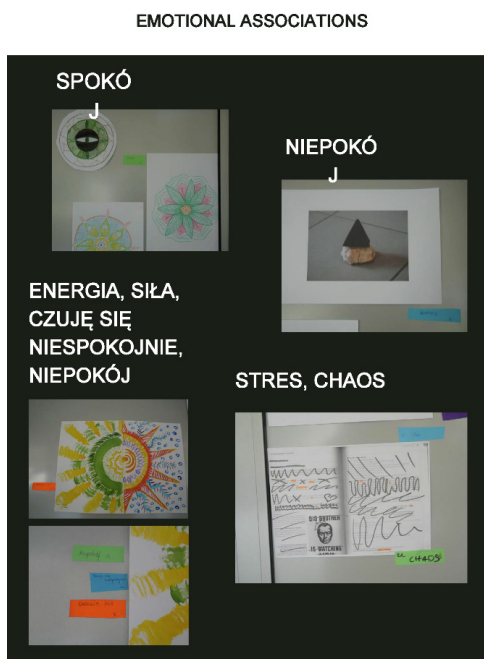
Figure 1. Collage – emotional associations

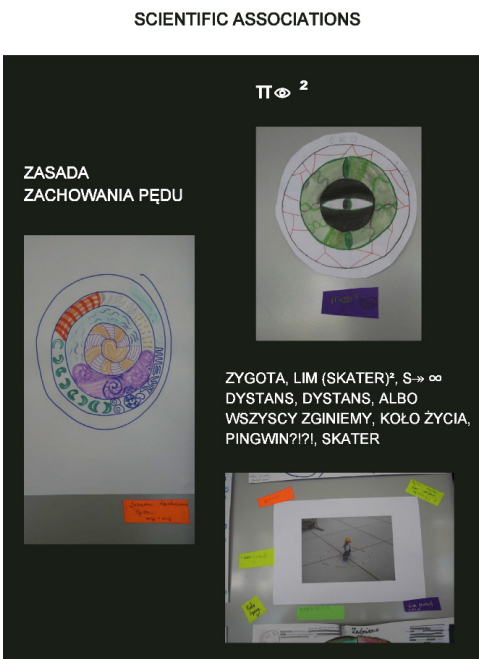Figure 2. Collage – scientific associations

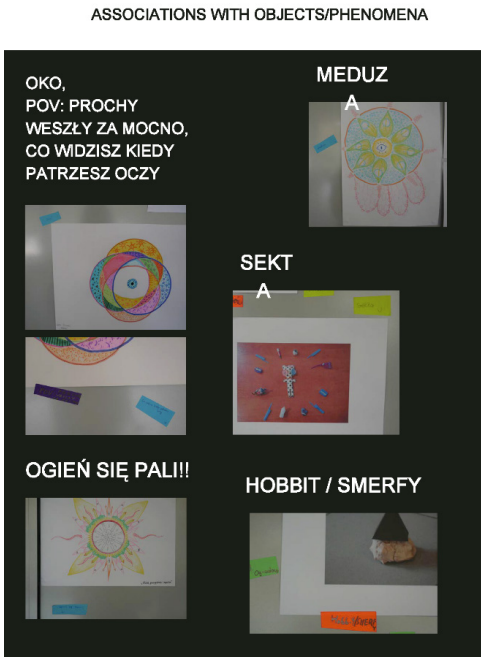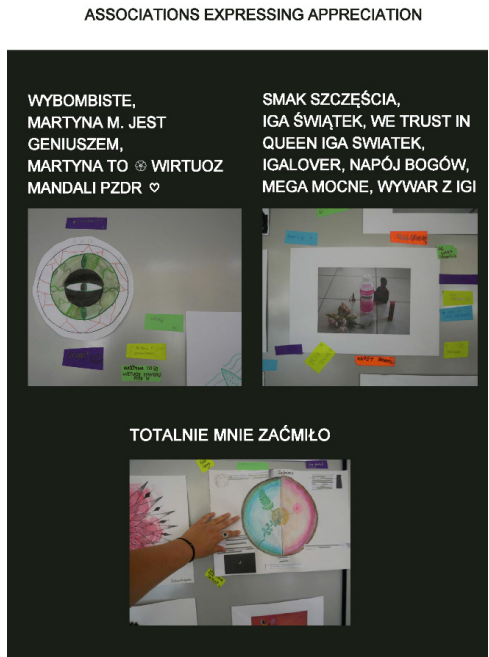Figure 3. Collage – associations with objects/phenomena

Figure 4. Collage – associations expressing appreciation

Through the translation made possible by the ABR methodology, poetry was created that offered a new perspective on the girls' works. Below is an example of a poem based on Julia's piece:

Radiant Art

She intensely felt
every ray
Was light-sensitive
and didn't want to darken
Like the tiger
striped with black.

Conclusions

Addressing the research question of how young people experiencing difficulties in school perceive the process of creating mandalas, the results indicate that this activity supports self-discovery and helps students cope with everyday school challenges. Through self-reflection, mediated by their artworks, the workshop participants gained a space to identify their needs, fears, and difficulties. Thus, creating mandalas became both a form of expression and a tool for understanding and working through these experiences.

Below is a summary of the most important conclusions emerging from the participants' work:

- what gives them comfort and a sense of safety,
- what gives them a sense of belonging and community,
- what is important to them,
- what helps them feel relaxed,
- what they are passionate about and whether it is easy for them to share themselves with others,
- whether they feel independent or controlled, and their need for autonomy,
- their sense of being different and fears related to being accepted by others,
- duality and variability of nature as part of their development,
- existential fear as an inseparable element of reality (Bułat 2024: 96–97).

The use of ABR made it possible to access content that often remains unexpressed in words yet may be crucial for understanding the participants' experiences, needs, and inner resources. Through artistic translation—in the form of research poetry—and through the exhibition of students' works, the project influenced both the creators and the audience, opening space for reflection and mutual inspiration in the institutional context. This demonstrates that the creative, participatory, and reflective nature of ABR promotes not only an understanding of the studied reality but also its transformation, strengthening the dialogue between theory and practice. I believe that schools should provide students with more opportunities for artistic expression and for presenting their work to a wider audience. Referring to Beth Gonzalez-Dolginko's (2020) research,

the presence of specialists trained to use art in therapeutic work significantly enhances the possibilities for pedagogical and psychological support in schools.

During the synthesis of the empirical material, a need arose for an additional and more substantial account of the participant's experiences—one that would be more than an analytical description. In line with the spirit of the ABR methodology, where creativity becomes a form of knowledge, a poem was created to summarize the work of all the participants, entitled "About 7 Flowers."

About 7 Flowers

Somewhere there was
that safe place
in the grass
among the leaves
sometimes in the sun
sometimes in the shade
and sometimes even
deep inside a shell
The search went on
water drops appeared
until a flower bloomed
And though this flower
could be picked
and tempted itself
it did not always wish to be
where it was
nor did it know why
it was
At last it found a way
to grow among many
without losing
its own color

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