

# The Emergence of Personal Symbols through Story Cloth Process with Gifted Children

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**THE EMERGENCE OF PERSONAL SYMBOLS  
THROUGH STORY CLOTH PROCESS WITH GIFTED  
CHILDREN**

Postgraduate final paper

Osijek, 2021

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Akademija za umjetnost i kulturu u Osijeku  
Poslijediplomski specijalistički studij Kreativne terapije, smjer art terapija

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Osijek, 2021.

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U Osijeku, 15.1. 2021. godine

Potpis: 

*To my parents with love.*

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## **Pojava osobnih simbola tijekom izrade pripovjednog platna u radu s darovitim djecom**

### **SAŽETAK**

Predstavljeno istraživanje ispituje stvaranje vizualnih osobnih simbola tijekom art terapijske aktivnosti, pripovjednog platna. Susreti su provedeni s grupom umjetnički darovite djece prijavljene na aktivnosti organizirane u sklopu gradskog projekta „Centra izvrsnosti Osijek”. Pitanja predstavljena u istraživanju su, Na koji će način osobni simboli doprinijeti razumijevanju djetetova emocionalnoga stanja” i „Utječe li šivanje na nastanak osobnih simbola?”. Istraživanjem se hipotetizira doprinos osobnih simbola u razumijevanju djetetova emocionalnoga stanja te da šivanje utječe na stvaranje osobnih simbola.

Susreti su osmišljeni u namjeri pružanja emocionalne podrške darovitoj djeci koja pohađaju osnovnu školu. Tijekom petnaest susreta u prostoru osnovne škole djeca su stvarala svoja pripovjedna platna. Šivanjem su razvijala usredotočenost, upornost i strpljenje te kontinuirano radila na svojim idejama. Tijekom redovitih grupnih i individualnih razgovora sa specijalizantom art terapije / istraživačem, učenici su doživjeli suradnju i povezanost. U ozračju sigurnoga mjesta nesvjesno su oblikovali vlastite simbole na pripovjednim platnima. U suradnji sa specijalizantom art terapije / istraživačem analizirali su pojavu i značenje vlastitih simbola te na koji su način isti povezani s njihovim emocionalnim stanjem.

Istraživačka pitanja su na taj način potvrđena i predstavljena kroz kvalitativne podatke. Uočena je pozitivna korelacija između osobnih simbola na pripovjednim platnima i djetetova emocionalnoga stanja. Dugotrajnost izrade pripovjednoga platna pružila je sudionicima vrijeme za prorađivanje i oblikovanje osobnih simbola koji su utjelovili njihova trenutna emocionalna stanja opisana u izjavama.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** darovita djeca, emocionalni razvoj, art terapija, pripovjedno platno, osobni simboli



## **The Emergence of Personal Symbols through Story Cloth Process with Gifted Children**

### **ABSTRACT**

The presented research explores the creation of visual personal symbols during an art therapy activity, story cloth. The sessions were conducted with a group of artistically gifted children who applied for the sessions organized by the city project Centre of Excellence Osijek. Questions presented in this research were, “How will personal symbols contribute to understanding of the child’s emotional state?” and “Does the sewing activity influence the creation of personal symbols?” This research hypothesizes that personal symbols contribute to understanding of the child's emotional state and that sewing activity influences the creation of personal symbols.

The sessions were designed to provide emotional support for gifted children attending elementary school. During fifteen sessions, on the premises of a primary school, children created their story cloths. Through sewing they were developing concentration, persistence, patience, while continually working on their ideas. Through regular group and individual talk with Art Therapy Student / researcher, students felt companionship and integration. In the atmosphere of secure place they unconsciously shaped their own symbols on story cloths. In cooperation with the Art Therapy Student / researcher, they analyzed the phenomenon and meaning of their symbols and how they related to their emotional state.

The research questions were thus confirmed and are presented through qualitative data. Positive correlation between personal symbols and the child’s emotional state was visible in all of the story cloths. The longevity of making a story cloth provided time for children to process and form personal symbols that epitomized their current emotional state verbalized in statements.

**KEY WORDS:** Gifted children, emotional development, art therapy, story cloth, personal symbols

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

My interest in making a story cloth was stirred during 2<sup>nd</sup> year of art therapy specialist study. Although I was not very skillful, I enjoyed the process. Needle between my fingers seemed to soothe my thoughts, delving one by one as I was piercing through the fabric. My whole posture had changed – my back was firmly providing support to the body, legs were touching the ground, relaxed, and my gaze became fixed. I loved the solitude sewing brought – I was part of the group, yet we were all pulled back. I was proud of thin lines of my sewed drawing because I knew this was the beginning of something different. Art therapy activities contributed to my motivation, organization and general well-being. My excitement got even bigger as I tried the activity with my children. My four-year-old was equally insistent and interested as my seven-year-old. At that point I remembered a lady that used to watch me from time to time when I was little. Mrs. Ivanka lived next door and I loved spending time with her because she let me help her with whatever she was doing. By the age of six we started making embroidery. I loved the colors and textures from which I could choose.

As a methodologist of Art Education, I was thinking of how we can re-introduce sewing in schools and provide children with benefits of story cloth making. Sewing is part of a worldwide tradition but, when talking to students, I found out only a few of them had experienced this activity in their childhood. My academic year 2018 / 2019 began with the preparation of encounters with the group of twelve artistically gifted children who were supposed to engage in an art therapy activity. Driven by the complexity of the process that brought out several stories I had stored and forgotten, I decided to elaborate fifteen sessions through which artistically gifted children could experience the beauty of a creative process unknown to them - story cloth. The leading thought was to provide artistically gifted children with emotional support from session to session, and to make their emotions visible in the final product.

The teacher's obligation in the elementary school is, along with staff members, noticing talented pupils and stimulation of talents. Two frequent approaches dealing with talent are *acceleration of program* and *elaboration and realization of special and enriched educational program*. Acceleration makes it possible for talented pupils to end sooner. The approach to enriched contents is deeper and individualized so that it can be under mentorship out of school. Individual needs of

a talented pupil on this occasion are important (HNOS, 2006). The special or enriched educational ending is partly covered by this research.

Leta Hollingsworth pointed to emotional challenges of talented children with high IQ that is a consequence of being talented. According to Janos and Robinson (Winner, 2005), 20 – 25% of the talented go through social and emotional difficulties twice as much as the other school children.

The project “Centre of Excellence” (CIO) of City of Osijek offers ample teaching for talented elementary school pupils (O projektu, 2019). The project aims to stimulate the talents development of pupils. This research is based on the art therapy student’s experience in working with talented pupils of CIO project, from October 2018 to May 2019. In this period the pupils entered art therapy sewing activity of story cloths. The workshops were made meaningful as emotional group support through the work on story cloth being led by Art Therapy Student / researcher (hereinafter referred to as ATS / researcher). While meeting, the children observed shape and use of their personal symbols, and in the conversation with ATS / researcher the personal symbols and their role were mutually analyzed.

The purpose of this research is to direct attention to the importance of emotional support of talented child in the course of education. The support enriches the quality of child’s life and strengthens it on the road of development and self-realization.

The research aims to bring awareness and analyses to the phenomenon of personal symbols on story cloths and to point to their value on the occasion of understanding their own emotional state.

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

Due to emotional sensibility, intelligence, strong impressions and concentration on the contents which are parts of their interests, gifted children demand special attention. Because of their often surprising achievements, parents and teachers tend to believe that their emotional development follows the cognitive one. Being quite opposite, the emotional development of gifted children is more similar to their classmates and results in their not being able to fit in any of the groups.

School is a place where children, gifted or not, spend most of their time. Due to time limitations and a large number of pupils in the class sections, the emotional care is frequently absent in the teaching procedure. Moreover, it is often emphasized that school is not a place for therapy. On the other hand, that is contrary to the learning outcomes of almost every school class. For example,

some affective achievements of an Art class are encouraging empathy, tolerance and patience. The school system would undoubtedly benefit from an art therapy studio within each school building, run by art therapists and open for all children. This research shows an example of positive practice in the school setting provided through a city project that paid attention not only to the improvement of cognitive skills but to the emotional state of important members of our future, the gifted ones.

## **1.2. Purpose of study**

The purpose of study is to awaken and to analyze the phenomenon of personal symbols creation within individual story cloths, pointing out their significance while understanding children's emotional state.

## **1.3. Social significance of the study**

This examination will analyze the cognitive, affective and psycho-motoric benefit of efficiency of story cloth production in the course of a longer period of time. The talented children demand special attention due to emotional sensibility, intelligence, strong impressions and concentration on the contents which are parts of their interests. Due to time limitations and a large number of pupils in the class sections, the care is frequently absent regarding talented students in the teaching procedure. Being engaged in this kind of activity, the student gets emotional support from the leader and other participants through conversation, adequate directions during the creative process, support and praise for persistence in the idea realization from sketch to final work, and affirmative messages connected to personal contents of his/her work.

If the benefits for students were significant, the fit in the chance for art therapy activities in extracurricular contents would be open. Thus the students would be able to perform regular activities which could articulate feelings in a socially acceptable way, to think over their actions and reactions, and have time in which they would take exclusive care of their mental hygiene.

## 1.4. Research Questions

With the aim of research to awaken and to analyze the phenomenon of creation of personal symbols within individual story cloths and pointing out to their significance while understanding children's emotional state, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ 1 How will personal symbols contribute to the understanding of child's emotional state?

RQ 2 Does the sewing activity influence the creation of personal symbols?

This research hypothesizes that personal symbols take part and contribute to the understanding of child's emotional state, and that sewing activity influences the creation of personal symbols.

## 1.5. Definition of key terms

Gifted children, emotional development, art therapy, story cloth, personal symbols

Gifted children

According to Winner (2005), gifted children have three unusual characteristics: premature development, perseverance to *dance to their own tune* and passion for learning. Due to their premature development, their first attempts to master their field of interest start very early. In accordance with it they prosper earlier than expected because they learn easily. In addition, besides learning more quickly than other children, gifted ones learn differently according to the quality. They require minimum help from their mentors because they learn mostly independently.

Emotional development

Emotional development, as important as physical development, plays a significant role in the social relations, exploration of environment and self-development. According to Haviland-Jones et al., and LaFreniere, Oatley and Jenkins, stages of emotional development can be divided into three groups: emotion acquisition, differentiation and transformation of emotions (Brajša-Žganec, 2003). Greenberg and Snell, and LaFreniere, Oatley and Jenkins write that areas of the brain that are most

important for emotional development and emotional regulation are the limbic system and front lobe of the cerebral cortex (Brajša-Žganec, 2003).

### Art therapy

Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art activity as a way of communication during the process. The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy as “an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches one’s life through creative process that encourages person’s active engagement. This kind of therapy applies psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship, facilitated by a professional art therapist. Art therapy, among other things, has a positive effect on cognitive and sensorimotor functions, self-esteem and self-awareness, resilience, insight, and social skills” (About Art Therapy, 2017). The goal of art therapy must be primarily therapeutic, but due to its hybrid discipline, an art therapist must be fully knowledgeable of and familiar with art, creative processes and therapy. It is necessary to know about human development, interpersonal relations, and the nature of the treatment relationship and mechanism of change (Rubin, 1982).

### Story cloth

Story cloth is a narrative textile which, through a sewed image, forms a representation of personal or collective event. Especially relevant is the time of the process. It takes a while to sew a picture and in that way a person is actually given time to process complex emotions (Garlock, 2016).

### Personal symbols

Symbol is most often defined as a term that stands instead of something else. According to Fromm (1970), a symbolical language is the one that expresses the inner experience as if it were sensory, a result of something gone through in reality. That way symbolic language is an exterior representation of the inner scene, a symbol of our soul (Fromm, 1970).



## **1.6. Population**

The research was held in an Elementary School in Osijek where children gathered twice a month, for a total of fifteen times. It consisted of continuous work on individual story cloths, along with follow-up activities used to increase the dynamics of the sessions.

The research was open to participants from October 2018 until May 2019, and finished three weeks before school classes ended. In the beginning of art therapy sessions there were twelve participants, but two of them dropped out after the third meeting. The research was then conducted based on the art work of the research sample that included ten remaining participants whose actual names were replaced by pseudonyms. Two participants were boys, Noel (11) and Vid (14), and the other ones were girls, Tara (12), Lena (12), Hela (10), Dina (11), Sofija (12), Maja (12), Lora (10), and Meri (12). The average age of the participants was 11.6 years. All of the participants attended different elementary schools in Osijek. They did not know each other previously, except Sofija and Maja who were best friends and classmates.

Apart from the participants' story cloths, the focus was on the works made through follow-up activities and on the data obtained by usual talk and informal interviews.

## **1.7. Research design**

The proposed research is a qualitative and uses the method of narrative analysis, documentation research, participation observing and interview.

The ATS / researcher offered to gifted children a systematic way to work on story cloth. Simultaneously with the students' continuous activity the researcher emphasized connections between the story cloth forming its meaning and planning the work in steps. Through narrative analysis, participation, and interview the ATS / researcher followed individual stories, simultaneously seeking repetition and personal symbols in visual form presented in story cloth.

Analyzing contents of individual cloths, but also the previous researches connected with creativity stimulation and historical story cloth development, the ATS / researcher was preparing for each meeting. In these preliminary steps the method of documentation study was used. To ensure dynamism of the meetings and to open the spaces for new inspections, the ATS / researcher used

the chosen shorter art therapy activities like Maze etc. that, along with continuous opening talk, gave extra material to deepen the research.

Approaching the end of sessions, students described their scenes verbally in the form of short written text, enclosed with each work. The texts were shaped in cooperation with the ATS / researcher and covered information obtained through interviews. These statements were a valuable source of information used in narrative analysis of story cloths.

Instrumentation was held in this order:

1. Opening conversation (at the beginning of every session)
2. Maze, Mirroring, Drawing by observation (in the first 3 sessions), Collaborative Drawing
3. Informal interview (from the fifth session on)
4. Participation observing (every session)
5. Written statement (during the eighth and the ninth sessions)

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Giftedness strongly impacts one's being. Kreger Silverman (1998) points out that gifted individuals have a different organization of the Self, because they are able to realize the unthinkable - impossible dreams, unrealistic goals, insurmountable obstacles. Therefore their inspiration and creative force come unpredictably. During that process, curiosity and need for expression mix, whatever the field of interest (literature, dance, art, mathematics etc.). Kreger Silverman (1998: 204) singles out "cognitive complexity, emotional sensitivity, heightened imagination, and magnified sensations" in the experience of a gifted one. In some dictionary definitions giftedness is equivalent with talent, but the author warns us that talent directs to what individuals can *do* rather than to who they *are*.

Skills can define the individual or design the structure of his/her day. Sometimes they lead to achievements and sometimes to hopeless failures. Along the process numerous questions arise, challenging the resilience. A gifted child, due to lack of experience in creative process, can easily be overwhelmed by those questions. Therefore it would be of great matter to provide a kind of care that could strengthen the child while he/she is navigating their giftedness. This dynamic territory affects interpersonal relationships as much as it challenges the Self. Due to the specific field of interest of the research, the literature overview was presented in subject categories and compiled

following key words - gifted children and their emotional development, art therapy (story cloth as chosen art therapy activity), and personal symbols which emerged during the making of story cloths. Because of the lack of literature dealing with gifted children and their continuous mental hygiene in form of art therapy activities, combinations of various fields were inevitable, such as psychology, art and art therapy, and the position of gifted children within Croatian school system. Therefore relevant literature was both Croatian and American. Amongst the benefits of the existing studies was understanding the importance of children's emotional development when designing art therapy activities and topics that these activities will address. Moreover, it was consequential to learn about vulnerability of gifted children caused primarily by not belonging to their peer group. Since ATS / researcher is involved in the school system and educational process of future teachers, it was particularly important to create a new platform where different topics would meet in order to strengthen precious members of our society, gifted children. The new study intends to link the key words and form a juxtaposition that will create a new form of psychological support of gifted children through art therapy activities, preferably within school.

## **2.1. Gifted Self**

According to Kreger Silverman (1998), giftedness brings pressure to succeed, performance anxiety, desire to become famous and fear of failure. Because gifted children differ from their peers, it creates the opportunity to be labeled as *nerd*, *teacher pleaser* or *overachiever*. The author reminds us that gifted children are exceptionally vulnerable which sets higher standards for their parents, teachers or counselors: "Lost potential is not the issue here; the greater fear is loss of Self" (Kreger Silverman, 1998:205). When thinking of giftedness in art fields the loss may be more obvious, because children and young people interested in art often reveal their inner state through creative process emphasizing that they simply *do not belong here*<sup>1</sup>.

The basis of the research was an example of positive practice with artistically gifted children in the school setting. The activity was provided by the city project "CIO – Centre of Excellence Osijek" that offered gifted children enriched educational activities. As stated on the CIO website, the project's school-embedded, systemic, and strategic educational plan was to address the educational

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to song *Creep*, by Radiohead (1993)

and socio-emotional needs of the gifted youth, age 10 to 15. CIO offered enrichment classes in mathematics, biology and chemistry, physics, geography, information and communication technology in sciences, and drama, visual arts, and creative writing in arts. Four Osijek schools provided their spaces as partners for arts, and four for sciences. The cycle of CIO lessons ended with public presentation of creative work prepared by pupils and their mentors throughout the school year. This project was novel in education of gifted children of Osijek in many ways, significantly because the art section offered art therapy in one workshop, conducted by this art therapy student. By implementing therapeutic activity into educational structure the CIO team showed sensitivity for emotional well-being of a gifted child in terms of preventive measures rather than waiting for the problem to occur. The improvement of the structure was an important step in nurturing (artistic) giftedness, especially because the educational system does not offer various support for processing complex emotions that come along with being (an artistically) gifted child. The concept of the workshop was designed to give emotional support through an art therapy activity, story cloth, in the group setting. Workshop development was based on verified researches in art therapy and psychology of giftedness that influenced ATS / researcher's approach to attendees, selection of the theme, and follow-up activities.

According to Kreger Silverman (1998), gifted children, same as any others with significant developmental differences, require specific kind of parenting, teaching and counseling so their Self could be fully realized. Remembering that Self is a puzzling, complex entity that operates as a whole, it should not be divided into positive and negative sides, abilities and deficiencies (Kreger Silverman, 1998). There are numerous definitions of the Self. For Maureen Neihart (1998) it captures the essence of personality – identity, self-esteem, and one's contributions to the world. A substantial factor in development of a healthy Self is the reaction of others to our actions. Taking into account self-esteem, it is influenced by one's experiences of being treated by others, between ages five or six until puberty. Moreover, the Self shapes throughout life, but adolescence is the period when it is defined and established (Neihart, 1998). The author provides the data from the field of Self psychology suggesting that gifted children often struggle to preserve their true personality, especially if their giftedness is ignored or neglected. Interestingly, Neihart notices that some types of giftedness will expose the child more to risk of losing the Self than others – for example, creative giftedness. Creatively gifted children may feel more pressure to create a false self than would academically gifted children (Neihart, 1998). For creatively gifted children the

school system often offers more creativity – in workshops, competitions or interesting educational programs. Most of the time emphasis is on technique, performance or skill, but the idea behind the product is neglected, as well as the person. Few people are preparing children for how it feels to think like a creatively gifted. Giftedness per se sets children into minority groups, which can sometimes be frustrating or even painful. When talking about strategies to preserve the Self, Miller (Neihart, 1998) pointed out that people with true selves are able to experience a variety of feelings, including pain. It is important to teach people how to express emotions and cope with intense ones, because it strengthens the true Self. Neihart (1998) stresses that adolescents in particular need to be educated about their pain rather than avoid it. It is especially nourishing to express the pain in some art form, in a facilitated support peer-group. Pipher (in Neihart, 1998) explains the importance of deep-structure questions during those sessions that avoid the superficial talk which refers to what can be observed. Deeper questions address the hidden emotions.

Reviewing the literature on creative giftedness and the state's primary educational school system opened an unexplored territory of emotional support for a gifted child. The research will introduce the current situation covering the topic in The Republic of Croatia. As it was pointed out earlier, there are no preventive measures that could contribute to children's emotional wellness. In accordance with that and my own personal interest in working with gifted individuals, the research will present general information on giftedness, and creative giftedness respectively, and its position in relation to the Croatian school system, followed by detailed description of art therapy activities with school children, focusing on story cloth.

## **2.2. Pursuit of Giftedness**

A French novelist and philosophy teacher Muriel Barbery (2009) in her novel "The Elegance of the Hedgehog" presents two peculiar women, concierge Renée and twelve-year-old Paloma, both gifted individuals desperately trying to hide their virtues. One thing they have in common is their quest for solitude, which at one point culminates with Paloma's radical decision to kill herself. This moving and yet humorous book vividly explains how it feels to be gifted, probably from the first hand, because Barbery's books are replete with autobiographic details.

When thinking of giftedness, people tend to focus on the extraordinary achievements, observing the gifted one as a sort of miracle. The individual is often unusual or even eccentric, and this

cognition is widely accepted. Kreger Silverman (1998) notices that some gifted children learn very early in life to hide their giftedness by pretending to be someone their peers would like more. They reject their inner Self. The author stresses the importance of early detection of giftedness, although National Excellence recommends not to identify it in preschool and primary school children. Kreger Silverman wonders how we could help vulnerable gifted if they are not detected at an early age.

According to Winner (2005) gifted children have three unusual characteristics: premature development (certain aspects develop earlier than the norm), perseverance to dance to their own tune, and passion for learning. Because of their premature development, first attempts to master their field of interest start very early. In accordance with it they prosper earlier than expected because they learn easily. In addition, besides learning more quickly than other children, gifted ones learn differently according to the quality. They require minimum help from their mentors because they mostly learn independently. Winner's (2005) nine misconceptions related to giftedness put giftedness into a wider picture.

1. The term *gifted* is usually related to academically gifted children whose giftedness is measured by IQ tests. It is assumed that those children are generally gifted but academic giftedness is rarely that broad. Children can be gifted in one field and show difficulties in another.
2. Children that develop premature scholastic abilities measured by IQ tests are called *gifted*, and children that show exquisite skills in art forms or sports are considered *talented*. Different designation suggests an unjustifiable classification because both groups show three characteristics of gifted children.
3. It is assumed that giftedness is related to high IQ, however IQ tests are narrowed to measure verbal or mathematical skills. There are not many arguments in favor of high IQ being necessary in art or music.
4. The general belief that giftedness is native to us, disregards the impact that environment has on growth of talents.
5. Quite contrary to this understanding is the belief that giftedness is the result of intensive practice at child's early age conducted by parents and teachers.
6. Gifted children are considered to be the "outgrowth" of enterprising parents. It is true that parents of gifted children are significantly involved in encouraging their talents but that kind of encouragement is needed for the gift to evolve.

7. Gifted children are often idealized by psychologists because of their abilities. In reality, gifted ones are often socially isolated and unhappy unless they, by chance, find someone similar to them.

8. Many teachers and principals claim that all children are gifted. At times it means that every child has a field in which it stands out, and sometimes that every child has the same learning potential. It is often overlooked that, for example, musically gifted children attend advanced music courses. This point of view leads to a conclusion that giftedness is a pure social construct designed to support elitism. Furthermore it denies any form of education specially created for gifted.

Typically, gifted children are considered creative, and are expected to be creative and outstanding adults. The fact is that many of the gifted ones “burn out” and others change their field of interest. Some of successful ones are not creative, and only few grow up into prominent creative people. We cannot assume that there is a link between giftedness at early age and eminence in adult life (Winner, 2005).

### **2.3. Creative giftedness**

Winner’s book “Gifted Children: Myths and Realities” (2005) provides a thorough survey of interesting topics related to gifted children including artistically gifted ones. The author highlights six characteristics that appear in artwork of gifted children: steady lines, depiction of depth and volume, drawing objects in different positions, composition, realism and visual narratives.

Artistically gifted children use large number of details and often succeed in drawing spatial depth on the sheet of paper. While doing it they use all known techniques, such as foreshortening or linear perspective, which may be simple in the beginning and applied locally instead of to the whole scene. Furthermore, the artistically gifted draw figures in challenging positions, such as side view or semi side view of a face. When analyzing composition of their artwork they use dynamic balance, the term coined by Rudolf Arnheim (in Winner, 2005). This absence of symmetry creates two different parts of one art piece that are visually balanced, for example bigger shapes opposite intensive colors. Due to mentioned characteristics, artwork of gifted children appears realistic. Winner points out that almost all western children identified as artistically gifted drew realistically, but there were some exceptions mentioned in Clare Golomb’s research. Golomb (in Winner, 2005) analyzed two artistically gifted children whose use of composition and color drew attention. Their

work was full of decorative features and the use of color was expressive, suggesting that realistic drawing may be the most typical characteristic of advanced development but non-figurative ability should not be overlooked. The last feature is tendency to create visual short stories. During middle childhood and adolescence creatively gifted children begin to draw imaginary plots and characters. Their drawings depict episodes from the lives of those characters. Some children are more interested in creating imaginary worlds rather than experimenting with composition and shape – their drawings are illustrations (Winner, 2005).

#### **2.4. Working with Gifted Students in the Elementary School**

As pointed out in the Introduction, according to HNOS (Croatian National Standard of Education, 2006) school employees are obliged to notice talented pupils and stimulation of talents. Tendency for high educational standards and achievements demands paying particular attention to discovering gifted children and creating opportunities for developing their giftedness. The teacher's mission is to replace the usual classroom setting in which contents, methods and forms of work were adapted to the majority. Spotting gifted pupils and stimulation of their giftedness by designing the program according to preferences, interests, motivation and abilities of gifted pupils is an obligation of teachers and expert assistants in primary schools. Previously briefly presented approaches, *acceleration of program* and *elaboration and realization of special and enriched educational program* are conceived in order to be used for mentioned purposes.

Acceleration makes possible a faster ending to education for talented pupils. It relates to those pupils who stand out with their excellent achievements in some or all subjects. Those pupils are given the opportunity to master the curriculum of two classes during one school year. Acceleration can be *partial* (when gifted students are placed in classes with older peers for a part of the day in one or more content areas) or *whole-grade* (when students are placed in a grade level ahead of chronological age peers).

Implementation of *elaboration and realization of special and enriched educational program* assumes identifying and diagnosing a gifted pupil or pupils, designing work programs, forming the professional team which will monitor child's /children's work, provide program realization conditions (schedule, instructional materials, literature, teaching and learning methods), and evaluation of student's results and achievements. Possibilities of enriched educational program are



multiple. It can cover every educational field, and approach to content is deeper, individually guided, inter-subjectively correlated, interactive or even mentored by a scientist or an artist. During practicing of this approach pupils are not being separated from their classmates, but individually working on assignments or projects, with expert guidance. It is important to take account of individual needs and preferences of every gifted child, especially of their motivation (HNOS, 2006).

School year 2018 / 2019 has started with National Reforms in School Education. “School for Life” is the name of experimental program of Ministry of Science and Education of The Republic of Croatia. According to The Regulations on primary education of gifted students (Official Gazette NN 34/1991), it is pointed out on the official website “School for Life“, with the aim of developing giftedness, schools can provide programs with various levels of difficulty, group, individual or mentored work, early admission, extracurricular and out-of-school activities, contact with professionals from the field of interest, etc. (Razredna nastava, 2020). In online Teacher's Reference Book, under the section Gifted Students, the main focus is on development of giftedness. Although there is a quotation in the bottom of the page, by Leta Hollingsworth, on how it is hard for a child to be intelligent like a grown up but with emotions of a child, there are no specified activities that would include emotional support for a gifted individual. In literature recommendations for teachers, only a few titles address the emotional life of a gifted child (Razredna nastava, 2020). Yet emotions and motivation are considered as a core of active learning.



Picture 1. Active Learning Framework

(After: Obogaćivanje redovnog nastavnog procesa, Metodički priručnik za 1. razred osnovne škole) <https://skolazazivot.hr/obrazovni-sadrzaji/metodicki-prirucnici/metodicki-prirucnici-za-osnovnu-skolu/> [accessed 03/26/2020]

Speaking of talented young people and their self-respect level, Vizek Vidović emphasizes that there are no unambiguous results. The successful, talented individuals who actively use their talents have a more positive general picture of themselves than the other persons of the same age (Vlahović-Štetić et. al., 2005). Colangelo and Assouline (in Vlahović-Štetić et. al., 2005) followed the development of a picture about her/himself, and the patterns of 563 talented pupils from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Their main finds, the general pictures about themselves, were more positive with the talented in relation to the other persons of the same age. On the scales of self-understanding the lowest results are achieved by secondary-school pupils, better said – the girls. Janos and Robinson (in Vlahović-Štetić et. al., 2005) noticed that with highly talented children there is a danger of negative self-estimate as the consequence of self-criticism.

## **2.5. Art Therapy, Art Education, and Story Cloth**

According to The Regulations on primary education of gifted students (Official Gazette NN 34/1991) with the aim of developing giftedness, schools can provide programs with various levels of difficulty. The main focus when working with gifted children is on development of giftedness. Although educational materials on the official web site stress the importance of motivation, there are no specified activities or directions that would include emotional support for a gifted individual. Led by the idea of filling the gap between emotional life and education, especially in the complex life of a gifted child, the promising strategy was found in the model presented by Rachel Albert, a registered art therapist and a licensed art teacher in the state of Virginia, USA. According to Dobbs (as cited in Albert, 2010) the prevailing theoretical approach in art education is Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), dating back to 1980s. DBAE is based on art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. Those components could be redefined as “creative expression,” “cultural heritage,” “perception and response,” and “talking about art” (p. 22), which could link them more directly with the field of art therapy. In her eclectic art therapy practice Albert aims to accomplish educational standards. The outcome is an integrated example that ties art therapy and art education

into one unit. Although each student is individual, Albert realized that general therapeutic goals are oftentimes alike: increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-advocacy, strengthening frustration tolerance, creativity, and reasonable risk taking, communicating personal stories, relating to cultural heritage, and accepting significant life experiences. “That is the goal of my art program: to blend art teaching with art therapy seamlessly, meeting the goals of both” (Albert, 2010: 91). Furthermore, the author stresses the importance of students’ creative process with all its stages, offering emotional and educational support on their personal journey through art and creativity. Especially relevant are the six facets of understanding the artwork, by McTighe and Wiggins (as cited in Albert, 2010), that could also be connected to therapeutic goals: understanding and interpreting artwork, applying, gaining perspective, empathizing, and obtaining self-knowledge. These six activities are the right way towards a thorough art education that includes technical education as much as art and self-analysis (Albert, 2010).

Similar intentions are set in David Henley’s (as cited in Rubin, 2016) “therapeutic curriculum” (pg. 453) where experience becomes an instrument for therapeutic growth. Although it is initially created for children struggling with violence, substance abuse, and other problems, Henley explains the base of such structure with the fact that learning experience should expand to include therapeutic support, which can positively impact emotional problem solving. Henley’s praiseworthy approach does not detach work from the academic experience, but takes into consideration creative process with its wide range of activities such as art, photography, poetry, and biblio-therapy. The goal of therapeutic curriculum is support within the safety of school while addressing the whole child (Rubin, 2016).

## **2.6. Concept of “CIO” Art Therapy Workshop**

As previously said in the Introduction, the basis of the research was the city project “CIO – Centre of Excellence Osijek,” an example of positive practice with artistically gifted children in the school setting. Although the aim of project was to provide gifted children with enriched educational activities, during the school year 2018 / 2019 coordinator, assistant professor, Ph. D. Željko Rački paid special attention to emotional well-being of creatively gifted ones, in collaboration with this ATS / researcher.

Understanding the main idea behind the workshop requires awareness of therapeutic impact on art education. Personal involvement in learning is an essential part of the process, whether it is students or teachers. Motivation runs deep and moves us towards achievements. At the beginning of 20th century, Margaret Naumburg, one of the first major theoreticians of art therapy, practiced learning through creative expression. In the 1930s, Viktor Lowenfeld, recognized art educator, emphasized motivation as the center of creative expression. Almost three decades later, Edith Kramer introduced the “art as therapy” approach in Wiltwyck School, Esopus, New York, in order to enhance students’ personal growth through the art process (Rubin, 2016).

## **2.7. Art Therapy Activity: Story Cloth**

Sewing is an activity nearly twenty five thousand years old (McLaren, 2015). For centuries women have gathered to sew. Making of story cloth is often used with survivors of trauma. The most famous examples made through history are Hmong Story Cloth (c. 1970) and Arpilleras (1973 - 1990) which were both reactions to political oppression. When writing on *arpilleras*, sewed pictures made by Chilean women during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, Garlock (2016) describes that through the sewing process women would relieve personal pain by sharing their problems with the group. Working with fabrics and sewing raised women's coping abilities and resiliency. Chansky (as cited in Garlock, 2016) noticed that the needle helps balance feelings such as anger and pride, because the needle pierces as it creates. The cloth thus holds strong emotions that surface in imagery. Not negligible is the duration of the process. It takes time to sew a picture but in that way a person is actually given time to process complex emotions (Garlock, 2016).

Sewing itself is a forgotten activity. Near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Domestic Science was part of the Elementary school curriculum in Croatia, where children obtained particular life skills, such as cooking or sewing. With the development of technology, some of the skills became unnecessary, and that affected a person's rhythm of the day. Day in a life of a child nowadays is mostly controlled by smartphones or computers, up to the point that they have replaced educators in certain households. Working creatively with one’s hands has been taken over by technology. At the same time that school reform took place, several schools in Croatia re-introduced Domestic Science as an extra-curricular activity. Sewing as an art form has been gaining more and more popularity, with artists and art therapists. Pöllänen and Weissmann-Hanski (2020) state that today crafting is no

longer a necessity but an inner impulse and natural need to make things by hand (e.g., Burke & Spencer-Wood, 2019; Gandolfo & Grace, 2010). The number of people interested in handicraft throughout the Western world has increased over the last decade (Grace & Gandolfo, 2014; von Busch, 2013). Authors cite Genoe and Liechty (2017) who have stated that creative leisure activities can stimulate one to try something new, explore different aspects of themselves, be open for advice, share success as well as failure and gain skills and confidence. Crafting even increased self-efficacy and personal agency through interaction with the material. Crafting is valuable in all stages of life. It promotes well-being and imparts a sense of meaning and purpose (Burt & Atkinson, 2012; Gandolfo & Grace, 2010; Kenning, 2015; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011). In these difficult times of uncertainty caused by pandemics, it is of great importance to acknowledge art as a coping mechanism. To set an example, Slemani (Iraq) has initiated a project „Literature and Arts as Helpmate and Therapist,“ to help people accept “social distancing” and confinement during the pandemics, to stay resilient and united (Govinden, 2020).

Sewing is most often related with clothes or clothing repair, and activities such as embroidery are nowadays rarely practiced in Croatia. Although sewing brings numerous benefits to one's psycho-physiological state, parents or educators hesitate to give a needle to a child because of safety issues. It is understandable that sewing is not the most manageable child's activity. However, the benefits such as enhancement of fine motor skills, focus and organization, comfort, persistence and resistance decided in favor of choosing the making of a story cloth as an art therapy activity conducted by CIO in the year 2018 / 2019.

## **2.8. Personal Symbols**

The general theme that children were given to express through story cloth was titled “In My Head.” The theme was created with the aim to provide children the opportunity to review their hidden thoughts, concerns or wishes, and to symbolically express them within the safe environment of the group.

Symbol is often defined as an idea standing instead of another concept. Psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung relates symbols with the unconscious, where he sees the possibility of progress in understanding mankind (Jung, 1977). Our unconscious is a restless area of wealth. There are several theories and classifications of symbols. Fromm specifies three kinds: conventional,

accidental and universal symbols. The last two are the categories that are used to express inner experiences.

Personal symbols are those that originate from each person and are fully understood only in relation to the person. In that sense, animal symbolism played an important role in several participant's artwork. Aniela Jaffé (in Jung, 1987) explains that animal symbolism in religion and art indicates the importance of comprehension of instincts in a person's life. Because of their ability to fly, birds were considered the link between sky and earth. They are exempt from physical constraints imposed by earthbound life, and symbolize deeper layers of human nature, like wisdom, intelligence, and sharp thoughts. The witty term "a little bird told me" derives its meaning out of that interpretation. Because of its characteristics, the swan has always been a personification of beauty, purity and fidelity (Žderić, 2010). In his analysis of Goethe's Faust, Gaston Bachelard considers the symbol of swan as union of desire and connection of two polarities, male and female, conscious and unconscious. That unity supports its androgynous qualities (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1987).

The unconscious is a fruitful territory for creating contents of symbols. Jung (1977) divides the unconscious into personal and collective. Personal layers of the unconscious consists of lost memories, repressed unpleasant experiences and subliminal perceptions that come in a form of rich images. According to Jung (1987), there is a distinction between natural and cultural symbols. Natural symbols have emerged from the unconscious as opposed to cultural symbols that express "eternal truths" and thus are related to religion. Interpretation of symbols played a significant role during Jung's individuation process because symbols were a natural way of reconciliation and reunion of opposites within our psyche (Jung et al., 1987). While creating symbols, our inner strength takes an important part in transforming our unconscious materials. Artists take on this kind of activity daily while simultaneously gaining the ability to observe and comprehend those transformations in their artwork. Unlike Freud, Jung considered symbolization a healthy part of our psyche (Stevens, 2005). Existentialist psychologist Rollo May (1975) emphasizes that creative process should be analyzed as a representation of emotional health and expression of self-realization, and not as a symptom of illness.

Textbooks are the starting point for understanding symbolic language of books, not to mention numerous sources where children can get information needed for their book reports. Yet Croatia's Ministry of Science and Education did not authorize any textbooks proposed for Art Education.

This omission, to say the least, turned art work analysis over to teachers. Quality of interpretation thus depends on teacher's interests and abilities. Visual language is therefore systematically neglected from early age, while many teachers reach out for ideas from social networks such as Pinterest or You Tube. Understanding art work, as a starting point for approaching the never ending language of symbols, can be aided by knowledge of artistic development, and contextualizing children's experiences.

The stage of a child's drawings, age 11 – 15 is called *visual realism* (Grgurić, Jakubin, 1996). The period of visual realism is characterized by:

- image is built as a whole – it is not made of individual pieces
- linear, aerial and color perspective are used more often
- flatness is gradually replaced with voluntarily exploration of light and shadow and appearance of volume

Stages of child's drawings show child's understanding of reality and its specific relationship towards it (Grgurić, Jakubin, 1996). The stage itself is rich with details and proportions are maintained, especially in human figures. The spatial relationships are coherent. Since they want their art work to be as realistic as possible, children are often dissatisfied with or embarrassed by the final product, which can lead to withdrawal.

Puberty is the period of children's independence when personality begins to form. It is often characterized by the child's conflicts with the environment. Imagination plays an important role in this new situation, enabling adolescents to prevail in a crisis. That is why it is important for children to continue engaging in art activities and develop their creative interests.

### **3. METHODS**

As stated, the purpose of this study is to awaken and to analyze the phenomenon of personal symbols creation within individual story cloths, pointing out to their significance while understanding children's emotional state.

Gifted children demand special attention because of emotional sensibility, intelligence, strong impressions and concentration on the contents which are parts of their interests. Due to time limitations and a large number of pupils in the class sections, the care is frequently absent for talented students in the teaching procedure. Art therapy activity within the school context would

enable the talented students to get continuous and structured care for themselves what would simultaneously offer absolutely necessary attention to this group. The meetings described in the research proposal describes working with talented students emphasizing the therapeutic function of art activities.

In agreement with the mentor, the ATS / researcher designed the concept of fifteen group encounters, putting in focus one main activity – continual work on story cloth. There were ten attendees of the art therapy workshop entitled “In My Head.” Participants met in the group with the ATS / researcher two times a month, from October 2018 to May 2019 which made a total of fifteen sessions that offered systematic work on story cloth. Throughout the sessions the participants were occupied with art activity which led to emotional feelings of relaxation. Simultaneously with the students' continuous activity the ATS / researcher emphasized connections between the story cloth coming into being – giving the meaning to a sketch and planning the work in steps – with everyday obligations and expectations. The aim was to carry challenge into the other aspects of the child's life.

### **3.1. Participants**

The research participants were ten school children who had chosen to attend art therapy sessions “In My Head,” organized by CIO, during the school year 2018 / 2019. At the beginning of the school year the CIO program was offered to every school in Osijek. Children identified as gifted were provided with this group and an individual program that targeted development of innovative educational methods and resources in working with gifted children.

Participants in this research were ten artistically gifted children of which two were boys age eleven and fourteen, and eight girls of ten to twelve. Children, together with their parents, agreed to take part in the research. The research took place in an Elementary School in Osijek, where sessions were held.



### **3.2. Exclusion criteria**

The initial list specified twelve participants of CIO Art therapy sessions. From the third session on there were ten full-time participants. Two children, a 10 year old boy and a 10 year old girl, dropped-out. Their artwork was not observed nor included in presented research.

### **3.3. Procedures**

The research was carried out in each of fifteen group meetings. The length of one meeting was three hours which included several breaks, depending on the general mood. The data were collected through informal interviews, group analysis and ATS / researcher's analysis of children's art work, group talk at the beginning of meeting and written statements for each story cloth.

The research protocol included brief informal interviews with each participant during most of the meetings. Interviews were conducted to collect the information about children's art work at the time of its formation. ATS / researcher was continually observing the process of working on story cloths paying individual attention to each participant. After the talk, the ATS / researcher would enter notes during the break. During informal interviews children talked openly and relaxed about their thoughts and ideas.

Group analysis of the work was an activity taken from regular school Art Education as part of the class period when children's work was being evaluated on previously defined criteria. Although the group discussed visual aspects of their work, the main focus was on ideas, emotions and overall process. A separate activity was ATS / researcher's analysis of work (sketches, drawings and story cloths) made by every participant, which followed similar criteria but from a different perspective. Guidelines for this evaluation was use of visual language, signs, and symbols, use of technique, level of creativity, use of habitual visual patterns.

Some information was gathered through group talks at the beginning of each meeting. Since meetings were held on Saturdays, beginning at 8 am, students were not talkative as they were during actual work on story cloths. Therefore the ATS / researcher had to come up with several activities that facilitated communication.

Finally, every participant wrote a statement regarding her / his story cloth that was on display together with their story cloths. Students had the opportunity to summarize the process they went through in their statements, and to explain to the viewer their vision of the theme.

### **3.4. Structure of Sessions**

At the beginning of every session participants sat in a circle where they talked briefly about emotions they brought to each gathering and how they spent time between the meetings.

In the first three sessions participants set group rules and worked on several sketches for their story cloths, in pencil and collage. In order to make the sessions more dynamic the ATS / researcher introduced follow-up activities: Maze, drawing by observation (while taking a walk by the river) and composing the drawings from the whole group into a graphic narrative. At the end of the third session, the ATS / researcher used an activity drawn from Dance and Movement Therapy called "Mirroring".

The period from the fourth to the twelfth session was the most significant because the children became familiar with textile materials brought by every one of them and simultaneously transferred their sketches into story cloths. During the art activity, the participants outlined the standpoints connected to their own work, supporting their views with personal experiences, doubts and anecdotes. Through narrative analysis, participation, and interviews from meeting to meeting, the ATS / researcher followed, together with the child, individual stories and personal symbols in visual form presented in each story cloth, respectively. In this period the method of documentation study was used. To ensure dynamism of some meetings and to open the spaces for new inspections, the researcher used the chosen shorter art therapy activity - collaborative drawing. By the end of this period the story cloths were mostly completed.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions participants discussed and noted individual narratives that followed their story cloths. Analyzing contents of individual cloths, but also the previous research connected with creativity stimulation and historical story cloth development, the ATS / researcher continually guided participants through sessions.

In the last session the participants typed the short statement enclosed with each work, thereby presenting their scenes verbally. The texts were shaped in cooperation with ATS / researcher and covered some information received through interviews.

At the final exhibition of all story cloths the participants together with ATS / researcher followed the course of development of their ideas, from sketch to finished cloths, to the written statement by each pupil. Thus the participants had a chance to review the whole process that they experienced together with the other members of the group.

### **3.5. Instrumentation**

The proposed research is qualitative. It is a thematic analysis based on the imagery and narrative that uses the method of narrative analysis, documentation research, participation observing and informal interview.

Instruments used in this research were informal interview, art therapeutic experiential – story cloth - the ATS / researcher’s observation, follow-up activities, and written students’ statement. Interviews were mostly held during intensive work on story cloths, while group talk at the beginning of each meeting was held throughout the project. The interview was conducted semi-privately, in the classroom, amongst other participants. The ATS / researcher did not separate students she was talking to in order to not disturb the lighthearted atmosphere. Subtle background music reduced other’s ability to hear the individual. Interviews included questions (and variations of questions) that could be applied in every meeting, such as:

- *Could we talk about what you made today?*
- *What was your plan? How well did it go through? Are you satisfied?*
- *Is there anything you would do differently?*
- *This is an interesting symbol, is this a... ? How did you come up with it? Is there a connection between you and this symbol? Would you like to explain it to me?*

Informal interviews were an important part of the research since the data gathered that way was immediate verbalization of the process children had gone through in each session. Not only was it valuable information to the ATS / researcher, it was an irreplaceable part of the creative process that allowed participants to embrace the unpredictability in art.

Group talk at the beginning of each meeting was mostly unstructured. The ATS / researcher gave children the opportunity to determine the direction of conversation themselves. The only exception

was the first group talk, held in October 2018, when the ATS / researcher prepared twenty four different questions. Students pulled two questions out of the envelope and answered them if they felt comfortable enough. Participants cheerfully played along. Some of the questions were:

- *Who knows you best?*
- *If you could change one thing on yourself, what would it be?*
- *Do you believe in love at first sight?*
- *Would you talk to a stranger?*
- *What are you grateful for?*
- *What are you proud of?*

During art activities the participants described their own work supporting them with personal experiences, doubts and anecdotes. The researcher, through narrative analysis, participation, and interview from meeting to meeting followed individual stories.

Analyzing the contents of individual cloths, using the previous research connected with creativity stimulation and historical story cloth development, the ATS / researcher consistently prepared for each meeting. In these preparatory steps the method of documentation study was used. To ensure open spaces for new interpretations, the ATS / researcher used other art therapy activities like Maze, Collaborative Drawing etc.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

Data collected by each participant were qualitative, in the form of participant's original story cloths used only for the group exhibition in Archeological Museum of Osijek, photo-documentation of sketches, follow-up activities and story cloths, interview observations and child's statement.

Each segment of data contributes to overall view of emergence of personal symbols through the process of story cloth making.

## 4. RESULTS

The qualitative data will be presented chronologically: ATS / researcher's journal, children's sketches and story cloths, follow-up activities, and children's statements. The data collected from ATS / researcher's observations and interviews will be incorporated into the aforementioned categories. The main purpose of presenting the material is confirming hypotheses that personal symbols contribute to understanding of the children's state by allowing the children to express less obvious contents of their mind, and that sewing influences the creation of personal symbols because of the length of the process that allows complex emotions to surface. Another purpose of analyzing overall documentation after the date of its creation is presenting the experience as authentic as possible, by providing insight into every aspect of children's work. The complete photo material can be seen in Appendices.

### 4.1. Journal of Encounters

Table 1 presents the content of fifteen art therapy sessions together with final exhibition. The ATS / researcher kept a Journal of encounters where every session was thoroughly described, with all the *ups* and *downs* of the creative process which were openly shared with the group. To vary the approach, the ATS / researcher introduced several follow-up activities, such as Mirroring (10/13/2018), collaborative drawing (3/2/2019), etc. Those activities indirectly supported children's individual processes and development of their own ideas for story cloths. For example, Mirroring got everybody closer to each other, and lifted the general mood.

Table 1. Journal of Encounters

1	10/13/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• introduction and brief conversation</li><li>• picking out questions</li><li>• Maze art therapy activity</li><li>• presentation of story cloth theme and historical overview</li><li>• Mirroring dance and movement therapy activity</li></ul>
2	10/20/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• group conversation</li></ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pencil sketches for story cloths</li> <li>• walking and drawing from observation</li> <li>• setting group rules</li> </ul>
3	11/3/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• collage sketches for story cloths</li> <li>• group writing short story based on drawings done from observation</li> </ul>
4	11/17/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• collage sketches for story cloths</li> <li>• planning what material to bring next time</li> <li>• Lena started sewing</li> </ul>
5	12/1/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• development of initial idea and sewing</li> <li>• brief informal interview with Lena</li> </ul>
6	12/15/2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• sewing</li> <li>• brief informal interview with others</li> </ul>
7	1/19/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
8	2/16/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
9	3/2/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• collaborative drawing</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
10	3/9/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
11	3/16/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation and revision of rules</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
12	3/30/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sewing</li> <li>• Lora writes her statement</li> </ul>
13	4/13/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• sewing</li> <li>• Noel writes his statement</li> </ul>
14	5/11/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group conversation</li> <li>• preparation for upcoming exhibition</li> <li>• sewing</li> </ul>
15	13/6/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exhibition in Archeological Museum</li> </ul>

Drawing from observation (10/20/2018) during a walk through the city center spawned one interesting story (11/3/2018) about evil dolls:

*“The Anything and Everything Fair” was held in Osijek. At that fair there were booths which offered anything and everything. Behind piled booths glimpsed the co-cathedral. Opposite the co-cathedral was a stage. The stage was prepared for musical performance where no one sang nor played. By the stage was a puppet stand. The puppets were dressed in folk costumes handmade by a woman.*

*Seemingly lovely, dolls’ faces would become evil every night at midnight. Dolls would gather around a tree in a big pot and think of a way to get rid of other beautiful things at the fair, so they could be the prettiest.*

*In their destructive quest they destroyed all the nice things from the fair booths and headed toward the river Drava. Because they were jealous of pretty and colorful ducks’ feathers, they chased them out of the city. A swan appeared on shore and they envied him, too. They minded its grace. Dolls tried to chase the swan but all of a sudden a fisherman came and noticed dolls’ unusual and evil behavior. He began throwing bagels and caught fish at them.*

*Finally, dolls ran out of the city, and Osijek was free and serene again.*

The story was a result of a group found in an unusual situation that demanded a different approach towards art activity, deviating from established school models. Since the group consisted of mostly girls on the brink of adolescence and big transitions, ideas of competition, jealousy, desire, and

control could be noticed. All of it played out in group therapy. In therapy and art therapy, the unconscious story or symbolism usually has some connection with what is happening for the person. The topic of doll's annihilation of beauty is also something that should be considered possible regression. The general mood of the group was joyous, but the underlying themes revealed escalation to destructive thoughts. Children's mood could have been a reflection of their confusion or not wanting to do the task because of the confusion (L. R. Garlock, personal communication Sept. 28, 2020).

Since most of the group did not know each other before, building a relationship was a slow process. Participants did not pay much attention to each other up to the point of not saying hello or good bye, when entering or leaving the room. Yet their discussions were open and one time touched on sexual harassment in classrooms (3/9/2019). Group rules were set (10/20/2018) to help raise the respect for each other, and participants eventually realized that rules could easily be used in every situation in their lives.

Amongst all of the participants, Dina's and Noel's crises were most intense. From session to session Dina became less focused and more talkative. She would engage in all sorts of activities except working on her story cloth. She had a need to help others in sewing while her own work was ignored. Dina had difficulties enduring the slow process of making, and would often wander around the classroom, draw on the blackboard or talk about herself. Her work experienced quite a change from the start-up stage, which she explained by transferring to a more pleasant school. She would often swap cloths with Lora, a complete opposite. Possible interpretation of Dina's behavior and, ultimately, her story cloth, suggests that story cloth process was emotionally too intense for her. It seems that her image is stereotypically pleasant, which could indicate that she was not ready to go deeper and process bullying she experienced in her previous school. She seemed to have trouble sitting with not only her story cloth, but also her thoughts (L. R. Garlock, personal communication Sept. 28, 2020).

Noel was either hungry or sleepy. These two states formed a vicious circle from which he had trouble escaping. He craved carbs – cheese pies, hot dogs or pancakes, the kind of food he regularly ate for breakfast, after which he was numb and sleepy. In a couple of hours he would be hungry and distracted because of his cravings. One time Noel slept through the whole session, and one other time asked if he could go home and sleep. When talking to the ATS / researcher, he was encouraged to visit a nutritionist who might help him beat fatigue. When working on the story



cloth, he needed constant motivation. He would stop approximately every ten minutes. His stitches were long because he wanted to end the process as soon as possible, which left the fabric loosely sewn. Otherwise, Noel was a warm person with a great sense of humor. Once, during our group talk, he admitted he would like his parents to spend more time with him and his brother. Noel's mother, a professor, was trying hard to fulfill all of her roles, while his father, a driver, was spending his free time playing computer games.

Writing the statements that described the story cloths was a distinct part of the whole process. Near the end, participants were introduced with the way their statement would be written. One of the directives was it should be handwritten. The reason for choosing hand writing was its compatibility with sewing. Both activities are beneficial to our well-being and contribute to development of fine motor skills. Hand writing reflects on thinking, not allowing the words to pour out too fast, which often happens when typing. Just like sewing, it provides time to think about what we are writing – to process it. Lora, a tiny perfectionist, complained that her handwriting was sloppy and asked to type the text on her smartphone. Finally, she decided to make both versions, one that was handwritten and one on the smartphone.

On their last session before the exhibition (5/11/2019) children talked about how their initial idea transformed. They remembered the effort needed in order to finalize the idea. Participants did not give up, even when they felt demotivated, tired or exhausted. In the end, those conclusions were related to everyday situations in their lives, such as school obligations, interpersonal relationships or even self-care.

## 4.2. Maze Activity

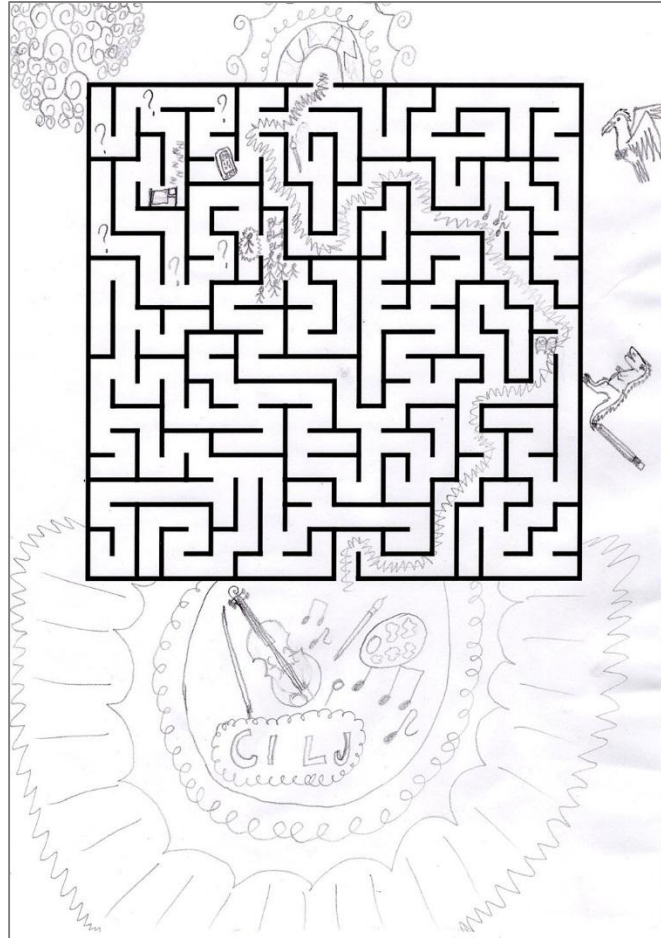
Seven children participated in the Maze art therapy activity<sup>2</sup>. (Hela, Noel, and Lena did not attend the session that day.) After they had been given the directions and quickly found their way through the maze, children curiously engaged in drawing. When finished, participants were asked if they felt comfortable to show their work to one another and talk about it. They started giggling but agreed immediately.

Children were mostly burdened with school and grades. It was hard to keep up with all their interests, such as gymnastics or dance, like in Sofija's and Maja's case. Vid, on the other hand, was reaching the end of elementary school education and was not sure in which high school to enroll. Two mazes, Dina's and Lora's, were scarce in information, concentrating only on the final goal, while Tara's and Meri's drawings stood out.

Meri's entire paper was decorated with linear ornaments. The path through the maze appeared like a stretched spring. The end on the lower part was bordered with things that made Meri happy – a violin, musical notes and art supplies. On the right she placed dinosaurs because everything about them aroused her curiosity, musical notes, books and a brush. The left side had several obstacles: Meri liked to sleep late and spend a lot of time on her smart phone. Lots of things interested her, and that is why she used six question marks. A group of seven stick figures stood near the path saying *Blah, blah, blah*. Detached from them stood Meri, a figure outlined with a zig-zag line. When asked to present her work, Meri did not want to talk. When the group encouraged her to open up, she quietly said that some of her peers were not kind to her.

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<sup>2</sup> On an A4 size paper with printed maze client is asked to mark the start/exit of the maze, after which they find the way through. When finished, they depict one of their goals at the end of the maze and present themselves in the present moment at the starting point. Goals should be realistic and placed in the near future. Current presentation placed at the start could be a self-portrait but also a symbolic representation. The next step is to depict on the left several possible obstacles on the way towards the goal, and on the right the strengths that empower and encourage one to proceed. When finished, client presents their work to the ATS / researcher and the discussion followed.



Picture 2. Meri's Maze

Tara drew a touching journey where a deer traveled through a maze to reunite with its baby. She was riding the deer. Her dark figure had no female characteristics. Tara's explanation was brief, she did not talk a lot about the presence of animals – she simply imagined a fairy tale maze, horizontally aligned, where obstacles were placed above the path she chose. The obstacles were lack of support, bad people and insults. Obstacles were also drawn as a triple fence that blocked the path at one point. Strengths were not inside the maze but written beneath the deer's legs – persistence, desire and luck. The forest was pretty dark but Tara sat firmly on the deer's back and seemed ready for the adventure.

#### 4.3. Sketches in Pencil Technique

The first step towards developing the children's idea for the story cloth was drawing sketches in pencil technique. During the second session (10/20/2018) the participants made drawings that marked the beginning of the story cloth process. Of the ten participants, eight took part in this activity. Noel and Lora were not present that day.

Meri, Lena, Hela and Maja drew ideas that would later be part of their story cloths, such as a bird, unicorn, gymnastics and candy world. Sofija's drawing depicted an unfinished girl's head with shoulders. The figure was surrounded by lots of smaller drawings that presented various things in Sofija's life. This was a similar composition she would later use in her collage sketch. Maja was undoubtedly influenced by Sofija. Vid explained that his work was more a presentation of what he could draw - a cartoon-like girl who was looking rather pensive. Dina drew a baby unicorn. She explained her choice with her fondness of cute things though she was not satisfied with her drawing. Tara's drawing revealed a crying person. A girl, who looked a lot like Tara, was sitting on the floor, surrounded with darkness. Her limbs were awkwardly drawn making her look like a marionette. A spotlight falling from upper part of the drawing gave the impression that girl was on stage. Her left hand was raised up making the person seem defeated. Tara said that this was a self-portrait. She cried a lot, due to other people's bad words addressed to her.



Picture 3. Tara's Sketch in Pencil

#### 4.4. Sketches in Collage Technique

Sketches in collage technique were a way to let the initial idea develop through time and change of technique. Individual talk contributed to the process of awareness of symbols used in the sessions. Generally speaking, this was the point when future story cloths were given their initial characteristics. Informal description of collage sketches, based on journal entries and interviews, are presented in Table 2. See Picture 4 for an example of a collage sketch

Table 2. Descriptions of collage sketches

Tara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cut-out muffins were complete opposite of her pencil sketch</li> <li>• loved making them as much as eating them</li> <li>• muffins were similar to her because they were layered – chocolate inside was just like Tara’s hidden virtues</li> </ul>
Vid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two black hands reaching towards each other</li> <li>• right hand was lady like while the left one was wicked looking</li> <li>• two-colored background accented the characteristics of hands for blue symbolized darkness and orange brightness</li> </ul>
Dina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• young girl on a meadow, observing nature</li> <li>• used her favorite colors, purple and blue, to present her figure</li> <li>• image was finished but lacked the face because the girl was standing in the shadow</li> <li>• shadow symbolized a difficult period for Dina, when she was bullied by her class</li> <li>• verbal abusing got so severe that she was forced to transfer to another school</li> <li>• talked openly and calmly about her pain, leaving the impression that she had turned a new page</li> </ul>
Sofija	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• girl’s head with a big question mark symbolized lack of information about life itself</li> <li>• head was surrounded with eleven symbols - in the story cloth she kept a ballet slipper and rabbit</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• was already planning her story cloth - a galaxy filled with things she loved</li> </ul>
Hela	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• young gymnast balancing lots of tasks with a smile on her face</li> <li>• no ground to stand on, which was kept in story cloth</li> <li>• interesting fact when observing all the blank space in her work - Hela had no personal space at home</li> </ul>
Meri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• young bird that had a plan to stay in the woods for the rest of her life</li> <li>• was not lonely, and from time to time would fly to another part of the woods to visit her two friends</li> <li>• one would get the impression Meri was a sad girl but in reality she was playful and cheerful; even when talking about her collage, she was giggling and looking for ATS / researcher's reaction</li> </ul>
Noel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• chose to repeat one of his school works for this activity and stuck to his idea in the story cloth</li> <li>• when asked to think about the part that might represent him, did not know what to say</li> </ul>
Maja	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• candy world reminded her of her childhood when she believed that falling stars made wishes come true - candy world would be one of those wishes</li> </ul>
Lora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heart filled with different symbols with no obvious connection except smartphone iconology</li> <li>• to make the process easier she drew on pieces of paper, eager to start sewing</li> </ul>
Lena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a sleepy unicorn, chosen because of its cuteness</li> <li>• it might be her in moments of reflective state</li> <li>• loved the colors she used because it reminded her of candies</li> </ul>



Picture 4. Noel's Sketch in Collage

#### 4.5. Story cloths

Writing the statements, after finishing hard work on their story cloths, gave the participants the opportunity to wrap up their long-term activity. It was explained that the written statement was a constituent part of the story cloth that provided information to the viewer as much as it did to author.

The following text will provide analysis of each story cloth along with its personal symbols, from ATS / researcher's experience and point of view, while children's statements carry the author's interpretation. A Dictionary of Symbols by Alain Gheerbrant and Jean Chevalier (1987) was mostly used as a theoretical resource in ATS / researcher's analyzing the symbols.

##### 4.5.1. Personality Cookies

*My colorful and playful story cloth represents my numerous personalities and different characteristics. I have chosen muffins because they have many layers that show my courage, creativity, kindness etc. Muffins were the first cookie I learnt to make. Different colors of whipped*

*cream symbolize, of course, my characteristics, cups represent my physical appearance – let us say, more my appearance that keeps all characteristics in one place. Decorations are the details of my external beauty, the habits I have when an emotion comes up, like smiling when I am happy. And finally, candies add charm to my work and represent the things that spice up my life. In general, my work depicts me and my happy childhood.* Tara

Tara, a talented and sometimes talkative girl, lived with her mother, a stepfather and a younger sibling. Her story cloth was done patiently and precisely (Picture 5). Tara would rarely speak while sewing the fabric. She showed skill, interest and vision. In comparison to her sketch in pencil technique, Tara kept pyramidal composition. Her complex, weeping girl was replaced with muffins adorned with different flavors and decoration. Layers played an important role in her creative thinking she explained in the artist's statement. Instead of the darkness that surrounded the girl, muffins were washed over with whiteness of the background, and placed on tulle, a delicate fabric that gave her trouble while she tried to sew it on. In the foreground there were four wrapped candies. Tara enjoyed the process. From the beginning she was prepared to go step by step in building her work; she pointed it out by adding "hand made with love" in the upper right corner. Her complexity was not apparent, yet revealed through her approach to carrying out the assignment. When confronted by too many questions, Tara would draw back, slightly offended by invasion of her privacy.

Mi-young Lee (2011), a therapist at Mara Child and Family Counseling Center, Seongnam (Korea) writes about food symbolism from the psychoanalytic stand. Being a creative person, Lee likes making things and sharing the joy of it with others. This was the one aspect Tara also mentioned – she loved eating muffins, as much as making muffins for somebody else. Satisfaction gained through making and sharing food, seemed important to Tara. Lee (2011) related this with the identity aspect of food, a significant factor in almost every culture, as well as in Croatia. When sharing food, people connect at a basic level and savor parts of a nation's culture. Producing and sharing food can be observed as a kind of human expression, which is an inseparable part of one's living environment, religion and mindset. Lee points out the sharing aspect of food as a symbol of building friendly bonds. Food, eating and the fulfillment of hunger can be seen as symbols that connect consciousness and the unconscious (Lee, 2011). Tara's crying girl found her hidden strength just like colorful muffins hide their most intense flavor.



Although personal symbols come up from one's hidden landscapes of the unconscious, it must not be omitted that most of the children are under the strong impact of imagery derived from smartphones and virtual communication. *Snap Chat*, *Viber* or *Tik Tok* are just a few of the mobile applications intensively used in everyday communication. Applications have opened up spaces where an image replaces one's expression of emotions. Thus muffin could send out a thank you message or be a simple invitation for an afternoon dessert.



Picture 5. Tara's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.2. Hands towards the World

*In my story cloth there are two hands. One represents the light, nature, warmth and has warm colors and ornaments. The other represents coldness, darkness, shadow and cold colors. My idea was to depict today's world, its virtues and flaws. One hand is the dark, cold and frightening part of the world, while the other is the good, bright and decorated part. You may have noticed that the hands seem to touch or to separate. On canvas they cannot surely approach or separate because they are fastened. The meaning of my story cloth is that one side cannot exist without the other side. It is frightening, though, if they should get too close and make chaos. Vid*

Vid strived to keep the original idea set out in the collage picture. Since he directly transferred the hands on the fabric, they remained original size and become less dominant than on the sketch. The distance between them increased. Vid wanted the colors to be similar to the ones he used in his collage. When he found what he was looking for, he was not completely satisfied with the texture of the orange fabric, but decided to work with it anyway. His first couple of stitches were broad. When asked if he would consider sewing it differently, making stitches shorter, he expressed worry that it would take too long. However, he started sewing more calmly.

As soon as he started working on the story cloth, Vid began defining his idea. What was initially explained as just hands, in time gained a more complex meaning. To emphasize his idea of two opposite sides of the world, he added floral ornaments on the positive, orange side. On the blue side which he considered negative, Vid sewed a black tab, and a tiny skull. Black lines were made subsequently at home, in the period between the last session and the exhibition. Although he knew that all the pieces should have been sewn, he could not make himself do it at home. In terms of form, Vid mostly used colored surfaces with several details mentioned above. Black hands and planes in complementary colors are the first thing to be noticed on his story cloth. In Christian tradition, which is an important part of life in Croatia, it is important to differ the right hand from the left one. The right hand is the one that blesses while the left hand is the hand of curse. In psychoanalysis, hand is sometimes compared to eye, because of its connection to awareness. Indeed, hands help us express our thoughts by writing them. Finally, hands symbolize synthesis of male and female principle (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). When talking about colors, Chevalier and Gheerbrant, (1987) describe blue as a color that dematerializes surfaces suggesting infinity, where reality transforms itself into imaginary. Wassily Kandinsky experiences blue simultaneously as one's moving off and moving towards the center (Kovačević, 2020). Vid used almost the same amount of orange color for the surface where he placed the right hand, achieving complementary contrast. Contrast, by definition, assumes a kind of strong opposition. It must not be omitted that all the complementary colors, when mixed, create grey - in a way, colors neutralize themselves. This fact is mainly important in movie language where the use of complementary contrast alludes to restoring the balance (Peterlić, 1976). Balance indeed was what Vid looked for while attending the sessions. From the beginning to the end he was occupied with which direction he should follow in terms of future career. Contrast and splitting were subjects easily related to his own world and his family. Vid, an only child, was a boy scout who lived with his mother, a high school teacher,

while his father was working in Ireland. His parents were divorced, and he visited his father on rare occasions.

Finally, at first sight, one cannot escape the impression that the hands Vid created resembled Michelangelo's scene from the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, *The Creation of Adam* (1508 - 1512). The powerful detail of forefingers almost touching has become a timeless image of human kind, and Vid had undoubtedly seen it. His, probably unconscious repetition, supports communicologic power of art where symbols of two hands passed a message of humanity.



Picture 6. Vid's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.3. Sun and Sea

*My story cloth represents my feelings. It has: sea, sun and birds. The sea symbolizes sadness, the sun happiness, and the birds my friends. Sun reminds me of summer vacations and hot days. Sea reminds me of swimming pools or some other place where I can cool myself. Birds remind me of a sunset because whenever sun comes down, birds fly. Sun, sea and birds depict my mood, my feelings, and especially my life. Dina*

Dina's parents were also divorced, like Vid's. She lived with her mother, stepfather and two siblings. Dina had a contentious trait. She monopolized our conversations whenever she had the chance, making it all about herself. Dina's work on story cloth had been a struggle all the way through. The problems started from the moment she moved from her collage sketch to sewing the fabric. That was also the moment when she confessed to the group she had changed schools. Surprisingly, after her short story, the group did not offer compassion. Her situation was briefly discussed, mostly with ATS / researcher, after which Dina mentioned her trauma in a couple other sessions. It must be noted that the ATS / researcher's observation covered only the activity going on during the sessions, but the participants showed no insight during their conversations during the regular half-hour break when they might have been more open and relaxed in their mutual conversations.

Dina's initial idea was transformed from a wandering, blank female figure to the golden sunset at seaside, the sky hanging with black birds. The scarce upper part of the cloth stuck out in comparison to the shiny sunset. Dina liked satin fabrics because of its gentle texture and soft glow. When the golden one reminded her of sun she began developing her idea. When asked about what changed her mind and why she was not working on something more similar to her collage sketch, Dina explained that she felt well now and enjoyed spending time in her new school. The bullying was far behind her. She had lots of plans for her story cloth, but only a few of them were realized. While sunrises gave her hard time, Lora came to the aid after Dina's request, and sewed 8 of them. Dina expressed thanks by sewing some of Lora's parts. In the end of the sessions her story cloth did not differ much from story cloths of other participants. The process of making it and her general behavior was what made her stand out.

The sun as a symbol was widely used in different cultures, mostly as a representation of divine or as a source of light, warmth and life. Yet, Dina depicted the sunset which, according to the legends from Central America, is sun's privilege to tread the underground area without taking the form of death. Paul Diel, a French psychologist of Austrian origin, reinterpreted the sun and its rays as symbols of enlightenment (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). The sea is a symbol of life's dynamics. It is a place where everything comes from and where everything returns to, a place of transformation (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). Birds represent a connection between heaven and earth, although their sign could be positive or negative. For example, Saint John of the Cross, a

Spanish Catholic priest, mystic, and a Carmelite friar, interpreted birds as symbols of imaginative activity – they are light-winged but also reckless (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987).

Despite the well-established meaning of above mentioned symbols, it should be remembered that Dina's collage picture was the only one that was completely opposite to her final story cloth. Images such as sun, sea or birds are known as schemas, sometimes negative fixations in children's art expression development. Schemas are adopted models, usually gained in early childhood. Besides its adverse effect on child's creativity, schemas are models frequently used when children do not know how to begin their work. Because of their wide acceptance and comprehensibility, they give confidence that one is on the right track, and children feel safe when using them. The strong symbolism of birds, sun and sea need not be separated from the possibility of the use of schemas, because Dina's personal symbolism is probably somewhere in between, half way towards her need to begin all over again, in the safety of a new school.



Picture 7. Dina's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.4. Sky in My Head

*My story cloth represents things in my head. Things I often think of and that describe me and my life. Cloth is covered in shades of purple and blue pieces of fabric that depict clouds, sky, universe*

*and my favorite colors. In the center of the cloth there is a brown fabric shaped like a rabbit's head that for me symbolizes love and connection which I share with my pet rabbit. Purple and pink bows show my creativity and imagination, and their color remind me of my beautiful childhood. The last, but, as it is said - not the least part of the cloth is the one with a ballet slipper. For me, the slipper represents the activity that has been bringing positivity into my life for the past six years, and that is dance. Sofija*

Sofija discarded the girl's head placed in the center of collage image. This change was probably enhanced by Maja's taking over of the head as the central motive of her story cloth. Sofija and Maja were inseparable, reserved and they rarely let others get close. Sofija, a dancer in her spare time, was the dominant one, in comparison to rather dazed Maja. She lived with her mother and an older sister, while Maja lived with her mother, and two older sisters.

In Sofija's story cloth, instead of the likeable mixture that floated around the confused head, Sofija went along with more abstract expression. Dispersed elements created a vibrant surface reminiscent of a wind-whipped sea. The story cloth was horizontally directed and filled with narrow stripes in various shades of blue, Sofija's favorite color. Between the stripes she placed two little bows, two hearts, ballet slipper, and a rabbit's head. Because of its simplification two latter ones were not immediately recognizable, and looked a lot like bows, too. In her statement, Sofija explained her love for her pet and dance, and bows were symbols of her happy childhood. If ballet slippers were considered footwear, they could be analyzed as a symbol of freedom, and contact point between body and ground. Dance, as a release of material boundaries can become a response of spiritual life (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987), a theme that obviously started to occupy Sofija. Her rabbit, that was a pet Sofija chose by herself, played a significant role in her life. It was an unusual option, unlike a dog or a cat. The dictionary of symbols refers to rabbits and hares as part of lunar bestiary that is of great importance in our deep sleep which holds many archetypes. Rabbits are mysterious, close and improper moonlight companions in the world of imagination. They are linked to continuous renewal of life in all its forms (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). Two bows could be associated with the symbolism of bond. It is a mark of success and accomplishment, and simultaneously a warning of potential vanity (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). The majority of Sofija's time was spent on cutting the pieces of fabric and combining them with one another. That decision left her little time to do the actual sewing and resulted in her wide stitches.



Picture 8. Sofija's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.5. Things I Love

*My work shows the things I really love. It represents a gymnast with a dog standing on top of her. I adore gymnastics, and dogs especially. Without gymnastics and dogs my life would not be interesting. Gymnastics is my hobby, and dogs are my favorite animals. That is my life. Hela*

Hela came from a strongly Christian oriented family. Being a second child, she had an older brother and two younger ones. Hela was also the only participant relatively known to the ATS / researcher, who was acquainted with her mother. However, she and the ATS / researcher met for the first time during the sessions.

Hela was determined to follow her collage and make the story cloth as similar to it as possible. She was sewing rather slowly and her stitches were tiny. The sewing excited her so much that she started practicing it at home. Since Hela was interested in arts and crafts, she would often bring some of her work to show to the group. It would, like in Dina's case, trigger no response so she would end up presenting her work to the ATS / researcher. During the period of sessions she was occupied with making small models of her future room. At home she had to share a room with her older brother. The family lived in a two bedroom apartment, while her father was working abroad. Hela

loved to spend time alone with her mother, but it was not so often, because her mother had to take care of the family and commit to her day job in a family trade. Hela continuously stressed that she yearned for some peace and quiet, and a little place she would call her own. Growing up with three brothers was challenging.

Hela had a specific approach to work. Sometimes she would work during the break and then, half an hour before the end of the session, she would stop. It suggests that, consciously or unconsciously, she knew that she needed time to 'return to the real world' from her possible flow state while working on her cloth. When Hela was sewing, she would forget the outside world and the participants would frequently forget her presence. After hard work, her attention changed and she would start singing or making strange noises.

Undoubtedly, Hela was overwhelmed by the size of the canvas. As a tiny girl, she was faced with vast whiteness she thought she would fill in with her ideas. It was explained to her that the activity was more important than making a pretty picture, and that it was all right if she left it as a work in progress. Although the words had given her comfort, she still placed four symbols, one in each corner of her story cloth, in order to make it finished. Panda patch presented her love towards the animals and a cut out heart reminded her that love is the most important thing in life. The butterfly patch and the one with the Croatian emblem were amongst the residual materials she would bring to every session, and were sewn with no known reason.

Hela tried hard to keep the original idea of a girl (herself) doing a headstand and splits at the same time. Most of the time she was devoted to that which suggested gymnastics played an important part in her life. Gymnastic activity itself could be easily related to dance. Both disciplines are body-based, kinesthetic, and have the double-edged sword of making one feel confident in their body as well as obsessive about their body's size or shape (L. R. Garlock, personal communication Sept. 28, 2020). Throughout history, dance marked important events such as rituals of initiation, weddings or preparations for the battle. Dance movements are expression of pleasure, skill, wealth or festive mood (Žderić, 2010). Special attention was also paid to making an outline of the dog. Animals, especially dogs, were Hela's big love. She dreamt of a pet that she could go for a walk with. When observing symbolism of a dog, in many cultures it is related to underworld (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). Yet, in Hela's case this meaning could not be noticed. Another source that does relate here, Martin and Ronnberg, (2010: 296), talk about how the dog has been our "ultimate animal friend and ally for thousands of years" and dogs' relationship with humans include



“unconditional love and devotion...” Hela longed for a perky, warm, soft friend, whom she could nonverbally communicate with. When talking about dogs, Hela’s fingers would slightly move as if she was caressing them. By creating this symbol, she made a tiny tactile image, expressing one of her greatest desires.

After the figure was done, Hela had no interest in making the face visible on the orange fabric. When asked if she would make any space indications, she firmly refused. The broadness of the white canvas suggests a spacious school gym. Being the only participant who attended the school where the sessions had taken place, Hela knew the physical space by heart. She would often lead the group through the school showing them all the hidden places. Each time, without exception, their tour would end in the school gym where she would perform her stunts. Gymnastics was important to her as much as dogs, and she found a way to unite them in her story cloth. When her attention was brought to the complexity of the performance depicted in the story cloth, she proudly whispered to herself, *Yes*.



Picture 9. Hela’s Story Cloth

#### 4.5.6. Magic

*My story cloth depicts some of my characteristics. In the center of it there is a cake. The cake represents my love towards sweets, and its shape of a unicorn tells that I like magical creatures. There are lots of flowers in my cloth which means I love to spend time in nature. A cup beside the cake describes I love hot beverages. I have decorated my work with golden beads because I like details.* Lena

Lena was an only child, very diligent, and from a loving family. Although very quiet in the beginning, she gradually revealed her decisiveness and persistence. By the end of the process, Lena's story cloth took a rather abstract form. It started as an image similar to a patisserie window – unicorn cake, placed in the center of the canvas, was surrounded with flowers and a mug that contained a delicious hot drink. Everything was bursting with color and taste, and purple fondant was pouring over the top. One could feel the softness of the thick cream in the mug. The image was a literal sugar overdose that Lena craved. She loved sweets, but at the same time was aware that they were good neither for her body nor for problematic complexion. Thus, she placed two black buttons on the cake - piercing eyes that stared at the observer mesmerized by the temptation. Lena decorated her composition with colorful flowers, which were a symbol of spending time outdoors. Even the flowers looked like candy because of their intense color. Towards the end she devoted her time to sewing tiny golden beads on purple parts. She was worried about threads hanging off the edges. When her story cloth was done, she cut off most of the threads with small scissors in order to make it neat.

The only thing Lena kept from the collage stencil was a horn. When focused on buttons-for-eyes and a pink horn, decorated with golden beads, one could imagine a strange creature gazing back from even stranger surrounding. It could represent mysterious Lena who often remained cautious when it was her turn to speak. During one not so usual session, she confessed that she does not like to be told what to do. That time, Lena was troubled by the school play where she was assigned the role of a dancing lion. She did not like the fact that the role was given to her because of her wild, curly hair. To Lena, the moves were humiliating and ridiculous, and she did not consider the whole situation fair. Teachers were the ones who were designing the choreography. In the art therapy

sessions Lena was dominant but gentle. Because of her height the rest of the group seemed much younger, which made Lena hunch up. No matter what, she was still more mature than others. Because her story cloth kept its original design, like the one in her collage picture, it was significant to analyze the symbol of the unicorn, which, in a way, was hidden in the sewn image. It was obvious that unicorns played an important role in contemporary teen age aesthetics. They had been mystery creatures who could within a second transform an ordinary landscape into a fairy tale. Despite their charming appearance that attracts the viewer at first sight, their hidden meaning is even more interesting. Medieval symbols of unicorn express power, luxury and purity. In Christian iconography it symbolizes the Virgin Mary, and also transmission of divine into human. Its pure heart affects even the meanest one. The unicorn represents sublime physical life and the supernatural force that emanates from purity (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987).



Picture 10. Lena's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.7. Favorite Sweets

*This story cloth presents my love for sweets. In the center there is a heart, surrounded by my favorite treats (muffin, ice cream and lollypop), and lots of colorful beads. The heart represents me and that is why it is pink (my favorite color), and beads are my feelings. Yellow – happiness, blue – sadness, green – peacefulness, orange – fury, pink – love. Because of my condition (celiac*

*disease) I am not allowed to eat a lot of things, and it makes me angry sometimes. This inspired me to make this the theme of my work. I am satisfied with what it looks like, but I think that some parts could have been done more precisely.* Lora

Little drawings that Lora placed inside of the heart in her collage, on her story cloth took up the space outside of it. The pink heart took on a pastel shade, and eyes popped up where arrow used to pierce. It seemed as if a strange, yet endearing, creature was floating on a soft cloud, surrounded by tempting sweets. One ice cream was already bitten, lollipop was unwrapped and muffins were missing their decorations. When she finished sewing the fabric, Lora decided to use the tiniest beads in order to express some of her emotions. Each color had its meaning explained in her statement. Observed from a distance, all her dotted emotions looked the same. Stiches were done with special attention by Lora's little hands. She was lost in concentration during the sewing, although she was aware of her surroundings.

Lora, a tiny perfectionist, was diagnosed with celiac disease. She did not mention it too often. She was aware of it, preserved her health, and learnt to live with it. Her approach to making a story cloth was seemingly relaxed but her criteria were high. She was bothered by messy edges and the fact that stiches were not hidden. Pink fabric was thin corduroy, and she did not like its texture, but fell in love with the color, which made her choose it for her work. From time to time Lora would run her hand over it with disapproval. At one point she had an idea to sew pompoms but as our sessions were reaching the end, she just wanted to finish her work as soon as possible.

In a way Lora's story cloth resembled to her. Always dressed in pink, she was curiously looking from her table and participating in discussions with her clear voice. Everything around her was in perfect order. One could easily tell by Lora's appearance that she was a loved child whose parents tried hard to make her life as normal as possible regarding her condition. She seemed like an eager student simultaneously unencumbered by learning, and rapt with intrinsic motivation. The control she had to have over her diet somehow translated into her surroundings that needed to be as tidy as possible. Although Lora looked spotless and smelled of fresh clothes, she did not let that restrain her – she was a lively girl who was all over the place as soon as the 30 minute break would begin. Living with limitations in nutrition from an early age surely affects any individual. Lora pointed out one time that she sometimes had strong food cravings, especially for sweets. Food had been a symbol ever since. Some arable crops are related to wealth and fertility. On the other hand, honey

presents the food of gods. Chocolate, which was the closest to the food Lora depicted, is considered sacred food for Aztecs and Maya. Since the enjoyment in chocolate was limited to upper classes, it became a symbol of luxury (Žderić, 2010). Metaphorically speaking, most sweets were a luxury Lora could not afford, unlike the other children.



Picture 11. Lora's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.8. What Is Inside My Head

*My story cloth depicts the things I like, my characteristics, flaws... I am in the center of the cloth. Instead of the face, I put a question mark to emphasize the question what is in my head. The lower pink stripe stands for my favorite colors. I sewed a milk shake because I like to drink it, and I simply like the way it looks like. There is a tiny strawberry on the milk shake, my favorite fruit. I have put the watermelon, too, because it is my favorite fruit as well. The cloud and the lightning symbolize my stubbornness and my fears. Grades, put around the canvas, reveal my fear and stress over them, but the concern of other students, too. The reason I have sewn a paw was that I have a dog and a cat, and I love animals. Maja*

If one observed the development of Maja's idea, from first sketches through collage and finally to her story cloth, it would seem as if she enlarged a tiny detail of her collage picture. On her story cloth she depicted a bust of a faceless girl on the top of a pink platform. The same surface appeared on her collage image, with the exception of the girl. Although pink color on the story cloth obviously presented some kind of desk where the girl was sitting, the similarity was interesting. In the center of the girl's face was an exclamation mark. In her statement Maja referred to it as a question mark. Because the statement was partially written at home, it was not known whether Maja made a mistake while writing or while sewing. Either way, the confusion was tangible. The faceless maiden did not find her appearance until the very end, surrounded with the variety of things that defined her, or at least that she thought had defined her. Sweets could easily represent soothing, like in Lena's case. But it may not be excluded that cakes and milkshakes are part of everyday imagery seen during communication via social networks and smart phone applications. Undoubtedly part of the imagery was taken from Sofija's collage, which she discarded during the process. The use of an exclamation mark suggested the girl was fed up with everything. It also markedly contrasted other colors used in story cloth. Thus punctuation mark could become a symbol of Maja's surprise.

Several participants, including Maja, needed tangible things to define their inner characteristics. As with social networks, they used their likes or dislikes to express their emotions. Eating sweets and desserts could have easily been a symbol of soothing behavior needed after a long day at school. Watermelon, used only on the story cloth, is a symbol of fertility, because of its many pits (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). Fruit, in general, symbolizes immortality, a magnificent product of nature that contains the seed of generations to follow (Žderić, 2010). Most of Maja's symbols were simplified and consisted of two or three different pieces of fabric in order to ensure quick making. Despite working quickly, the story cloth was visually impressive, proportions of small parts were well balanced with bigger pink field placed in the lower part of the cloth, where Maja's initials stood barely visible. The whiteness of the background equally competed with colored parts scattered all over, making the story cloth graphically structured and organized.



Picture 12. Maja's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.9. Kestrel

*My work depicts a kestrel (species of hawk), that I got last summer. It fell out of the nest and it could not take care of itself. I saved that young kestrel, nurtured it and taught it to fly. We spent a month together, and when she was big enough she flew away and never came back. So will me, one day... I loved that kestrel very much, and I love birds because, for me, they symbolize freedom. My story cloth represents golden sun and snow-white clouds on sky, clear-blue river, green, unpolluted nature, which tells a lot about my opinion about the world we live in. I am environmentally aware and love plants and animals because it is my God-given human responsibility. Meri*

Meri, an extremely withdrawn girl, was the oldest of five children, raised in a strongly Christian oriented family. She had a baby sister and three younger brothers. She was engaged in numerous activities, amongst which was *tamburitza* that she attended regularly. Shyness was reflected in her body – her posture was bent, with hands always close to her abdomen. Meri was the only participant completely driven into the process of creating her first story cloth. During the sewing part of the

session she was quiet and unnoticed. When addressed, her posture would change and she would hunch up, shrugging her right shoulder even more, muttering to herself. Her appearance was disheveled and unusual for a girl of her age. Meri usually had no questions during the session, and spoke reluctantly. In the end she would pack her things and continued to work at home. Several times her mother showed her different kinds of stitches. As soon as the break would begin, Meri would grab her worn out cell phone with shattered display and immerse into playing games. If somebody invited her for a walk through school, she accepted without hesitation, transforming into a playful child.

As it is explained in Meri's statement, she depicted a bird she found one summer. It was a kestrel, a member of the falcon genus. Kestrels are used to humans and they can be found nesting in buildings. Meri's creative process revealed the working out of one idea through all sessions. The maze activity could also have been linked to the general motive because of the strong presence of ornaments that reminded her of bird's feather. Sketches made in pencil and collage presented one and the same bird through different approaches. Bird made in pencil technique took over the central position in the paper and was drawn carefully, opposite of the close-up done in collage. If observed chronologically, young kestrels that stood still took off at one point, and returned to its natural habitat, carefully depicted on Meri's story cloth. These three stages of art therapy process provided Meri an opportunity to say farewell to her little friend. In the end of the statement, Meri related the kestrel's leaving to her own eventual leaving of her family nest. Since Meri was 12 years old, it was still too early for more independent life, but it should be taken into consideration that she was the oldest child in her family. Because of her position, she probably participated in taking care of her four siblings, which could enhance her maturity level.

Bird symbols may represent a connection between heaven and earth, although their sign could be positive or negative. Some authors interpreted birds as a symbol of imaginative activity – they are light-winged but also reckless (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1987). Falcon's high flight symbolizes freedom of spirit. In Croatia, it represents spirit and life of sportsmanship (Žderić, 2010). It might be interesting to look at kestrel as a bird of prey. It could be a symbol of Meri's watching out for or taking care of siblings, having to provide for them in some ways, and a possible predatory aspect - teasing siblings or picking on them (L. R. Garlock, personal communication Sept. 28, 2020).

Meri's story cloth was full of textures she created with various fabrics and sizes of cut pieces. Rough bark was evoked with the use of burlap and rustling sound of treetop with scrunching of



soft green textile. Kestrel on the branch, in the forefront, was dominating the image, with trees, stream, sun and clouds in the background. Colors were carefully picked to resemble nature more closely. Especially interesting was visual correspondence between the sun and the kestrel's beak that seemed to be smiling. Because of equivalent color intensity the sense of space faded away, but it could still be noticed when carefully observed. Meri enriched some surfaces with tiny beads and playful stitches.



Picture 13. Meri's Story Cloth

#### 4.5.10. Lost In Color

*My work shows a color contrast. I got this idea from a work I did in school. The only thing I changed in my story cloth was cutting the triangle instead of two hands. I wanted my work to be simpler because it would be difficult to cut the hands and sew them. I have chosen a black triangle because it stands out well. I am not sure what it represents, but I seem to think that sometimes you do not have to know what it is all about. The center of the cloth describes me the best because there*

*is a bit of black and a bit of color there. It means that some parts of my life are a bit boring, but there are also some fun parts.* Noel

Reaching the end of our sessions, Noel's idea took on a more abstract appearance. Though his start was simplified, he reduced the image even more when working on his story cloth. In order to make the sewing quicker, Noel replaced silhouette of his hands with six stripes that formed a rhombus. The stripes were made by cutting two triangles. He explained the idea in his statement expressing an interesting point of view - sometimes it was all right not to be sure what your work was all about. Despite his usual drowsiness Noel had a specific and clear view of the situation. During the sessions Noel struggled between hunger and sleepiness most of the time, which caused a lack of motivation. The hypnotizing repetition of colored stripes used in his collage picture and story cloth, reflected the foggy feeling he seemed to experience every Saturday morning. Colored stripes presented interesting parts of his life and the black ones represented aspects that were less interesting. To some extent Noel led a common life - he lived with a younger, peculiar, withdrawn brother and busy parents. He wished he could spend more time with them. Color symbolism in Noel's story cloth was not done analyzing color by color but colored field and black parts. Colors hold strong symbolism in every culture, some based on positive characteristics of chromatic colors and negative characteristics of black. There are also many variations of this general assertion. Although Noel's collage and story cloth were created as a bold contrast between colored and black stripes, it should not be omitted that the idea was taken from an Art Education class. It shows that Noel gave meaning to pre-existing form designed by an art teacher.

Besides the color, as a personal symbol of interesting things, the process of creating the story cloth was significant. Since Noel was working particularly slowly, one could literally feel his struggle to finish the work planned for each session. His condition was far more than laziness. It looked like the stripe presented a certain stage he felt obliged to finish and repetition of forms stressed monotony of the whole situation. Different colors indicated that there were slight variations, but even they repeated themselves. Pieces of fabric were loosely sewn at the ends, lifelessly moving when story cloth was moved. Several black stripes were additionally attached, resembling a disintegrated rhombus. The softness of fabric reflected the weariness of Noel's body. If there was one thing that got lost along the way, from collage image to textile image, it was firmness and strength. Both could have been achieved by sewing the pieces more consistently but unfortunately

Noel did not reach that level. In the center of the composition he placed his initials, feeling relieved with each stitch.



Picture 14. Noel's Story Cloth

Symbols that children used and referred to may be divided into eight categories: food, body, nature, animals, things, people, typography and color. The Table 3 below provides a list of objects used in each category.

Table 3. Symbols divided into categories

Food	muffins, cake, milkshake, sweets, fruit
Body	hand, heart, head
Nature	sunset, sky, universe, cloud, lightning, landscape
Animals	birds, rabbit, dog, unicorn, paw
Things	ballet slippers, bows
People	gymnast
Typography	grades, exclamation mark
Color	chromatic and achromatic contrast, blue, pink, orange, yellow, green

A wide variety of color was used and afterwards verbally emphasized in all of the story cloths, which makes color the most used characteristic of children's communication. Besides that, all of the mentioned categories were also expressed through color. Elements of nature were used in order to express different types of moods, such as fear or stress. When talking about food presented in children's work, it is noticeable that sweet taste prevailed. Sweets and fruit were related to comfort, layering, enjoyment and even tokens of affection. Sweets mentioned in story cloths originated from contemporary popular culture i.e. from food symbols found on social networks and communication platforms. Animals, on the other hand, sometimes symbolized the artist, a pet or, in case of *paw* – love towards animals. Unicorn, a legendary creature classified as animal, added a touch of magic and mystery to a richly decorated cake. Body parts, precisely hands, heart and head represented states of fear, desire or confusion. Interestingly, lower body parts were not used, and only one participant (also one of the youngest) embarked on creating a whole human figure. The reason could be that the human figure was too demanding to create. Finally, grades and an exclamation mark were again presentations of fear, stress and confusion, but in a more obvious way than elements of nature.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The process of making a story cloth is a long-term therapeutic art activity. Because of this quality, the activity itself provides enough time to process complex emotions, confusing thoughts or past events that made a strong impact on who we are today. The length was the essential part of the observed sessions, since it was contrary to a general dynamic speed within contemporary teenage culture. At a certain point in every session children were reminded of how much time they had until the final exhibition to be able plan their work. It was explained that one story cloth should be done in the course of 15 sessions, but some children did not finish their work within a given deadline, while the others wanted to bring it to the end as soon as possible. Although impossible in this kind of activity, speed was still a quality that children desired. Participants were part of a population familiar with cell phones, smartphones, Internet, and computers since they were born. Their use, among many other disadvantages, got them accustomed to quick access to information and apparent problem solving. The same was in their ways of self-awareness, offering contents they could easily hook up to, under the guise of their personal preferences. Faced with the

unpredictable creative process with all its stages, the participants experienced how long it actually takes to dedicate and develop an idea. The theme of the sessions, titled “In My Head”, offered seeming determinants, and also encouraged the freedom of expression. The qualitative data gathered through 15 art therapy sessions produced valuable data enriched with children’s symbolic language.

Art therapy sessions showed that participants experienced various types of challenges during story cloth process, starting from the general lack of ideas, technical difficulties, and discouragement or fatigue. Those problems could be easily transferred in every type of situation - growing up as well as setting up a company. During these difficult periods, children found comfort and encouragement within the group, observing and talking to other participants who were in a similar situation. Being a part of the group process from the beginning through the ceremonial ending (exhibition) gave participants a positive image of the creative process, hard work and introspection. Although they did not obtain any reaction from accomplices, children still felt secure enough to verbalize aloud their intimate thoughts and dilemmas. Accordingly, hypotheses set in the introductory part of the research are confirmed: personal symbols take part and contribute to understanding of the child's emotional state revealing unobtrusively its meaning within the creative process, and sewing activity influences creation of personal symbols.

These encouraging statements inspire us to advocate even more for increasing hourly rate of Art Education and implementing art therapy in the school setting. Creativity and quality living share a secret connection that intrigues scientist, too. When talking about creativity, problem solving and self-esteem, neuroscience offers indications that visual art making can improve our well-being. Harth (cited in Kaplan, 2000) points out that by externalizing images and placing them alongside reality one can recall and re-examine them. Sylwester (in Kaplan, 2000) discusses that early training in the arts has the potential to develop brains of young people in a way of assisting in meeting and creatively solving the problems throughout their life. Eubanks (in Kaplan, 2000) writes that art can move from the borders of the curriculum toward the essence of learning. This statement supports the emotional aspect of the presented research as a core of gaining knowledge. Motivation is a mental process that needs to be nourished and supported. In that way, art therapy activities could bring benefits to artistically gifted children, as well as to others.

Another aspect of the story cloth process is its restorative character. Howell and Pierce (2000) claim that restorative activities, such as sleeping or engaging in certain re-energizing occupations,

renew one's energy resources. The restorative activities improve physical and mental state, creating feelings of renewal and regeneration during and after the activity. Preferences for highly restorative occupations are unique. Some will find needlework to be calming, while others would re-energize in woodworking, or writing in a journal. Frequent restorative activities have strong routines of simple, repetitive actions and are pleasurable as well (Howell and Pierce, 2000).

Because of these valuable characteristics participants noticed the comfort of needlework during and after the sessions. While engaged in the activity, their behavior changed in intervals – in one moment they were talking and in the other they were silently doing their work. That way children experienced the flow - immersing in the activity would often change their perception of passing of time and surprise them. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Kaplan, 2000) perceived that art making meets the conditions of flow, optimal human experience. Several participants even started sewing at home because they grew fond of the activity, and one participant attended two similar story cloth workshops a year after sessions finished. Parents of participants also got engaged in making their children's story cloth, encouraging them, sewing on their own or assisting. They all felt proud that their children practiced this neglected traditional activity with such attention.

### **5.1. Limitations to the study**

The main limitation of the study is a small sample consisting of ten children. The relevancy of the research would be higher if the sample was larger.

Another limitation of the study is the location where the art therapy sessions were held. Since the school environment is a place that children mostly associate with obligations, tasks, grading and discipline, its atmosphere is different than in an art or art therapy studio. The sense of obligation to attend the session could have been avoided if the location was more art-focused. Thus the children would experience a more comfortable creative process characteristic for artistic studio spaces. In order not to overwhelm children, sessions were held every other Saturday. The long time intervals between sessions caused the participants to sometimes forget what they had been doing previously. Shorter intervals could contribute to more dynamic development of ideas.

Although exciting, the idea of having an exhibition also adds pressure to the children to complete their work. It also might influence what they do if they know it will be seen by others - adults, peers

or parents. These are some of the factors that should be taken into account when thinking about displaying one's personal artwork.

## **5.2. Implications for practice**

The research can be used for enrichment of Art Education class and programs for (artistically) gifted children. Due to its broad applicability, story cloth process can be applied within different populations with the aim of enhancing positive traits such as motivation, confidence, collaboration and trust. The implied results from the qualitative data reveal the benefits of story cloth process in defining the leitmotif of individual's preoccupations and thoughts that lead to future interests and actions.

Furthermore, story cloth activity introduces art therapy practice at its best, providing long-term support throughout the process. In that way, sewing a story can be used as a preventive measure with (gifted) children, with the aim of preserving mental health regularly, instead of focusing on periods when problems occur. Preventive art therapy would make a significant change concerning mental hygiene, particularly because this kind of practice is not usual in Croatia.

## **5.3. Implications for further research**

The general theme of the story cloth could be adaptable to various situations and clients or students, and process could be done in a longer or shorter frame of time, depending on the interests of the researcher. It would be useful to apply the story cloth process on a larger statistical sample, within the school environment, where it could be analyzed for the purpose of maintenance of positive self-image, motivation, consistency or persistence. Listed qualities are desirable at every stage of life. Therefore, if the outcome is positive, the process could be applied with populations of different ages and conditions. Thereby the research could derive more general or in-depth results dealing with story cloth and self-image.

It is no surprise that school and learning bring the least enthusiasm in a child's life. That is why one would think that situation is different with gifted children. However, this research is dealing with artistically gifted children whose giftedness differentiates from its other forms. It should be taken into account that all of the described sessions took place in a school, i.e. in a classroom and

not in a school art studio (very few schools in Osijek have special classrooms equipped for art activity, AC). When in school, whatever the occasion, children tend to act or feel the same as on any other school day. The question arises whether the participants experienced the sessions as a part of school obligations or support. This is an important question to take into consideration when the opportunity for art therapy sessions within school arises.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The art therapy sessions “In My Head” presented in this research, relied on educational achievements included in National curriculum, but with the aim of raising awareness of emotional relief caused by art therapy activity - story cloth. By its nature, story cloth’s long-term process creates spaces and strength for defining the important moments. Through the period of realization, from their first sketches to finished work, children unwittingly created and used specific symbols that had led them towards less obvious contents, thoughts and emotions going on in their mind. The ATS / researcher, in the role of interested grown-up, assisted them on the way. The process spawned complex work, in several cases significantly different from the initial idea or sketch that were conjoint in the last phase of process - the group exhibition. By that time, some of the children developed connection towards each other or the ATS / researcher. That is meaningful information, since all of them were strongly self-centered and insensitive of each other in the beginning. Besides children opening up and making new acquaintances, substantial parts of every session was strengthening persistence in fulfillment of tasks. This newly-created persistence was a desired side-effect children could transfer in everyday context.

Story cloth is a narrative placed on a flat textile surface which, through a sewed image, forms a representation of an unspoken personal event. As a medium it is especially interesting as an art therapy activity because of its effectiveness and cultural relevance that emerge when working with clients. Story cloth is a form whose potential in art education, and in Croatian educational system in general, is still not realized. Croatian tradition and cultural heritage is reflected, amongst other artefacts, in rich needlework, tapestries and embroidery. Our legacy is a strong proof of presence of such activities throughout the country.

Until recently, children have been growing up with grandmothers who spent their free time engaged in embroidery. More recently, restorative activities have been replaced with simulation of reality



found on smartphones. Internet offers numerous contents through which one can seemingly calm down the creative aspect of being by purely glancing over the images. The ease of use of the web and its availability via smartphones have made it wide-spread to preschool children as well as to pensioners. Croatian school system has incorporated tablets in everyday class activities, exposing curious bright eyes to virtual world. The consequences are slowly showing.

The presented research, based on a traditional medium, offered gifted children a safe place where they could retreat for a couple of hours and devote themselves to a restorative activity. The process of creation of ten story cloths, each done by gentle children's hands, brought to life a tiny fragment of self-discovery. In that complex journey, young, artistically gifted participants witnessed the benefits and challenges of a long-term process. From session to session their thoughts and ideas took forms that, in the end, became recognizable as their personal symbols. Quintero (2010) notes that children, as consummate communicators, have something to say. The author's observations concern verbal storytelling at a young age, which is partially related to the story cloth process finished with written statement. Through their stories children build connections with others in their families, communities, and worlds (Quintero, 2010). The most important connection in that lifelong maze is the one with their own, true self. Life, as an unpredictable journey, faces even the youngest and most gifted among us with numerous situations that question connection to ourselves. Although this struggle for integrity can occur at any age, adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time. Gifted children are precious potential of every population that deserves special attention in their homes as much as in schools. While they branch into their specific fields of interest, their emotional life should experience growth as well.

The presented research provided insight into art therapy sessions designed in order to nourish mental health of a small group of artistically gifted children, throughout the school year. Further intention was to contribute to raising the awareness of importance of emotions and motivation within the educational process. The described art therapeutic experience ended in mutual pleasure. Continuous sessions with artistically gifted children provided valuable experience for ATS / researcher forming ten individual approaches to creating personal symbols. The creative path was additionally enriched with everyday situations and thoughts shared throughout sessions. On the other hand, participants went through layered experience that every professional artist is used to when facing a challenging project. The result was slowly sewed on their cloths as a permanent reminder of who they were in 2018 – a colorful thinker, an irresistible sweet, limitless sky, a well-

balanced gymnast, hands that were about to meet the world, hidden unicorn, an exclamation mark, sunset, a mysterious muffin and a bird that flew far, far away.

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Picture 5. Tara's Story Cloth

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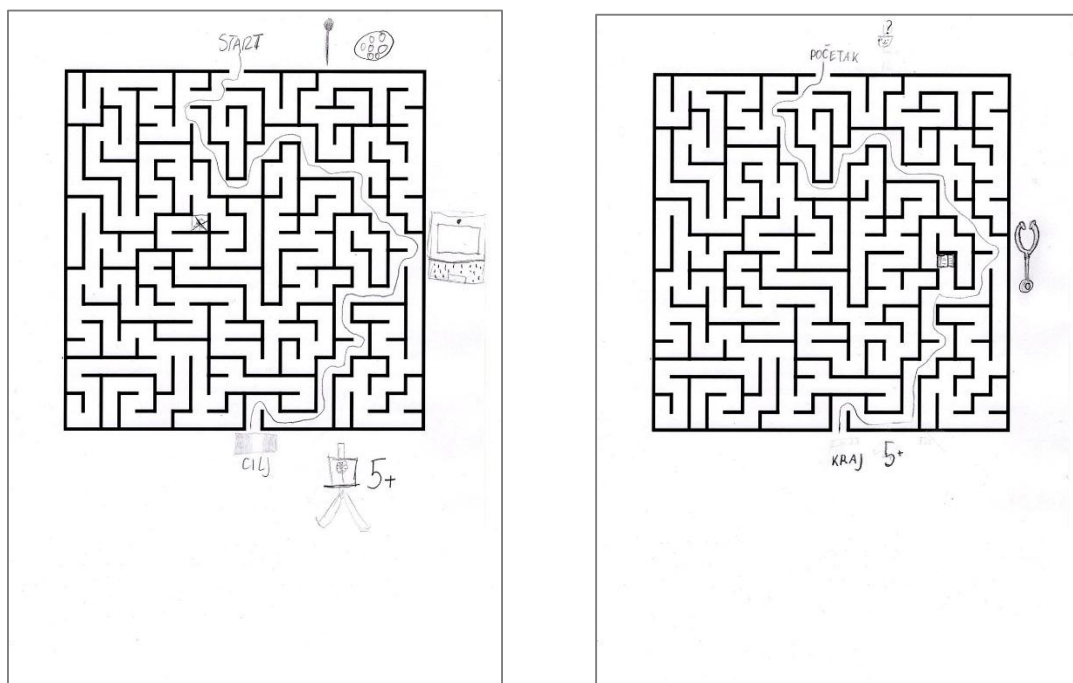
Picture 15. – 25. (in: PHOTO MATERIAL)

## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

CIO – Centar izvrsnosti Osijek (Centre of Excellence Osijek)

HNOS – Hrvatski nacionalni obrazovni sustav (Croatian National Educational System)

## PHOTO MATERIAL

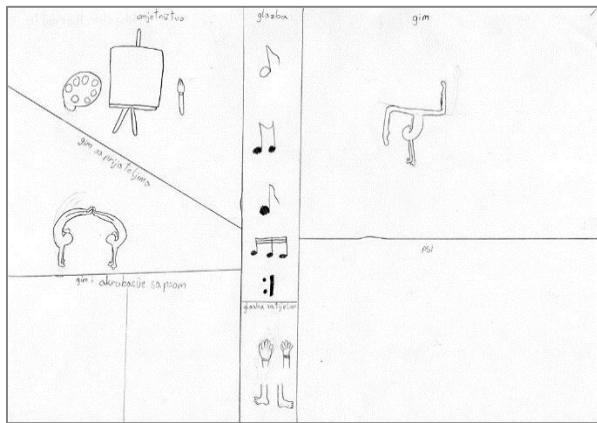


Picture 15. Dina's and Lora's Maze



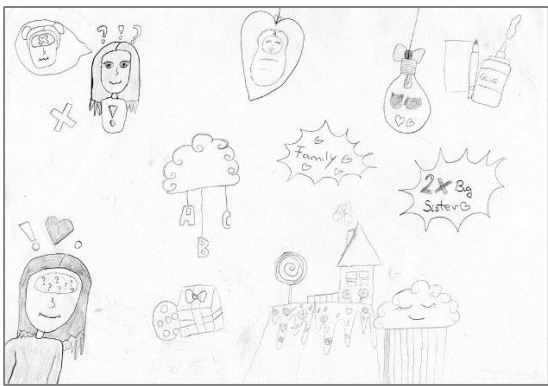


Picture 18. Dina's and Vid's sketch in pencil



Picture 19. Hela's and Lena's sketch in pencil

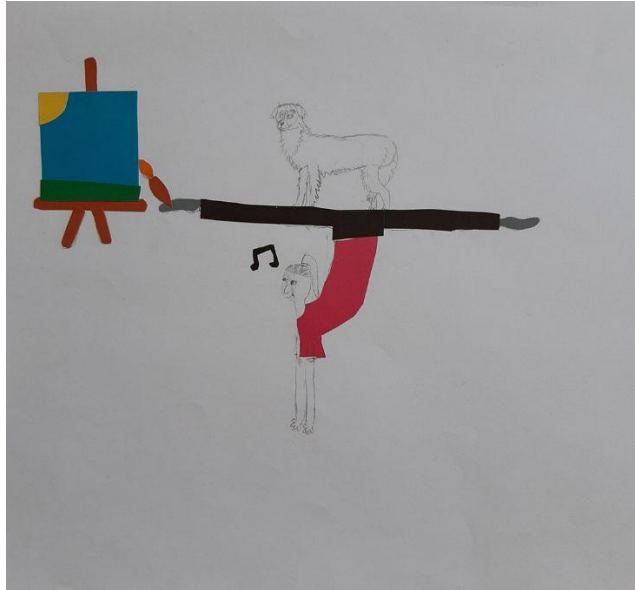




Picture 20. Maja's and Sofija's sketch in pencil



Picture 21. Meri's sketch in pencil



Picture 22. Dina's and Hela's sketch in collage



Picture 23. Lora's and Maja's sketch in collage



Picture 24. Lena's and Meri's sketch in collage



Picture 25. Sofija's and Vid's sketch in collage