

SYNTHESISING THE VALUE OF ARTS EDUCATION

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Abstract: All learners should have equal and sufficient opportunities to participate in arts activities through their lives, as arts provide multiple advantages and make vital contributions to their education [Russell-Bowie 2006]. In the following sections, various qualities of the arts are investigated in relation to how these qualities benefit learners. This paper review the findings of various empirical research studies relating to the educational value that arts education holds for children and young adults, with reference to intellectual development, enrichment through cultural diversity, creative thinking, espousing noble ideas through arts, and arts as a means of non-verbal communication.

Keywords: arts education, intelligence, curriculum, culture, creativity.

1. ARTS AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

While it is widely acknowledged that all learning areas of the curriculum have the potential to develop an imaginative and creative intellect in learners, the potential of the arts in this development have often been neglected, and underestimated by many teachers and principals [Russell-Bowie 1997]. It seems that many – mostly uninformed – people do not associate the arts with ‘thinking’ and are unaware that:

The real driving force behind [...] arts is what it does for the emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities of the student.

[Jensen 2001:76]

As the pursuit of academic excellence is a key factor in any education system, the above quote supports the notion that the Arts are vital to develop the full variety of human intelligence. It is, however, a misconception to believe that the quality of education of children and young people can be improved only by focusing on high standards of literacy and numeracy through a specialized curriculum with Mathematics, English, and Science as core subjects. Paige [2005], who highly regards arts education for children and young adults, notes that the arts are an integral part of a complete, successful and high quality education, as well as that it enhances people’s intellectual, personal, and social development: “The arts provide a rich and engaging curriculum that develops student’s abilities to think, reason, and understand the world and its cultures” [Paige 2005:52]. Arts in all its manifestations – music, dance, drama, poetry, literature, and visual arts – are powerful vehicles in developing the full variety of human intelligence.

One of the misfortunes of contemporary education is the ill relationship between the development of deductive reasoning skills – which often receive far more emphasis – and the development of aesthetic abilities. Eisner [2004:8] says “[...] academic schooling would do well to look more like the processes the arts celebrate”. He is of the opinion that the current educational focus in learning and knowledge construction, in which the arts are regarded as “marginal niceties”, is upside down. To him, arts and arts education should be “the regulative ideals for all we do”. Peter Abbs [2003] investigates how aesthetics are translated into arts education, and how student understanding of the arts can be informed by an aesthetic engagement with the arts. He suggests that there is such an entity as an “aesthetic intelligence”:

The aesthetic denotes a mode of response inherent in human life which operates through the senses and the feelings and constitutes a form of intelligence comparable to, though different from, other forms of intelligence such as the mode of logical deduction.

[Abbs 2003:4]

In order to develop the full variety of human intelligence, literature concurs that educators need to cater for the development of all modes of consciousness, thereby promoting a much wider and richer realm of human potential [Campbell, Campbell & Dickinson 2004; Jensen 2005, Levetin 2006; Miché 2002]. Synthesising the multiple intelligences of learners would also help to bring about a deeper understanding of the arts. For this reason Eggen and Kauchak [2012:141] recommend that arts lessons should “present content in ways that capitalize on as many different intelligences as possible”.

Research on the brain has concurrently been of significance and has been extended through a multitude of studies over the last four decades [Ornstein 1975; Gordon 2008, Michels 2001; Hallam 2010; Thornes 2009]. Education concentrating only on the rational functions of the left brain hemisphere at the expense of the more sensuous, intuitive and holistic aspects of consciousness and perception of right brain functions, denies children to develop unique qualities and skills.

Creative Arts education develops the ability for creative thought and actions, imaginative thinkers, as well as encouraging divergent and convergent thinking and multiple solutions to problems. If the arts are a narrative, and therefore a cognitive construction [Klein & Reylend 2013:74 – 75], the arts are able to teach divergent and convergent thinking, and encourage students to produce different rather than similar solutions, because the solutions to artistic problems are multiple. Therefore, the arts provide an alternative to the ‘true-false, memorize-this, name-that’ approach to learning. Transformative learning, for example, is a viable option to reach these goals. As Chapman [2001:23] remarks, the arts are “the very subjects where ambiguity, uncertainty, struggles of conscience and independent thinking are as unavoidable as they are in life beyond schools”.

2. THE ARTS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Culture has to do with daily life, while the arts have to do with human expression. Therefore culture and the arts share an important aspect of humanness, of expressing oneself in daily activities through the arts. Blacking argued that “because music is humanly organized sound, there ought to be relationships between patterns of human organization and the patterns of sound produced in the course of organized interaction” [Blacking 1971:93].

In a multicultural society, Creative Arts education can help foster understanding for, and pride in cultural diversity, especially between cultures that were previously separated through political powers [Potgieter and Klopper 2006:142]. This holds that an approach, through which arts from different cultures (e.g. Western art, African art, art from the Eastern World, etc.) is included in the curriculum, will result in learning how symbols, colours, art artefacts, music, dance, stories, etc. in folk art showcase the ideas of the people from the various cultures and times.

Because of the multi-racial nature of schools in many countries worldwide [e.g. Namibia, South Africa, Australia, America, Canada, and lately also in some European countries after the influx of refugees during recent times), schools should no longer be regarded as transmitters of culture, but rather as complex cultural exchanges. In this respect, Arts form a natural link to unite people.

In a Southern African perspective, strong voices for transformation from a colonized education in the past (in Namibia and South Africa for example) to a decolonized future education system is currently under strong scrutiny, evident through curriculum reforms over the past two decades in Namibia and South Africa. The fruitless efforts of transformation in higher education is under severe criticism: “The unpleasant truth is that we all are saturated to the bone with colonialism” [Burger 2016:11]. In a lecture presented by the well-known South African writer and painter, Breyten Breytenbach [Burger 2016:22], he pleads for transformation of universities to mirror an African identity. However, he warns against an exclusive tribalism approach, such as Hitler wanted for Germany, or Idi Amin for Uganda. Delport [2006:80] is of the opinion that many South Africans’ attitudes towards their fellow citizens from other cultural groups are still based on “misinformation and ignorance caused by past political policies of segregation”. She comments that personal transformation, beliefs, and perspectives, could be driven by an inclusive arts education in our country. This scenario might in the near future also become the subject of debate in other parts of the world when naturalisation of refugees to these countries starts. The arts are an expression of social as well as individual beliefs, desires and values, and thereby provides a vehicle for moulding and reflecting cultural diversity. Nussbaum [2001:269] views the specific role of music as an art form to be intricately bound to our beings: “[...] music seems to elude our self-protective devices, our techniques of manipulation and control, in such a way that it seems to write directly into our blood”.

Nussbaum theorizes that a “person’s emotions are shaped by his or her interaction with others” (2001:157). Sustaining diversity in arts provides a means through which the many different individual as well as collective emotions, dreams, aspirations, beliefs, values, and perspectives of people can be fostered and sustained. To nurture diversity, is also to promote human imagination and its expression, which is multi-shaping rather than uniform in artistic and cultural beliefs and practices:

Learning in the arts highlights the important role they have in the spiritual and cultural lives of people. It highlights the importance of the arts in cultures throughout history, having the capacity to cross societal and cultural bounds, acknowledging a significant part of all cultures.

[Sinclair, Jeanneret & O’Toole 2009:17]

Arts education aims at challenging the bifurcation between self and other, and broadening personal perspectives towards a sense of reconciliation amongst all, as well as greater inclusiveness of the wide spectrum of indigenous cultures. This view perpetuates the old systems, in which children and young adults in multicultural societies of the 21st century still have to learn the “secrets of the dominant code, rather than undergo a more profound socialization into their own cultural code” [Bredlid 2003:99].

Meki Nzewi [2003], Clement Abrokwa [1999], and Khabi Mngoma [1990] highlight the importance of indigenous sub-Saharan cultural arts and knowledge systems in educating children, especially the role that performance-based learning play in these art forms. Evolution in arts education in this new millennium aims at transforming the arts education ideologies of the previous millennium, rather than transmitting and sustaining extant past arts education practices. They should be subverted. In this way, the idea of promoting and fostering diversity as a way of enriching, is proposed. Smit [2006:77] argues that we should “adapt teaching strategies by means of which (we) can really enhance the personal and group identities of learners, for the sake of the feeling of self-worth of the learners, and also enhance cultural and national cultural identities of learners for the sake of mutual respect and tolerance.” The *ngoma* principle in African arts education tries to educate the whole person for life [Mans 2006]. The term *ngoma* is used by several African tribes for performing arts practices, and it “summarises the holistic connections between music, dance, other arts, society and life force” [Mans 2006:66–67]. It is a way of educating all children, irrespective of their abilities, through and in the arts. This integrated embodiment of African musical arts has also been documented by several other researchers [Nzewi 2003; Phuthogo 2007; Sager 2006].

Learning about different arts and cultural practices arises from the view that Arts education should be concerned with the transmission of multiple arts and culture traditions. The notion served by such a viewpoint is varied. Jorgensen [2002] summarizes this proposition– freely translated – as follows:

- Arts and culture diversity is as good as diversity in the natural world is good;
- The variety of arts and culture practices exemplifies human ingenuity and cultural diversity, and knowing about how to go on in these practices, help keep them alive and vibrant;
- At any time there is a stock of cultural, and specific arts beliefs and practices, and knowing various arts and culture traditions represents an important element in culture education that is the necessary business of education;
- Knowing multiple arts and culture traditions develops empathy towards different cultural traditions, and contributes to social tranquillity and peace between different cultures;
- Knowledge of contrasting traditions necessitates rethinking one’s heritage, and offers the prospect of combining elements from other arts traditions into one’s own, thereby enriching it, much as a gene pool is potentially enriched by marriage arrangements between persons who are not closely related.

[Jorgensen 2002:37]

People identify themselves through the arts as individuals, and as a culture. In this respect, Jaco Kruger notes that “The nature and historical patterns, and the extent to which they are invoked in cultural redefinition, identify the position of their practitioners in relation to centres of hegemonic social and cultural production.” [Kruger 2006:41]. In this way, the arts help children to understand culture in a broader sense, while they can also relate to their ethnic origin and heritage. The arts education to pre-service teachers, and to children in schools, can therefore have a powerful impact on the way in which children think about their own, and other cultures.

3. THE ARTS NURTURE CREATIVITY

The forms of creative thinking and doing which the arts represent, are fundamental to the curriculum. Paige [2005:385] observes in this respect that the benefits of arts education could lead to the development of “learner’s creativity, perception and understanding of life, cultural identity, and place and role in society” .

According to John O’Toole [Sinclair, Jeanneret & O’Toole 2009:xxiii], schools that value creativity in arts education, develop well-informed and active citizens for our future. These individuals will be able to generate and employ fresh ideas, communicate effectively, take risks, adapt easily to change and work cooperatively. One can therefore accept that an education that provides rich creative arts and culture programmes will maximize opportunities for learners and students to engage with innovative thinking, and to experience and appreciate arts practices from cultures different from their own, both as audience members, and as artists. Such an education is valuable and vital to students’ success as individuals, educators, and as members of their society. This type of education emphasizes not only creativity and initiative, but also the value of broad cultural understanding and social harmony across cultural borders. Furthermore, learning in the arts also “enables concrete development of meta-cognition and self – regulation, and through consistent engagement, it develops a full range of cognitive, psychomotor and effective domains” [(Sinclair, Jeanneret & O’Toole 2009:16).

Robinson [2005] proposes that, as change in all areas of social life accelerates – the vibrant developing world of modern technology is telling proof hereof – two qualities in young people are becoming more important than before: those of capability, and adaptability. Although academic skills contribute to achieve these qualities, it is sometimes – if not always – over-valued at the cost of the practical world in which young people live, and eventually have to make their way. Industry and commerce in this new age want those entering employment to show powers of innovation, initiative, and application in problem solving and pursuing opportunities, as these are pre-requisites for a healthy economy [Jensen 2005]. Such creative thought should be developed and fostered in all areas of education [Miché 2002]. In the arts, these creative qualities are central.

4. THE ARTS AS A MEANS TO SHARE MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES

The arts are in a unique position that it is a means whereby moral and ethical values can be shared and educated. Notions of the noble value of the arts have been particularly embraced in the East [Jorgensen 2002:42]. In the music literature, Suzuki’s avowed aim was to develop ‘better people’ demonstrating characteristics such as magnanimity, generosity, statelyness and excellence that are admirable and emulated by others. Espousing noble ideas necessitates making value judgments about the precise traits of character that are considered to be admirable, and that are expressed in dispositions to act in particular ways. Creative Arts education promotes noble values and fosters a culture of moral and ethical nature.

The aims of arts education include notions of spirituality and aesthetic sensibility with the emphasis on humane values [Kaplický 2011]. According to Kaplický, the essence of education is religious, because it inculcates duty and reverence for both teacher and student.

5. THE ARTS AS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Some aspects of human experience are better expressed through an alternative means of communication, rather than only using verbal communication. McDonald et al. [2002:10], in their attempt at making a case for the arts, argue that music “act as a medium through which people can construct new identities and shift existing ones in the same way as spoken language”. It could be claimed that the arts would not exist if verbal exchanges satisfied all our communication needs. Philosophers and arts educators have taken note of how the arts convey meaning through non-verbal means. In this respect, the words of Arnaud Reid clearly reflect this notion: “I conceive of feeling as cognitive as well as affective, as always having content or an object. Even when we cannot possibly say what we feel, we are feeling a quality of something through the unnameable” [Reid 1986:5–6].

There are other ways of knowing and telling besides verbal language, and the arts are as powerful as any other form of human discourse. Teachers and psychologists know that young children or traumatized adults understand and know more than they are able to verbalize [Rosner, Kruse, & Hagl 2010]. For instance, young children as well as adults reconstruct traumatic experiences more willingly and easier in drawings, a mode of communication which has long been used in therapy and counselling [Kim 2010]. Both music and art therapy are arts disciplines combined with psychology, where both the therapist and the patients’ thoughts can be expressed through artistic means [Vick 2003:5; Rozum & Malchiodi 2003:72].

Arts education is using sound, movement, gesture, form, mime, and images to express ideas, thoughts and feelings, and children often show a preference for a particular medium [Reily 2006:96]. Therefore, it is vital that young children find their preference by experiencing a range of options that only Creative Arts can offer them. Only by embracing the arts, will they be able to become fully multi-literate.

In their aim to develop children to their fullest potential, educators should be aware of the powerful role which the arts can play in releasing that potential. To deny children access to learning in the arts, is to deny access to what Bennett Reimer refers to as “a basic way that humans know themselves and their world; they (the arts) are a basic mode of cognition” [1989:11].

6. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ARTS EDUCATION

It is important that discovery of arts and of cultural identity should start from within the learner or student, in other words, from personalized experiences rather than from generic ones, moving out through an active process of discovery to the arts and cultures in the learner’s own environment, and then to the arts and cultures in world context [Masoga 2006:48]. Blacking [in Howard 2006:31-32] also suggests a personalized experience with the arts. It should therefore not be left to the educator to promote his or her personal views on what constitutes good art by means of lectures or lessons, but rather that learners learn through the process of creating arts themselves, by discovering that each art and culture is indeed unique, but that there are certain interrelationships and skills involved in each. Blacking makes the implicit explicit when he refers to experiencing Mahler’s music on a personal level “rather than considering another scholar’s analysis” thereof [Howard 2006:31-32]. Opportunities should therefore be provided for students to have personal hands-on experiences in arts and culture, especially in creative activities.

Broad experiences in listening to and observing the arts of various cultures would benefit arts courses. This refers to the products of the students’ own efforts as well as masterpieces in all forms of the arts, and in a variety of cultures. There should also be experiences in analysing, comparing and evaluating the various arts [Potgieter & Klopper 2006:148] for the purpose of transformative learning and perspective change. Moreover, it should be stressed that the indigenous knowledge is inherent in the various art forms, “such as traditions, customs, folk stories, folksongs, folk dramas, legends, proverbs, myths” [Masoga 2006:47].

A balance should be created between **doing** the arts (experiencing the arts of different cultures), and **understanding** (appreciating and valuing) the arts. Gadamar puts it to words as follows: “As our experience grows, and if we can view our life as a series of tableaux, so our understanding – our horizons – shifts” [Howard 2006:32]. Creative Arts is too exciting, too innovative, and too creative to be limited to a fixed schedule. The approach for this subject should therefore be to provide teachers with a variety of suggested activities and transmission approaches to apply during the teaching of classes.

During a lecture while at university, Spies remembers her music lecturer, professor Jacques Malan, comparing the learning experience of music to a pyramid where the learning process should start at grassroots level: “The broader the base of the pyramid, the higher the top will be” [Spies 2006:34]. This method of providing a broad base of learning experiences and exposure to basic arts concepts, can be applied to all the arts disciplines. Furthermore, to follow a spiral curriculum in a pre-service teacher education programme (as well as in schools) is vital to ensure that arts concepts develop progressively [Van der Merwe 2009]. Only if arts concepts – for example the various elements of music – are revisited [Van der Merwe 2009:27], can it lead to a foundation of knowledge and skills on which teachers can base classroom experiences in the arts for their learners. Once the basic concepts and knowledge in an art form have been established, teachers – and their learners in the classroom – will be equipped to create art products.

7. CONCLUSION

This overview provides a strong case of the value of arts education to children and young adults. While many (uninformed) teachers, school principals, and even parents of school-going children do not associate arts education with intellectual development, research studies of the past two decades [e.g. Ceci et al., 1997; Cheek et al., 1999; Orsmond et al., 1999; Hetland, 2000; Altenmuller et al., 2003; Pantev et al., 2003; chellenberger, 2003; Hallam, 2010, to mention but a few], found a strong link between arts education and intellectual development. It leaves no doubt that arts contributes to the development of the full variety of human intelligence. As cultural diversity becomes more and more a reality in many

countries worldwide, research found that arts education can help foster understanding for, and pride in cultural diverse societies. Arts education can furthermore develops creative thinking, helping individuals to create fresh ideas, communicate effectively, encourages them to take risks, and work co-operatively, all qualities that are much needed in the workplace. Notions of noble values, e.g. spirituality and aesthetics, have also been attached to arts education. As an alternative to verbal communication, arts, being a non-verbal communication means, can construct new identities and shift existing ones in exactly the same way as can be done through spoken words.

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