The challenge and value of learning and teaching in the arts

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KEY POINTS

- The arts teach us things that cannot be learnt through other subjects.
- The arts also provide benefits for other subjects and for student engagement.
- How we teach the arts is crucial; a narrow and exclusive focus on skills erodes quality and creativity.
- The unique languages of the arts provide inclusive and divergent possibilities for students' expression.
- Community involvement in the arts has many reciprocal benefits.
- The arts enrich lives and extend imaginative possibilities.

Literacy and numeracy are high-stakes, and we do our students a disservice if we do not grow their capabilities in these areas. However, we also do them an immense disservice if we ignore their creative, imaginative, and artistic abilities. Not only do the arts contribute to student learning in other areas of the curriculum, they have innate benefits and teach us things that cannot be learnt from other disciplines. How we teach the arts is also significant. Too much emphasis on narrow skills perpetuates a dull, instrumental outcome and erodes quality. The arts require the purposeful teaching used in effective pedagogy with attention to the scaffolding of skills, exploratory play, idea development, honing of precision, and imaginative expression. The arts also offer inclusive contexts for engaging all students given the embodied ways of knowing privileged in the arts. Moreover, the arts readily engage the wider school community and are enriched by community involvement. The contribution of the arts to our students places beauty, imagination, and creativity at the centre of education.

Introduction

It is well known that the arts suffer from marginalisation in schools throughout the world. That we privilege literacy and numeracy over the arts is testament to the fact we place greater value on the former as the pinnacle of what counts as knowledge. The arts are squeezed into the margins of a jam-packed curriculum, making it apparent what is highly esteemed and what is considered superfluous. It is tempting to lapse into a debate on the relative merits of the disciplines, but this is invariably counterproductive. Literacy and numeracy are high-stakes in the world and we do our students a disservice if we do not grow their capabilities in these areas. However, we also do them an immense disservice if we ignore their creative, imaginative and artistic abilities. Picasso claimed that children are born artists but we educate them out of it (Robinson, 2007). In addition, Wright (2010) argues:

> The schooling process often is at odds with young children's imaginative and creative dispositions. It is biased toward teaching children the rule-bound structured symbol systems, where written letters, words and numbers are seen as a 'higher status' mode of representation over self-derived, visual thinking and reflection. (p. 177)

The arts are often considered an indulgence, a frill, an expendable extra. Yet a school that does not have a vibrant arts programme cannot claim it is educating the whole child, nor can it claim that it values what children bring to school. It is curious that the arts are so often sacrificed for subjects deemed more important and more worthy of large chunks of the school timetable. There are two major problems with this.

First, there is much evidence to show that the arts do enhance learning in other areas of the curriculum, especially for students whose strengths lie in bodily, kinaesthetic, visual, haptic, and aural ways of knowing. Using these modes to access learning can enable students who do not usually perform well in literacy and numeracy, for example, to succeed in surprising and sustained ways (e.g., Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Ewing, 2009; Gibson & Ewing, 2011). Recent research from the University of Canterbury ("Chemistry expert", 2013) also shows benefits for science graduates from incorporating the arts to aid communication. The arts are not the cause of alleged issues with achievement in numeracy and literacy, yet for some reason they are the sacrificial lamb. Bolstad's (2011) review of the literature found that the arts contribute to a range of goals, such as fostering creativity

and innovation, and developing a sustainable knowledge economy. She also refers to a few large studies that state that students do better overall in schools with rich arts programmes, than those in schools with poor ones.

Secondly, the arts have immense innate value and teach us things that cannot be experienced through other disciplines. Elliot Eisner (2000) elegantly captures the ways in which the arts educate and enhance who we are in his *Ten Lessons* which are summarised here:

1. **The arts teach children to make good judgements about qualitative relationships.** "The arts teach rightness of fit … Is this color too raw? Questions like these, which are crucial in the arts, cannot be answered by appealing to formula; their answers must be found by appealing to what can be felt" (p. 7).
2. **The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.** "If they do anything, the arts embrace diversity of outcome" (p. 7).
3. **The arts celebrate multiple perspectives.** "The greater the pressure on schools to standardize, the greater the need for the arts, those places where individuality and productive surprise are celebrated" (p. 8).
4. **The arts teach that purposes in complex forms of problem solving are seldom fixed, but change with circumstance and opportunity**. "At its best, work in the arts is not a monologue delivered by the artist to the work, but a dialogue … the aim is more than impressing into a material what you already know, but discovering what you don't" (p. 8).
5. **The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor number exhaust what we can know.** "Put simply, the limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition" (p. 8).
6. **The arts teach students that small difference can have large effects.** "The arts traffic in subtleties … learning to see and hear is precisely what the arts teach … Seeing in such situations is slowed down and put in the service of feeling" (p. 9).
7. **The arts teach students to think through and within a material.** "All art forms employ some means through which images become real … the work of art is both a product and a means through which we make ourselves" (p. 10).
8. **The arts help children learn to say what cannot be said. "**The task is not to replicate in language the qualities that are themselves ineffable, hence the trick is to say what cannot be said" (p. 11).
9. **The arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.** "Some works of art have the capacity to put us into another world. So stirring is the journey that we surrender to where the work takes us" (p. 11).
10. **The arts' position in the school curriculum symbolises to the young what adults believe is important.** "The curriculum of the school shapes children's thinking. It gives or denies children opportunities to learn how to think in certain ways … the arts for all their instrumental value, are, in the end, about learning how to be touched. They are about the enrichment of life" (p. 13).

Eisner eloquently reminds us of the transformative and enriching power of the arts. Humankind's history of art-making can be traced back to prehistoric times when art-making persisted despite the pressing struggle to survive. The instrumental arguments today against the arts such as the uncertainties of career prospects if students pursue the arts, and the need for "more important" subjects to take precedence, do not stack up and blatantly miss the point. The arts are not just instrumental means to an end. They represent the innate human need to express deep feelings in ways that word and number cannot. They enhance and deepen our lives provoking feelings of curiosity, fascination, and insight. The ancient roots of the arts in our existence on earth underline the persistent and prevailing need for us to create and appreciate art.

FIGURE 1. YEAR 3 BOY PRINTMAKING

Practical knowledge and developing ideas

Another important issue in teaching the arts is the role of practical knowledge and developing ideas (Ministry of Education, 2000). *Both* are necessary in the creative process, but too often the former dominates the latter. Lesson after lesson in the arts is focused on the teaching of practical skills (e.g., how to do body percussion, how to hot-seat in drama, how to prepare a linocut, how to explore balance in dance) with little if any time for idea

development. Moreover, these skills are often taught as a one-off lesson rather than as a series of lessons that build skill development. We would not teach addition once to a child and then assume he or she has the skills, yet we often see a lesson on dance or clay in isolation with no follow-on lessons to develop what was learned.

While skill development is necessary in learning in the arts, an overemphasis on skills erodes creative expression. Too much emphasis on practical skills conveys the message that skills are paramount, including the meeting of learning outcomes that are often based on that which is observable and measurable. Practical skills do not take thinking very far, and too much emphasis on skills can hinder—even annihilate—thinking, if compliance to conventions becomes a paramount goal. The practical elements are, however, more obvious to teach and assess.

Eisner (2004) maintained that the arts need to allow for flexible purposing and expressive outcomes. Behavioural objectives, with their clearly defined learning outcomes, can be too closed for the unknown directions that arts creation needs. This freedom to explore is necessary if arts programmes are to enable children to bring their imaginations to the task at hand. The *Art of the Matter* (Fraser et al., 2006) project found that important exploratory play which aided creative idea development was often marginalised in favour of carefully defined criteria such as "we are learning to" (or WALT) lists. There is an emphasis in the creativity literature on the importance of exploratory play—and play was historically well valued in arts programmes of the last century. It seems that the importance of play has been lost, yet a number of music researchers, (for instance, Burnard, 2000; Dogani, 2004; Glover, 2001), claim that improvisatory play is central to idea generation. They promote playful immersion as the norm in children's intuitive response to music making.

WALTs are not necessarily an impediment when teaching art, and they do provide a specific goal plus clear criteria for reaching that goal. They break down a broader goal into manageable steps, and they can provide a sense of progress and accomplishment when reached. For the key competency of *managing self*, WALTs can provide a helpful guide. A problem emerges when WALTs are the only way to frame learning in the arts, and when exploration, innovation, improvisation, and creativity are sacrificed for adherence to observable outcomes. In art, children need to know the conventions, but they also need chances to break free from conventions. Moreover, *managing self* needs to become internalised and not driven by external instructions.

Developing ideas requires ongoing qualitative reflection on whether the development is towards something *better*. This does not preclude setbacks and regressions which are part and parcel of the messiness of learning. Learning

Development of ideas infers movement or growth towards something better. In other words, there is qualitative improvement.

does not proceed smoothly in a linear, staircase fashion (Barker, 2012; Claxton, 2002; Nuthall, 2007), despite what some models of human development have claimed. Good learners, according to Claxton (2002, p. 18), like a challenge, know that learning is sometimes hard, are not afraid to make mistakes, and like the feel of learning. It seems that development of ideas requires the elements of "good learning". This good learning is invariably aimed towards improvement; something that is qualitatively better than before, but does not avoid risk taking and mistake making.

The arts curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2000) broadly defines *developing ideas* as the strand where students "initiate, develop, conceptualise, and refine ideas" (p. 20). Development of ideas includes possibilities that are considered, explored, tested, rejected, resurrected, and pushed in directions that are not wholly determined at the outset. Development of ideas infers movement or growth towards something better. In other words, there is qualitative improvement. Children are more likely to grow their ideas if they know what that feels, looks, moves, and sounds like in practice. And similarly, teachers are more likely to foster such development if they too are familiar with the context and processes that enhance improvement. Development of ideas is also inevitably part of one's *thinking* processes as ideas are created, evaluated, adapted, extended, and refined. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) defines thinking as "about using creative, critical, and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences, and ideas. These processes can be applied purposes such as developing understanding, making decisions, shaping actions, or constructing knowledge" (p. 12). The arts honour this by providing "a process that uniquely synthesises cognitive, emotive and sensory forms of thinking" (O'Connor & Dunmill, 2005, p. 3).

Idea development, and the thinking required, is inevitably a time-consuming process. The parameters are fluid and the outcomes unknown at the outset. It requires exploration with the art medium, be it body, sound, image, or enactment. It requires sensitivity to what is felt, heard, seen, and expressed so that qualitative improvements can be gauged. And if children are working in groups (which is often the case in classrooms) they also need time to negotiate the ideas of the group. This adds a whole new layer of complexity and also requires skill in collaboration which is part of *relating to others* in the key competencies.

FIGURE 2. DEVELOPING IDEAS IN DANCE: FISH AND CHIP THEME

An example that shows how to promote the development of ideas is evident in Gay Gilbert's pedagogy (Fraser with Gilbert, 2013). Gay believes the prescriptive forefronting of practical skills is not necessary and in fact inhibits children's painting development. Rather, she invites children to enter painting through an organic, problem-solving approach. As children experience art-related problems, this naturally raises the teachable moment. The solving of such problems comes from both peers and the teacher, modelling that this work draws on a class community. This nicely steps children up as experts. In doing so, children are more likely to challenge what is possible because of the confidence accrued. A wise teacher knows that children will discover more than can be predicted in advance given time and opportunity. For example, she invites children to experiment with colour and in doing so, discover blends and hues without the need for a prescriptive lesson on the colour wheel. This freedom to experiment benefits children and is developmentally appropriate. Similarly, famous artists constantly use trial and error to hone their skills. In addition, no artist's work looks just like another's. This salient point cannot be overemphasised. The piece of art a child creates should be a reflection of who they are and what they bring to the work. Discovering their unique perceptions, feelings, and view of the world are what makes their art important and meaningful. Art is an area through which children make tangible their relationship with their ideas and their media, and thus, each piece is as personal as a fingerprint:

> In making art you need to give yourself room to respond authentically, both to your subject matter and your materials. Art happens *between* you and something—a subject, an idea, a technique—and both you and that something need to be free to move. (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 20, emphasis in the original)

To raise the quality of any artwork the teacher needs to know technical skills that might be encountered, and the topic depicted needs to be carefully chosen. For example, children will persist longer and incorporate more detail when the topic is strongly personal such as climbing trees, swinging on ropes, animals, camp experiences, and so forth. These contexts are embedded in the child's consciousness and thus in visual art they draw from this deep emotional well, as well as from observation.

FIGURE 3. PAINTING INSPIRED BY CLIMBING TREES

To honour what is completed, the work needs to be displayed or presented with respect. It is also helpful for teachers to add a blurb about the process so that parents, caregivers and other visitors are helped to "read" the work; so that they understand the depth of thinking that underpins the making of art. Too often art is considered a decorative but relatively insignificant learning area. Educating others about the value of what the arts teach is an important part of any school policy and practice. In doing so, community members become aware of the myriad ways in which art fosters persistence, problem solving, informed judgement, critical thinking and depth of perception.

FIGURE 4. YEAR 3 COLLAGE

The strength of Gay's approach is that the skills are taught as needed and are contextualised in ways that are tangible and meaningful (see also Ewing, 2009). The artwork created is rigorously worked and reworked over a sustained period. The time given makes it clear that these areas

are valuable in their own right, and not mere decorative appendages.

The languages of the arts

Instead of privileging the linguistic, the arts offer multiple opportunities for learning in and through unique, largely non-verbal languages—through music, dance, drama, and visual art. Drama is the most verbal of these art forms given the speech aspects of teacher-in-role, hot-seating, spoken thoughts, and the like. However, all four art forms are rich in non-verbal ways of communicating, such as gesture, shape, movement, sound, rhythm, tone, pitch, colour, use of space, layering, texture, position, levels, facial expression, body language, perspective, and many more.

For many children, their expression in the arts outstrips their verbal abilities. They are able to "show" stories, convey feelings, capture moments, compose images and sounds that have expressive power in their own right. The arts enable those children for whom English is an additional language to participate fully alongside their peers, as long as spoken and written language does not dominate how the arts are conveyed and interpreted. Moreover, teachers often report surprise at the abilities a range of children reveal through the arts. Dance, for example, can be a place where teachers see their children in new ways.

The initial case studies in the *Art of the Matter* (Fraser et al., 2006) project revealed that teachers relied mostly on spoken, and to a lesser extent written language, to convey to children key ideas, sequences, and lesson moves. As a result of the initial case study, and the viewing of her teaching on video, one of the teachers, Shirley Tyson, recognised the ways in which her talk tended to dominate what occurred in dance lessons. Her verbal language had supremacy over the movement of dance. Through discussion with her university colleagues, she set herself the challenge of incorporating more dance gestures and movements to provide increased non-verbal guidance in dance. This did not mean that she did not speak at all, but rather that she consciously built in specific dance ways of communicating (gestures, movements, bodily expressions) within feedback stages of the lessons. After three demonstrations of non-verbal dance feedback, a child in the class asked if he could give non-verbal feedback to his peers. Shirley quickly agreed that this was a great idea and watched with interest as the children developed their own dance feedback responses.

Periodically, she would check in verbally with groups to gauge whether they had understood what their peers were communicating to them (e.g., "What was the person telling you?") and she assisted with clarifying any confusions or mixed messages. Her 'checks' were to confirm children's understanding, rather than to provide verbal explanations.

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She was surprised to find though, that quite a lot of their communication was clearly conveyed and received.

Shirley noted that the more confident children used dance moves to communicate their ideas and the less confident used mime. Both forms of non-verbal communication were accepted and encouraged. Over time however, more children incorporated dance rather than mime, as their skills and confidence grew. She also noted that using dance movements as feedback was easily understood by the children as well as inclusive. For example, children who had English as an additional language were not disadvantaged by non-verbal feedback to the same extent as the giving and receiving of the verbal. When interviewed about the innovation, children commented that, "I like it because I could see what my dance looked like [to someone else]" and "I found it better than being told because it was a surprise." Moreover, the degree of dance participation time was arguably increased as children kept working on and using their movement repertoire rather than having to anticipate what they were going to verbalise.

Gardner (1983, 1993) has long argued that schools overlook a range of intelligences that are undervalued and underserved, such as the visual/spatial, the musical, and the bodily/kinaesthetic. These ways of knowing are emphasised in the arts. As the arts do not rely upon fluency with literacy or numeracy it could be argued that the potential for inclusive pedagogy is enhanced; that is, children from an early age respond to music, create pictures, and like to move. These are *embodied forms of expression* that the arts naturally draw on.

FIGURE 5. FREEZE-FRAME IN DRAMA

This is not to say that the creation and reception of art forms should not, at times, lead to rich verbal dialogue and literacy. Interpretive dialogues and literacy are *further* opportunities for children to share their own unique views and collectively construct understanding of the richness of what the arts offer.

Community involvement

Parental and community involvement in the arts is as crucial as any other area of learning. The more parents understand about the value of the arts in their children's education, the easier the teachers' job in facilitating effective arts learning. The arts should not be reduced to decoration for the refrigerator or the end of term operetta. *Connecting Curriculum, Linking Learning* (Fraser, Aitken, & Whyte, 2013) reveals a number of ways in which parents and wider community members were involved in the arts through landscaping a school environment with art installations, participating in student-created interactive museums, and providing design advice. Some schools also hold student-led art events where parents and caregivers do not merely watch as passive audience members, but are invited to participate alongside children. These events include student-led dances, songs, and interactive process drama. The energy and joy emanating from these events show gains for everyone involved. To borrow a sporting metaphor, the arts need not remain a "spectator event".

FIGURE 6. PARENTS DANCING AT A STUDENT-LED ARTS EVENT AT BEATTIE SCHOOL OF THE ARTS IN KAMLOOPS, CANADA

The arts are a magnet for community involvement. Beattie School of the Arts in Canada is a regular primary school that teaches all the curriculum subjects, but deliberately places the arts at the centre of the school. This school was a parent-led initiative as parents felt that the arts had been squeezed out of the curriculum. Not only do the arts feature prominently, achievement in the traditional subject areas continues to thrive. It is more common, however, for schools here and overseas to struggle to maintain vibrant arts programmes. Michael Irwin found in his study of nine New Zealand primary schools that the arts for the most part have been relegated to decorative features and only then if time permits (personal communication, 25 June 2013). In the few schools that have maintained the arts it is often due to the efforts of one or two teachers.

A vibrant arts programme tends to draw in parental and community interest. Irwin's study includes a low-decile school with a large Māori population that has strong community support due in large part to its music programme. Students are taught skills in percussion, for instance, and are then given opportunities to practice and improvise. The development of ideas is not neglected, as improvisations capitalise on what children bring to the arts and extend their creative repertoire. There are regular "battle of the bands" competitions, and plenty of parental involvement. Research shows that student engagement and achievement at school is enhanced by parental involvement, and this is particularly so for students from minority groups.

Today, beginning teachers have less background in the arts than ever before as arts education programmes worldwide have been decimated. Therefore, they are ill prepared to foster and grow the arts, making the arts the equivalent of an endangered species. One way to mitigate this is the involvement of community artists. Research shows (e.g., Catterall & Waldorf, 1999) that vibrant school arts programmes regularly draw on outside experts to inspire, mentor, and guide. Surveying the local community to locate these people and inviting them to share their expertise is a way to get started. In New Zealand, Artists Alliance is an organisation that helps to broker such relationships with contemporary artists and arts groups. It is important, however, that teachers do not merely outsource the teaching of the arts to specialists. Specialists may not be teachers and may use top-down instructional methods that alienate students or make them into clones copying the expert artist. Teachers need to work alongside such experts to increase their own knowledge of the arts and to build in vital pedagogical skills such as ascertaining prior knowledge, scaffolding new learning, teaching to needs, providing opportunities for repetition and exploratory play, and developing ideas. Penny Deane of Omanu primary school leads the art programme at her school, providing guidance to teachers and sourcing outside experts when required. Through community fund-raising the school created its own purpose-built art suite. Penny comments that teachers are more likely to do art with their students when they have the facilities. Not surprisingly, the art room also draws parental and whanau interest and support with volunteers assisting students in a variety of art endeavours.

Conclusion

Art making is risky. It is "like beginning a sentence before you know its ending" (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 20). One of the vital elements in creativity is the ability to tolerate the feelings and struggles that come from bringing something new into being. Bayles and Orland argue that "uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the pre-requisite to succeeding" (1993, p. 21). These important qualities are fostered when children are engaged in art-making. In many respects, children are better than adults at this and the last thing we as teachers should do is stifle their tolerance to the inevitable uncertainties inherent in the creative process.

Do the arts make us more creative? Yes, but only if they are taught well. An art lesson can be as tedious and prescriptive as a lesson in any subject area. Conversely, a lesson in mathematics or science can be highly creative and innovative. The role of the teacher is crucial in providing the opportunities for creative expression. What the arts do invite however, is more license and more scope for pushing the boundaries of knowledge. The arts by their very nature kindle our creative urge and extend our creative capacities. When the drudgery and banality of life threatens to extinguish our dreams, the arts reawaken us to beauty and the endless possibilities that thrive in our imaginations. Moreover, the arts do not only provide pleasing aesthetics. They also provoke, challenge, stir, and confront. The arts help us to explore difficult issues in ways that enlighten and inform. Strong feelings, complex social and political issues, bigotry and prejudice can be examined through the arts. In such cases the arts raise consciousness and promote social justice. To paraphrase Mr Keating in the *Dead Poets' Society*, numeracy and literacy are noble pursuits and important to sustain life; but drama, dance, music, art—these are what we stay alive for.

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