

Education is art and art is education: An outline of arts education in New Zealand

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A Brief History

New Zealand was a crown colony of Britain between 1840 and 1852 and in 1878 the first national curriculum in New Zealand was offered to students that “closely related to the British model” (Smith, 2007, p. 78). The first New Zealand school curriculum offered drawing, vocal music and sewing (for girls). Drama and dance in the form of plays and concerts were evident from the early 1900s reflecting attitudes and values of a young country. Between the 1930s and the 1950s Clarence Beeby was the director of the New Zealand national education system and during that time he introduced many reforms that strongly impacted on students. He promoted a student-centred education where the arts were strongly featured. He chose influential artists to train specifically for education and teach in schools, and brought many overseas artists to the country to develop education in the arts. His influence continues to be felt throughout this country as many of the children at that time grew up to take the arts forward in their own teaching, and as artists whose education played a role in their formative years.

The Current Situation

Within the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) the arts subject area is articulated in terms of dance, drama, music and visual arts. The curriculum policy states that four arts disciplines are mandated to be taught in every primary [elementary] school classroom. That is, all primary school children in New Zealand are expected to learn dance drama, music and visual arts. Research suggests however, that the teaching of arts is sporadic and while teachers support the arts curriculum they tend to shy away from teaching. The reasons for not teaching the arts appear to be a lack of confidence, a lack of time and the government’s policy focus on literacy and numeracy. Although there is some evidence of exciting arts programmes being implemented in classrooms, they are not widespread and often schools believe they have met the requirements of the curriculum through a school musical or a dance competition. We hold concerns regarding arts being viewed as performance or product vehicles only, without offering students creative opportunities where they can work cooperatively, problem solve and discover and appreciate differences between themselves and others.

Concerned with the absence of the important creative aspects and processes of the arts, we looked for ways in which students could profit from the arts within a crowded curriculum. Our research examines the benefits of an ‘arts across the curriculum’ pedagogy as a way in which the requirements of the New Zealand arts curriculum may be met along with UNESCO’s policy, strongly advocating for the role of arts in education.

Dance across the curriculum

While our research acknowledges the value of arts within classrooms for their intrinsic value and learning, we were aware that as arts advocates we were not winning the timetable wars and we needed to incorporate arts within the curriculum. Our argument rests upon research that consistently reveals the positive impact of prioritizing arts education (Hui, He & Ye, 2014; Bonbright, Bradley & Dooling, 2013; Smitherim & Uptis, 2005; Wilkinson, 2010; Winner & Hetland, 2000). As parents and teachers our argument also rests on observations of children increasingly bored and frustrated by classrooms, held back by tests, standards and silo curriculums.

In order to clarify what is meant by 'arts across the curriculum' our working definition states, 'integration of 'arts across the curriculum' is a pedagogical approach to teaching where one or more art forms are employed as a process to engage student learning in another subject area to the benefit of both subject areas'. The idea of using arts to support learning across the curriculum is not new. Wilkinson (2010) documented a community system programme in the U.S.A. integrating arts across the curriculum that is currently resulting in students "better grasping the basics of earth, life and physical sciences" (UC Irvine New, 2014, p.1). Lalevic (2013), a visual arts educator documents,

Large scale programs, such as Arts for Academic Achievement, Chicago Arts Partnership (CAPE), North Carolina Schools + Program, Transforming Education through the arts challenge (TETAC) and Project Zero have shown positive effects on education (p.2).

To date, we have researched widely in many countries and also conducted research within an 'arts' classroom in a New Zealand intermediate school (children aged 12 and 13). This study was most revealing and indicated that while teachers may be interested in including the arts in their teaching as a pedagogic approach, little appears to be known about the 'how' to teach or 'what' to teach by the generalist teacher.

Observations in an arts classroom

While the Principal of the school where the research was conducted had been very interested and encouraging of our research, the teacher did not seem as enthusiastic. Interviews and observations revealed over time, that her understandings of 'the arts' was based firmly on performance or product. There seemed little connection with arts as a process. Conventional subjects were taught in a conventional manner as quickly as possible so that students could get on to their rehearsals for J-Rock, a dance competition, or create a music video. The teacher stated,

The way the school works and what we have to report on as a whole school is literacy and numeracy. So if there is no proof of us doing that then we will be held accountable. The time frame is very short and they have to be completed by a certain time.

The teacher's comments revealed her concerns within a system where a government policy favours literacy and numeracy and leaves little time for other subjects. However, it became apparent over the weeks of observations and discussions that the teacher was not clear

about was was meant by using the arts to 'teach across the curriculum'. This classroom was set up for students who wanted to learn through the arts, and seemed to be a perfect classroom for a pilot programme, but unfortunately this was not what was happening.

Conclusion

It appears that there is much work to be done to change thinking around the arts, so that an understanding of creative learning in and through the arts is not understood only by arts advocates, who keep talking to teach other. While there is value in performance, technical excellence and products, our research is focused on the creative, expressive aspects of art forms and in using them to encourage enjoyment in learning, promoting in turn higher student outcomes in education.

As stated in the introductory paragraph, the arts are a compulsory component of the New Zealand curriculum in primary schools. As students grow older they may choose to study specific arts disciplines in more depth.

As we look forward we are considering what young people need to thrive and survive in the 21st century. We believe students require cultural and aesthetic literacy as a core component of their formal education. Competencies that the arts may purposefully foster include: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, communication and problem solving. Young people need to be curious, flexible and socially aware. The World Economic Forum paper titled Vision for Education (2016) shares our views.

Arts education within New Zealand schools has amazing potential to help young people as they make future societies. We, teachers in New Zealand today, need to re-think how we value and how we teach the arts, as we prepare young people for their future.

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