

Creative Arts 7–12

ADVOCACY FOR THE ARTS

In the Term 1, 2000 edition of **CURRICULUM SUPPORT** (Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 1), I summarised key elements of the research report, *Champions of Change*. In this article I will refer more specifically to two research projects, as they provide valuable material in advocating for the arts in the curriculum.

I also want to draw attention to national and state issues and priorities, and the part that we can play in ensuring that arts are given prominence as agents of change as well as having intrinsic value.

Public education is facing a major challenge to its viability as a provider of a universal and free system of education – one that provides access to quality education for all. As educators who adhere to this ideal, we need to take every opportunity to promote the achievements of our schools. The arts are a powerful force to employ in advocating the successes of our students and our education system. But it is effective only if the public, as the clients of the educational service, place a high value on the arts relative to other forms of learning. The research referred to in this article assists in giving academic credibility to learning in the arts and in emphasising the relationship between cognitive, affective and social development.

Through performances and exhibitions, the arts are able to demonstrate student achievements in many areas of specific knowledge and skills, and in a range of competencies applicable to broad spheres of learning and work.

We can demonstrate the achievements of the public education system at the same time as we demonstrate the purpose of classroom programs.

Public demonstrations allow us to promote the value of learning in the arts through explicit teaching, high expectations of students and immersion over time in a rigorous program. This is as valid for Kindergarten students as it is for tertiary students.

Continuity

The Department as a system is becoming increasingly interested in pursuing the issues associated with adolescents and pre-adolescents in the school Years 5-8: “continuity is the crunch issue for the system”. This also coincides with renewed activity on the national and international front in this area. The recent Curriculum Corporation Conference addressed the implications for systems of the middle years at all levels, from policy to implementation.

One recurring element of the research is the need to establish “connectedness” with students. This might be achieved in a number of ways, but essentially it involves each student being able to relate with an adult (teacher) to provide assurance, direction, support, a sense of self-worth and guidance in forming a values position on a range of issues. In the primary sector, we might need to offer a greater diversity of adults for students in Years 5-6 to work with, and in the high school we should be reducing the number of contact teachers for students in Years 7 and 8.

But simply offering a range of adult mentors is not enough in itself. We need to ensure that students have access to the pedagogical practices, subject content (skills and knowledge) and learning styles which enable both personal connections and scholastic success.

In the arts, we are poised to take advantage of the middle years priority. We facilitate the development of positive relationships between students through cooperative work, we promote ethical practices, encourage alternative ways of working and divergent thinking and acknowledge various ways of knowing (intelligences), including tacit knowledge.

Opportunity

The arts provide opportunities for students to access the benefits of education and to have choices in post-school life. This presupposes that the arts offer something unique and intrinsic to the school curriculum. If we believe that the arts deserve to be in the curriculum and are therefore equal in status to other learning areas, then we must be prepared to use argument and persuasion. We need to provide evidence of the value of an arts education for students.

The arts are authentic. The practices of the classroom model those of artists, directors, composers, technicians, writers, researchers, audience.

We need to remind parents of this. The notion of vocational relevance is one way of convincing people of the value of a course or program. By bringing these practitioners into the school or classroom we allow students to experience the person, to work with an artist or to talk with a writer.

Research

As arts educators, research reports are our best weapon to advance an argument or to make a point.

Major Australian arts reports include:

Education and the Arts, 1977 (National and State Reports)

Action: Education and the Arts, 1985

National Arts in Australian Schools Project, 1991

Creative Nation, 1994

Arts Education. Senate report, 1995

Two recent reports, which have important information for advocating the arts are:

Securing the future, Australia, July 1999

www.dcita.gov.au

Champions of change. The impact of the arts on learning. US, 1999

www.pcah.gov

SECURING THE FUTURE

Securing the future is a major performing arts discussion paper. It makes reference to the importance of partnerships between the performing arts and education in securing informed audiences and education for future artists.

The report refers to an American study and details a paper, *Involvement in the arts and success in secondary school*.

The focus of this project was on arts involvement and potential ties to academic success in the middle (Year 8) and high school (Year 10) years.

The paper describes academic performance levels and attitudes for two groups of students:

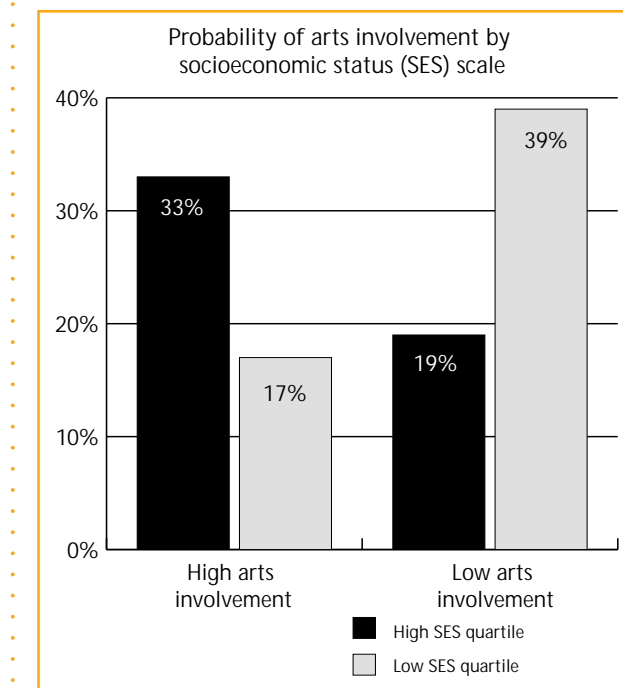
1. those with high levels of involvement in arts experiences
2. those with low levels of involvement in arts experiences.

(High arts involvement entailed sustained, continuous activity in music, chorus, drama and visual arts over the two years of data collection.)

Interim conclusions were that the differences favour the arts-rich group. They score higher on academic tests, achieve more in school, and exhibit more community-minded values than the low-arts group. However, because middle-class parents provide more arts experiences for children, these students tend to have higher school success rates than groups of lower socioeconomic status. The social inequities could be influencing the results. Educated and more affluent households provide advantages for students' success because:

- they can afford private lessons
- increased parent resources are available to transport children to arts activities
- arts programs are more prevalent in affluent districts
- parents are more encouraging and have a higher expectation of achievement.

This chart shows a clear relationship between SES and arts involvement.



This chart shows that students of high socioeconomic status (SES) are twice as likely to have high arts involvement than are students of low SES. Conversely, students of low SES are twice as likely to have low arts involvement than are those of high SES.

The survey then sought to determine the effect of involvement in the arts on low SES students. The lowest quartile of the family income and parent education spectrum was analysed for the relationship between involvement in the arts and academic achievement.

The findings were:

The differences in achievement between high and low arts groups within the low SES group remain significant.

Consistent involvement in the arts shows up in pronounced academic advantages for arts-rich (economically poor) students by the 10th grade (p. 310).

Conclusions

There are advantages for students who are highly engaged in the arts compared to arts-poor students. Improved performance is evidenced in academic grades, standardised test scores, measured reading levels and attitudes concerning community. The pattern holds generally for the 25,000 students in the sample, and especially for students in the lowest quartile of family education and income.

As arts educators, we know that the arts broaden access to meaning, offering ways of thinking and representation across the spectrum of “intelligences” scattered unevenly across the population.

The arts show links to student motivation and engagement in school, attitudes that contribute to academic achievement. (This is borne out in the middle years* findings and is a powerful lever for us to use when positioning ourselves in the middle years program.)

The arts promote community – a shared purpose and team spirit.

The report shows that the arts matter:

- as worthwhile experiences in their own right
- as instruments of cognitive growth and development
- as agents of motivation for school success,

and that access to the arts is inequitably distributed in our society. (The poorer groups participate less in the arts than higher SES groups.)

In terms of advocacy, this is a powerful argument for ensuring equity for all students, but especially for ensuring that students of lower SES are given opportunities through schooling to participate in the arts, for the educational benefits provided by this.

*Years 5 to 8

CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

The other important research report released late last year was *Champions of change. The impact of the arts on learning* (US).

The purpose of the research was to examine the impact of arts experiences on young people – to examine why and how they were changed through their arts experiences.

The report is a compilation of seven projects, I will refer briefly to one of these: *Learning in and through the arts: curriculum implications* (Columbia University).

The research covered 2000 students in grades 4, 5, 7 and 8. Again, two categories of student groupings were studied: a high-arts group and a low-arts group.

The questions asked by the survey were:

- What is arts learning?
- Does it extend to learning in other areas?
- What conditions in schools support this learning?

The report noted that a number of recent studies have investigated the relationship of arts learning to other school disciplines. The results of these studies have been in dispute because of a polarisation. On the one hand they show that learning in the arts is context-bound, specific, and important in and of itself; on the other hand, it is more general and plays a critical role in serving other disciplines.

The Columbia project showed that learning in the arts is multi-dimensional. It is a set of cognitive competencies (elaborative and creative thinking, fluency, originality, focused perception, imagination) which group to form constellations in particular contexts.

In these contexts, students adopt multiple perspectives, layer relationships, construct and express meaning in unified forms of representation.

The competencies work by creating a flexible interweave between intuitive, practical, and logical modes of thought (characteristics of arts learning, applicable to all disciplines).

The competencies are accompanied by personal dispositions: risk-taking, task persistence, ownership of learning, and perceptions of academic accomplishment in school.

Conclusions

1. The competencies and dispositions are prevalent in schools where:
 - the arts are studied continuously over time
 - there is learning in several arts.

Therefore they are typical of arts learning itself.

2. In arts-rich schools the features are evident in other subject disciplines.

Therefore the relationship between arts learning and learning in other disciplines is not uni-directional (arts to others) but is dynamic, interactive and complex.

There is a dialectical relationship between different subject disciplines. Student learning advances in depth when travelling back and forth across subject boundaries.

The implications for schools and the system are:

- to create a school arts curriculum which is flexible and open (not formalised and central) and which offers in-depth, carefully sequenced programs in several artforms K-12
- to support teachers in gaining subject-specific knowledge and a broad knowledge of students' socio-cultural backgrounds
- to encourage teachers to collaborate – with each other, with teachers in other KLAs, with artists and with other providers.
- to extend classrooms to include arts and cultural institutions (museums, galleries, theatres, concert halls, etc.)
- to initiate timetabling which allows adequate time for students to be immersed in work.

The arts are neither core nor ancillary to other subjects in the curriculum – they are partners in the development of critical ways of thinking and learning.

In schools with rich arts provision, the constellation of competencies is nurtured in arts learning. Schools with limited or poor arts provision deprive students of opportunities to form linkages in patterns and habits of thinking between different disciplines.

Research shows a positive correlation between high-arts schools and student development of cognitive and personal skills needed for academic success. The converse is true of low-arts schools.

Both reports are saying very similar things. We can use this research to advocate for equality of outcomes for students. The evidence is a powerful lever to motivate schools, parents and the system to ensure the provision of quality arts education in our schools.

Reg Newitt
 CEO, Creative Arts