

The arts matter

Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning

In the latter part of 1999, the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities released a major report on arts education that has had a significant impact on the way the arts are regarded in America and elsewhere, including here in Australia.

Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning contains research that demonstrates, in rigorous terms, how and why the arts contribute to effective learning across the curriculum for young people of school and post-school age.

Seven teams of researchers were invited to examine a variety of arts education programs using diverse methodologies. The programs included elementary (primary) and secondary school settings, as well as out-of-school and post-school environments.

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 findings

Teachers will not be surprised by many of the findings of the research teams – they are known to most of us either through previous research, or they belong to the “common lore” of arts education.

For example, the results indicate: that there is a correlation between mathematical and musical intelligence; that arts education programs provide avenues for enhanced self-esteem; that classroom practice emulates professional arts practice and has a direct correlation with the world of work.

The more revealing findings are:

Learning in and through the arts can help less advantaged students to achieve academically in formal schooling.

The project *Involvement in the Arts and Human Development* (IAHD) reveals that “high arts participation” makes a more significant difference to learning generally for students from low-income backgrounds than it does for students from high-income backgrounds. The IAHD research examined the effects of involvement in the arts generally – across all disciplines.

Learning in one domain supports and stimulates learning in others, which in turn supports learning in a complex web of influence described as a “constellation”.

The research study, *Learning In and Through the Arts* (LITA), suggests that the arts disciplines are separate domains, which interact upon each other, but that these also interact with other domains of learning, such as science, mathematics and history.

Effects of learning in the arts

The report identifies a number of reasons why the arts change the learning experience of students.

The research projects were conducted independently, but there is a consensus among their findings. Engagement in the arts nurtures the development of cognitive, social and personal competencies by developing multiple skills and abilities.

The ArtsConnection study and the LITA research build on recent research on the effect of different styles of learning on student achievement. The studies provide examples of students' success in the arts which, in turn, leads to success in other areas of learning.

The LITA and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) projects reveal that, when the arts become central to the learning environment, a school's culture is changed and conditions for learning are improved.

The IAHD study, in particular, demonstrates that intensive involvement in specific arts disciplines can offer poorly motivated students renewed interest in learning while accepting the unlimited challenges offered by the artform. In the ArtsConnection project, students work with mentors and professional artists to extend their expertise in specific disciplines.

The research reveals a close relationship between learning experiences in the arts and workplace competencies. Students immersed in arts practices are motivated to learn for the intrinsic value of the learning experience itself – they become their own toughest critics. Learning in the arts, whether it is based in the classroom or out of school, mirrors current and future workplace behaviours.

The NSW Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus parallels key aspects of the US report. The emphasis upon sustained engagement, rigour in learning experiences, and the acquisition of multiple skills (including generating ideas, planning, realising ideas and reflecting on results) are key elements of our syllabuses

Implications for schools and the system

If arts experiences help to level the playing field for less advantaged students, then high expectations of outcomes to be achieved by all students are critical to ensuring that this happens.

Highly trained teachers, able to foster passion for the subject in students and to model practice, are critical for achieving the learning outcomes of the syllabus.

If, as demonstrated in the research, well-constructed partnerships between schools and arts organisations can improve outcomes for students, then such partnerships must be nurtured and replicated.

The achievement of artistic and learning excellence requires opportunities for the sustained engagement by students in their work during individual sessions and over time. The provision of the learning experiences need not be confined to the classroom or school, but may extend to many settings at different times.

Superior results are associated with the concept of “practice” and the development of a sense of “craft”. When teachers model professional practice and students emulate the processes and work habits of artists, they acquire skills and techniques and develop an understanding of conventions, codings and signifiers.

Sustained engagement with the arts allows students to develop self-regulation and resilience, or “flow”, qualities regularly associated with personal success. The arts need to be embedded in the regular timetable of the school, with opportunities for extension time to enable students already immersed in work programs to further pursue their involvement.

If sustained, integrated and complex projects, like producing an art exhibition, a musical performance or a theatre production, significantly deepen the learning process, then school schedules must be modified to make such experiences possible.

Conclusion

The compelling evidence of this research indicates that student outcomes are improved in an environment where high quality arts education is offered and where the school climate supports active and productive learning.

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A brief summary of one research project

Learning in and through the arts: curriculum implications (Columbia University)

The research covered 2000 students in grades 4, 5, 7, 8. Two categories of student groupings were studied: (1) high arts group and (2) 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 have been in dispute.

On the one hand, they show that learning in the arts is context-bound, specific, 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 and 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, persistence in task, ownership of learning, 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 and interactive, 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:

- It is necessary 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.
 - It is necessary to support teachers in gaining subject-specific knowledge and a broad knowledge of students' socio-cultural backgrounds.
 - It is necessary to encourage teachers to collaborate with each other, with artists and with other providers.
 - It is necessary to extend classrooms to include arts and cultural institutions (museums, galleries, theatres, concert halls, etc.).
 - It is necessary to initiate timetabling which allows adequate time for students to be immersed in work.
3. 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 thinking patterns or habits between different disciplines.

The study showed a positive correlation between high arts schools and the development in students of the cognitive and personal skills needed for academic success.

The converse is true of low arts schools.

The evidence from this and the other six research reports provides a powerful motivator for us to analyse our curriculum offerings and our expectations of student achievement of syllabus outcomes and to enlist community, professional and system support in our quest to ensure a curriculum guarantee for all students.

If you want to look it up on the Internet, this report is published on www.pcah.gov/new.html.

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