

CHAPTER 1

A vision for the Arts in education

The best thing any teacher can do is to plant the spark of a subject in the minds of his students, so that it may grow, even if the growth takes unpredictable forms.

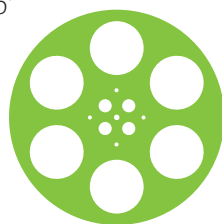
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IN THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter we will explore the unique nature of the Arts along with what the Arts ‘do’ for people. The differences between Arts education policy and actual provision will be presented with particular reference to the need for broad access to, and equity in, Arts education in primary and early childhood contexts. The importance of an approach to Arts education that encourages learner agency and cultural diversity is discussed, and the benefits of sustained ‘quality’ Arts education experiences are presented. Your role in the provision of the Arts in early childhood and primary education is discussed and a ‘praxial’ vision for the Arts in education is presented.

By the end of this chapter you should have a clear understanding of:

- what the Arts are and what they ‘do’ for us
- the need for access and equity in Arts education and the ‘gap’ between policy and provision
- the importance of learner agency and cultural diversity in Arts education
- the importance of sustained, quality Arts education experiences for children



- Arts education as ‘praxis’, a vision for the Arts in early childhood and primary education, including developing your own vision
- your role in Arts education.

Introduction

Remember when you were a child? Remember what it felt like to ‘squish’ paint around a piece of paper? What it felt like to dance and sing along to your favourite TV characters, whether they were bears, birds or dinosaurs? Remember what it felt like to make something new out of playdough, or to wonder what playdough might ‘taste’ like? Remember what it felt like to be totally ‘wrapped up’ in the moment of painting a picture or ‘being’ a pirate? Those sensational experiences did not feel like ‘learning’ to you at that moment, did they? As adults we so often forget what those experiences felt and feel like. As Picasso said, ‘All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.’ Those sensations were central to exploring your world, expressing yourself, sharing your expressions with others and just having great fun. These are some of things that the Arts ‘do’.

The Arts are everywhere. Everyone has artistic potential, and we all have a right to explore our individual cultures through the Arts (Bamford, 2006; UNESCO, 2006). For millennia the Arts have been a part of what it means to be human, to express and communicate our individual and shared perceptions, what it is like to live in a particular culture (ACARA, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2007b), and what it is like to express personal feelings and emotions (Robinson, 1999). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers Arts education to be a ‘universal human right’ for all children (2006), and highlights the importance of Arts education in cultivating creative potential and cognitive development.

As a central part of human existence, the Arts are a natural part of children’s worlds, and children enjoy and value them in their daily lives (Barrett & Smigiel, 2003). Arts education enables children to learn valuable Arts skills and understandings (Hunter, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2004) in addition to cultivating many important dispositions that are of value in life and in other areas of learning (Bryce et al., 2004; Deasy, 2002; Ewing, 2010a). The Arts have a unique capacity to help children reach their creative potential and engage in lifelong learning. These points about the fundamental role of the Arts in education will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter 2, but it is also important to be aware of them as you read this chapter.



The Arts are central to the education of children because they occur through the senses, rather than linguistically or mathematically; or, as O'Toole (2012a, p. 7) writes, 'We make sense through our senses, and thus we give meaning to our reality.' The Arts sustain confident and creative individuals, nurturing and challenging active and informed citizens. The central premise of this book is that children must first think and act through their senses as artists in order for them to value and engage meaningfully with the Arts in their lives. Our vision, based on this premise, is that early childhood and primary contexts provide children with an education in the Arts that gives them a sense of agency (discussed later in this chapter); that includes the five art forms of dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts; that is culturally situated (discussed later in this chapter); and that is sustained over time.

ACTIVITY 1.1

We have all had different experiences with the Arts in our lives. Some of us have had full and rich encounters with them, and some have had little experience of them. However, we have all had some contact with the Arts.

Reflect on what role the 'Arts' play in your life today. Share your reflections with a colleague.

As digital technologies rapidly develop, the concept of ‘audience’ has changed and Arts content has become increasingly portable and flexible, giving access to all (Cayari, 2011). At the same time, artists are employing new technologies that invite audiences to become actively involved, forcing them to move beyond passive listening or looking. Children need skills and understandings as artists and as audiences to prepare them to navigate Arts practices, content and forms in the 21st century.

EXAMPLE 1.1

She lies in bed in her room filled with pink Swedish-designed furniture, child-sized and covered in images of music, flowers and fluffy animals. The alarm sings ‘Best of Both Worlds’ and she opens her eyes and smiles as she recognises her favourite song and singer. Her mum is downstairs dancing to Zumba; dad is already on his laptop sending mail. The wardrobe is full of logo-stamped kid’s gear, but she selects her eco-friendly school uniform.



She switches on the TV, flicking through the channels of children’s shows, sitcoms, cartoons and movies as through her earphones she now listens to music on the iPod. Her favourite song comes on again and she jumps up to dance along with the images on the screen. Soon she joins her parents, who are perched on handcrafted

bar stools in the kitchen, chatting via Skype to Grandma in Scotland. The digital screen in the corner of the kitchen announcing the top news stories of the day, she selects from the different, bright, gift-promising boxes of cereal, and eats from her theme-designed dish. Her lunch is packed into her music-star lunchbox, cleverly matching her brightly decorated schoolbag and shoes. Popping her iPod in, she heads for the car ... all this before leaving the house. The Arts are everywhere.

What are the Arts and what do they 'do'?

The Arts are culturally determined

The Arts are a part of the educational curricula of almost every country in the world, yet they are defined differently according to the culture in which they are created; indeed, the Arts are culture and context specific, and their meaning varies from country to country (Bamford, 2006). The Arts are fundamentally means of expression and communication and by their nature they are also intensely personal. In some cultures literature is strongly associated with the Arts, yet in others it is not; in some cultures the Arts include the creation of utilitarian objects, such as baskets, whereas in others these activities may be defined as 'crafts'. Bamford (2006, p. 10) writes that 'A work of art is an object that embodies meaning ... what is seen as art in one culture is not defined as such in another.' The 'Arts' cannot be neatly tied up in a box with a bow and a label; they are culturally determined, personally constructed, and open to a multitude of interpretations and meanings.

The Arts and aesthetics

Viewing, talking about, writing about and investigating the Arts involves aesthetic appreciation. The traditional focus of **aesthetics** is the experience of beauty, but the contemporary view of beauty is not based on innate qualities but rather on ideas that are specific and unique to particular cultures and individual interpretations; for example, in New Mexico non-Indian collectors of silver value signs of age ('patina' or 'tarnish'), but Indians generally keep even heirloom pieces highly polished (Smith et al., 1993).

Aesthetics can be defined as 'critical reflection on art, culture and nature' (Kelly, 1998, p. ix). Judgments of aesthetic value rely on our ability to discriminate at a sensory level. The word comes from the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning 'of sense perception'.

The Arts in curriculum

The term 'Arts education' is similarly context specific (Bamford, 2006). In Australia the Arts Learning Areas consist of dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts (ACARA, 2011), and in New Zealand they include dance, drama, music (or sound arts) and visual arts (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Each art form is a different means of expression and communication, each with its distinct 'language' and processes. By 'language' we do not mean to imply that an art form can communicate very specific linguistic meanings, such as 'The sky is beautiful'; this is what different languages such as Maori or English do. Rather, we mean that each art form communicates meaning in different ways; for example, music communicates through sound and silence and visual arts communicate through spatial, symbolic and visual means.



The Arts as 'language'

Take the sentence, 'The sky is beautiful.' Communicating this through visual means might include a visual representation of a sky rich in deep layers of colour that exude a sense of beauty. Or, through the elements of music a

composer may attempt to communicate a sense of natural beauty and calm. It is important to note here that the Arts are not some form of inferior linguistic communication, but rather that they have different objectives. They enable expression and communication in different ways and in so doing can alert the audience to those aspects of an object, person, place or emotion that are impossible to convey through language alone.

The Arts communicate in non-linguistic, expressive ways (Wright, 2003a), culturally and through symbol (O'Toole, 2012a; Wright, 2003a) and metaphor (Wiggins, 2009). Wright (2003a, p. 17) highlights the non-linguistic nature of artistic expression and communication stating that the Arts:

involve expressive and symbolic modes of thinking, understanding and knowing, and communicate ideas in a unique manner ... they enable us to 'say' things to each other that cannot be expressed in any other way (see also Jeanneret & Swainston, 2012).

Most importantly, they communicate something 'other', something valuable that is 'beyond' words. This is what the Arts 'do' for us, and therein lies their real value to adults and children alike.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Listen to the YouTube recording of Polish composer and conductor Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960) and view Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica* (1936).

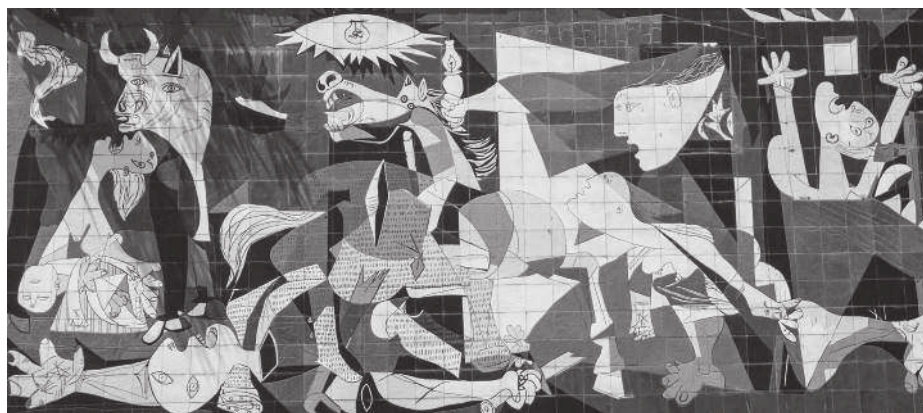


Figure 1.1 Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica*



**Threnody for the Victims of
Hiroshima (1960):**

[www.youtube.com/
watch?v=Dp3BIFZWJNA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp3BIFZWJNA)

**Pablo Picasso's painting
Guernica (1936):**

[www.pbs.org/
treasuresoftheworld/
guernica/gmain.html](http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html)

Both works explored in Activity 1.2 are about an individual's responses to war. One is auditory and one is visual; one is a piece of music and one is a painting. Both express and communicate feelings, ideas, thoughts and emotions about war; yet both are different. As human beings we also respond to each artwork differently. *This is what the Arts share.* They are all non-linguistic means of communication and expression, but they speak in their own ways and with their own 'languages'.

Think about the ways in which the music communicated a certain 'mood', and the ways in which the painting communicated certain symbols. Share your responses to both of these pieces with a colleague.

The BIG disconnect: policy and provision/ access and equity

As stated earlier, the Arts are a central part of human experience and access to them is regarded by UNESCO as a 'fundamental human right'. According to Bamford (2006, p. 59), the Arts are also 'a compulsory part of school education in 84% of countries'. However, access to Arts education and equity in the provision of Arts education is extremely problematic in reality. It is problematic because access to 'quality' Arts education (a term that will be discussed later in this chapter) is inconsistent. Access to quality Arts education varies from system to system, school to school, teacher to teacher and class to class. The curricula of both Australia and New Zealand include the Arts as discrete Learning Areas and provide important guidance about the ways in which Arts education should occur; but curriculum presence is only one aspect of access to quality Arts education.

The Arts and hierarchies of curricula

One reason for this inconsistency is a tendency in schools to consider the Arts peripherally rather than centrally, despite the evidence that the Arts actually contribute to learning in other areas, provide valuable skills in and of themselves, and have important benefits for children, such as improved self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation to learn (see Chapter 2). This has been particularly evident in recent years during a renewed focus on literacy

and numeracy. Robinson (1999) emphasises the importance of multiple ways of knowing when he states that:

our primary perceptions of the world are through the senses: through light, sound, shape, texture, smell and movement ... Conventional education tends to emphasise verbal and mathematical reasoning. These are vital to the intellectual development of all young people *but they are not the whole of intelligence.* (p. 38, emphasis added)



Another reason for the inconsistent provision of Arts education is what may be referred to as a ‘hierarchy’ of Arts education domains, in which some Arts domains are valued above others (Bamford, 2006; O’Toole, 2012a; Robinson, 2005). This hierarchy tends to place music and the visual arts somewhere at the top, drama and dance at the bottom, and media arts sometimes not at all. The reasons for this ‘hierarchy’ are multifaceted, they vary according to cultural context, and reflect systemic, societal and individual biases. Some argue that the grouping of five Arts domains as one Learning Area called ‘the Arts’ has unintentionally contributed to a devaluing of individual Arts domains (Davis, 2008; Pascoe et al., 2005). One reason for this may be that

grouping the Arts as a single domain inadvertently enables primary and early childhood providers to choose to include only one of the five art forms in their curriculum at the expense of others, and by so doing provide an ‘Arts’ education despite the fact that this education is by any measure incomplete (Davis, 2008; Pascoe et al., 2005).

The Arts domains are all different

To understand why this is problematic for early childhood and primary education, you must understand that ‘the Arts’ are each individual domains of human activity, each with its own ‘language’, but also sharing attributes, as you will have discovered in Activity 1.2. As we have stated, the Arts are all non-linguistic vehicles for human expression and communication. However, what is significant here is that they all do this in unique ways. Music, for example, does this through sound and silence, and the visual arts predominantly do this through mark-making, space and symbol. So to claim that experience in one Arts area equates to learning in all Arts areas is definitely problematic. ‘Quality’ Arts education is Arts education that occurs in and across all five of the art forms.

The problem of time

The lack of sufficient time for pre-service educators to adequately explore all five art forms is also an important reason for the inconsistent provision of Arts education. Recent Australian reviews, *First We See: The National Review of Visual Education* (Davis, 2008) and the *National Review of School Music Education: Augmenting the Diminished* (Pascoe et al., 2005), highlight the lack of adequate time for the Arts in Education degrees and the resultant lack of confidence and skills for teachers (see also Bamford, 2006). These reports also indicate a lack of systemic level professional learning in the Arts for practising educators, suggesting that there are too few opportunities for teachers to improve their use of the Arts in the curriculum.

The Arts and equity

Equity of access to Arts education is a serious issue, not only because organisations such as UNESCO maintain that access to Arts education is a fundamental right, but also because, unless all children have equal access to