

THE NECESSITY FOR ART IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I review the literature that argues that there is a correlation between arts awareness and ability at school level and academic performance. Based on this research, I argue in accordance with five principles or pillars that art, rightly conceived, will develop persons through play, visual literacy and thinking through materials, and that this will overcome the materialistic, superficial, greedy culture that prevails. Learning should be fun and not just utilitarian and art a portal to the inner life, not just a certain kind of performance. I suggest that art taught in such a manner right from the beginning of the educational process will promote a better society and more well-adjusted individuals.

Keywords: art; academic performance; play; self-confidence; materiality; empathy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The idea that the arts have a strong link with academic prowess is not new. Indeed, several studies in recent years (Egani deSol 2023, Joseph 2019, Gulatt 2007, Punzalan 2018) building on earlier theories of different kinds of learning (Gardener 1989), ranging from the play factor (Huizinga 1949), Dewey's pragmatism (1887), tacit knowledge (Polanski 1966) and even the old Kantian ideas concerning the aesthetic sense (1790 {1952}), suggest that the arts has a deep and lasting effect on overall academic excellence and life-enhancing modalities. However, there is scant literature and research on the impact and the necessity for arts education from elementary to higher education where this unfortunately has been overlooked. The present study aims to address such an oversight, and after reviewing the literature and theory assessing and supporting such a thesis of a causal connection between the arts, in particular the visual arts, and improved academic performance - notwithstanding its critique (Schneider & Rohmann 2021) - I propose five necessary pillars of true education that ought to include the arts. This essay then suggests a more rounded, value-based, and qualitatively better educational experience and process of learning particularly where such awareness is lacking.

Thus, two hypothesis underly this study: Is there a correlation between enjoyment and interest in the arts and general academic performance and secondly, do most teenagers between 12-16 years old choose to drop art at this stage. I suggest this is due to a lack of teachers training and interest in the arts and the subsequent lack of an arts education on the part of learners. This is not superficial or trivial as it will be argued that such a lack has a terrible effect not only academically, but in forging a better society and global community.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Egana de Sol (2023) has conducted a thorough research program investigating the link between arts education and academic performance. It was found that while substantial practice is necessary, when this is evident, indeed such participation in art classes has a significant impact on academic achievements in language, maths and in art and cultural pursuits. In addition, such participation improves students' willingness to consider post-secondary education, enhances creativity and creative behaviours.

To measure such an improvement, the study included a sample of 297 students where workshops were held in four high schools in Chile within the age group of 14-16 years old. The curriculum was developed by carefully selected and paid artists who taught the various mediums (such as painting, music, and dance). The workshops were held weekly for an hour and a half each session. A control group to "conduct doubly robust reweighted regression analyses that are at the frontier of the impact evaluation literature" (2023:1) ensured that the quantitative analysis would be valid. The participants, both male and female, were selected randomly.

Measurements of creativity were based on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking in the graphical and written form which is widely recognised and emphasises divergent thinking. Creativity and creative behaviours were defined as a sub-set of play (c.f. Huizinga 1949, a seminal theorist in this regard) and in the generation of new and innovative ideas. It also includes self-awareness or self-concept, the ability to get along with other participants that is socioemotional attributes and these skills were measured using surveys and monitoring academic improvements over a period of two years. The study also included considering other variables, such as parents' income, cultural capital, and extra-mural activities.

The methodology used was propensity scoring matches, and this rendered the analysis as least bias as possible, while trained artists (rather than simply art teachers) in accordance with the Acciona Program, a Chillian initiative created in 2007 by the Chillian National Council for Culture and the Arts in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Balaceda youth art foundation, developed their own curriculum. The paper aims to overcome the lack of bottom-up evidence-based studies on creativity, creative behaviour and academic achievement, indispensable in modern education, as well as the biases in data and sampling methods in trying to establish if there is a correlation between training in the arts and academic performance. It achieves this through a robust methodology, random sampling, and clear numerical evidence that indeed – at least in this context – such a link exists.

Another study by Hardman, Rinne and Yamolinskay (2014) measured the effects of arts integration (AI) on long-term retention of academic content. It was found that retention is enhanced and improved considerably, especially among basic or less proficient students in the skills of reading and writing.

The article begins with a lengthy list of previous studies that have dealt with the effectiveness of art to improve academic performance as well as an exhaustive list of the theory that supports why this may be the case. But emphasises that there has been scant research on randomised controlled trials that have tested arts effectiveness in such domains, and that mitigates the effects of teachers' bias.

Their methods include a small preliminary study of a classroom-based experiment on 97 5th graders in lessons on astronomy and ecology, one with Arts Integration (AI) methods and another control group using conventional teaching methods and strategies. The participants were all African American, about 50-50 male and female, 14 percent of which were identified to have disabilities and from low-income families. The faculty were identified as highly qualified teachers, and all the students agreed to participate in the study. To mitigate teachers' bias they were not informed that the study was to test retention of content, only that they wanted to assess AI effectiveness versus conventional teaching.

To measure the said effects, a pre-test (given the day before), post-test (given the day after the course) and subsequent post-test 8 weeks after the course were administered. The questions were largely multiple choice or brief answers, with a change of wording after each course to challenge the participants. Teachers were given 10 hours of instruction on the material and activities. They were to teach one hour a day of science instruction. Each teacher taught a randomised group – one in the AI and one control group. Observers were present 60 percent of the time to make sure the curriculum was taught, and the activities standardised. The total duration of each course was 3 weeks.

The results indicate that active learning through the arts does enhance memory retention over time, and that while the limitations are that the sample size was small and that some teachers may naturally incline to the use of art in education, the data suggests that art, music and the performing arts ought to be integrated into learning modalities not simply for “art’s sake” but in terms of successful performance across various learning subjects (Smith 2015) .

There is unanimous agreement that creativity is a “commodity” that is instrumental in education at all levels (Egana de Sol 2023, Hardman, Rinne & Yamalinskaya 2014, Furizalta 2018, Joseph 2019, Kaur 2021, McLellan et al 2012, 2015, Sowden et al. 2015, Egana-delSol, 2023; Hardiman et al., 2014; Kaur & Kaur, 2021) and for development in the 21st century in terms of innovation, and adaptability, but it is unclear precisely how education in the arts specifically fosters this. Moreover, creativity itself is not a monolithic entity, and is constituted by various components such as open-mindedness; originality; diversity; intuition, and risk-taking and this renders it a decidedly difficult variable to measure and to cultivate.

There are four areas of difficulty that arise in trying to unravel a topic such as this: While there is some evidence that art improves academic performance and other positive attributes indispensable to coping with the vicissitudes of life, that is creative malleability (Catteral 2002, Deasy 2002, Fiske 1999, Spewlte 2006, Wandall, Fancourt & Finn 2019, S Dougherty, ben Shachar & Tsang 2009, Herland, Winner, Veemena & Sherdan 2007, Puzalon 2018, Eisner 2017, Kaur, 2021, Joseph 2017, Liculi & Juriseric 2022, Perez 2023, Fontalva & Solventos 2022, Puzalon 2018, El Bidi & Elbildi 2023, Liculi & Jurisenie 2022). it is also a fact that when budget considerations come into play within the educational system, art is usually the first to be so affected (Mishook & Kornhaber 2006, Gallat 2007, Purizzalan 2018, Mishook & Kornhaber 2006, Tambocci 2006). Secondly, art subjects are often themselves considered decidedly unacademic and in an increasing technicist and scientific culture, are given little regard and “soft skills” are inherently difficult to measure and train (Aluma 2018, Tambucci 2006).

Furthermore, there is some indication that in fact there is no absolute or definitive causal connection between training in the arts and better academic performance (Rohmen & Schneider 2021, Winne & Hetland 2001). Moreover, teaching in both school and higher education is reductive and specialised with little or no integration of the arts as embedded or connected to other subjects, let alone training on the part of teachers in the arts in general (Gibson & Larson 2007). Finally, there is an argument that the arts need not be justified as instrumentally favourable for improvement in other academic areas, that its value lies precisely in its own domain, as an end in itself, and as having the capacity to teach and enrich what other subjects are unable to (Gibson & Larson 2007, Eisner 2017, Sowden et al. 2013).

While it may appear that Rohman and Schneider (2021) effectively argued against the correlation between arts education and academic achievement, having amassed and distilled the sum total of research in this area over the last two decades (updated to 2020), arguing that such studies were limited due to sample size, small number of studies, the large range of effect sizes and methodological oversights “and that the gold standard of experimental research comes at the expense of other study characteristics such as sample size, intervention and follow up length” (2021:1), they have not necessarily completely discredited the conceivability of a causal link. Indeed, they conclude that: “The results of the review should not be understood as a generalizable claim about the impact of the arts in general and rather be considered as an overview and critical analysis of the limitedness of the available (quasi) – experimental research in terms of its outcomes and methodological characteristics” (2021:10).

A similar study that considers available research on assessment of the correlation in question of articles between 1950-1999 (Winner & Hetland 2001) also casts doubt on the causal link proposed between arts education and academic performance (and creativity in general) and indicates scepticism in this regard. Certainly, most research concerns training in music where certain positive outcomes in other academic areas such as language and arithmetic have been shown to be the case, yet less research in the visual arts, dance and dramatic arts is available.

Nevertheless, one would do well to recall the pioneering work of Gardner (Gardner & Hatch 2010) who theorised the idea of multiple intelligence where linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities or symbolic thinking (emphasised over and above other abilities within the academic framework, is but one dimension of human intelligence, and that spatial, kinaesthetic, musical, inter and intrapersonal skills are also significant traits and markers of creativity, self-development, and abilities necessary for both academic and other effective modes of behaviour.

Moreover, Polanski (1966) is another early theorist who argued in favour of learning by doing as did Dewey (1938) and points in the first instance to “tacit knowledge” and in the latter, to learning through active involvement and participation and it is surely the arts that afford such opportunities. I would even look as far back as Kant (1790 {1952}) whose claim that aesthetic experience is a peculiar human capacity or propensity preceding and transcending knowledge as such, and yet indispensable for a sense of the sublime, and of beauty, an innervation that allows for the desire to know, learn, and discern. Accepting these pioneers as theoretical leverage for my proposal, one could argue that art and in particular, the visual arts ought to be integrated and taught at all levels of academic studies. And that this in turn will improve both the quantified results of such an education as well as its intrinsic quality both within an

institutional context and in terms of producing better and more equipped individuals including the ability to perform complex tasks and driven by empathy and values, indispensable for a better society, which ought to be the goal of education in the first place.

3.0 FIVE NECESSARY PILLARS OF TRUE EDUCATION

In a society which emphasizes competitiveness and praises power and status in the form of monetary superiority, control over others and material goods, the possibility for love, empathy, health and creativity free of self-serving ambition, greed and honour-seeking, cannot properly thrive except with rare exceptions. I contend that an understanding of the arts can fight against such trends, where art is understood as a creative and individual outlet, not in its institutionalised form which suffers the same fate as any other area of cultural capital and power-mongering. Thus, if taught with this goal in mind – to nurture the inner world, to nurture diversity, individuality and co-existence (which is not a contradiction), then not only would education itself be remedied, but a better society would result, and history would not continue repeating itself.

A) The importance of the inner self (world)

Too much of education is about memorising external facts, mastering the ability to perform by applying certain methods; upending one's peers with better grades; or simply demonstrating what one has been taught to think. While there is obviously some merit in this – abilities of logic to solve an algebraic equation following a prescribed routine and identifying patterns; the ability to use language in complex ways; the capacity to recall information and apply it and so on, it is not the whole story. There is a terrain, albeit a less practical sphere that concerns the inner life of a person, and it is this that is not nurtured in the educational system. The result is that one may end up with a society of individuals who fit the bill in terms of being lawyers, accountants, business persons, doctors; skilled workers and so on, but have no knowledge or access to an inner life, and subsequently may be considered unhealthy in many respects, and hence all the ills of society, and the lack of moral discretion.

How can art help remedy this? If teachers were aware of arts true nature – not as a bunch of techniques, or a history littered with names of masterpieces and great artists, but rather as an expression of the inner life of the artist – ideas, emotions, intuitions, instincts – then they would facilitate art classes where students were pier into their inner world, their individuality. In such classes, it is not just the ability to render and copy an image classically, or produce a still life or landscape or recite the main modern artists that is expected of the student, but rather as a tool and bridge to explore what that student truly feels and thinks in order to find his or her inner centre, something I believe is within the reach of us all, just as we learn to talk. This would produce more self-confident learners, students that question and dream (and I don't mean simply dream about buying a fancy car etc.).

B) The importance of thinking and feeling through materials

The power of art lies in its capacity to use materials in order to think and feel symbolically. In the plastic arts this may be paint or clay and the like; in dance and theatre, it is the body itself; in architecture it is the formal qualities of say steel or metal or concrete as well as light and space in a very tangible sense; and in film it is the space created through camera work, lighting

and movement; music is played via instruments. The point is that art uses concrete elements to recreate reality and in the prevailing culture, which is largely flat and digital, these material means are ever so urgent.

Using materials creates an emotional connection to the stuff of the world, it is the means through which things are felt and conceptualised rather than the abstract domain of numbers or letters where the means is but a transparent mechanism and in themselves carry no weight, no emotive content, no trace of the bearer that uses it in the actual existence.

This materials sensibility causes the user, so to speak to have a “feel” for materials and this invites empathy, connection to nature and the body. These are important human qualities that we are at the risk of losing in the superficial, digital domain, the screen that filters out tactile awareness, craft in shaping matter and symbolic thinking through matter. While good film perhaps overcomes this, still the physicality of the arts is necessary in order to reclaim the nature-culture dynamic, without which nature is so dominated to the point where culture causes the self to be alienated from the body, and it is this lack that ironically in the age of hyper communication degrades true and real and loving communication. To illustrate, perhaps this last few sentences ought to be incised and carved into a giant column for words are sounds and visual objects in their own right and there is no mind without some form or body; failing to recognise this risks recognising the relative truth of statements, promulgations and authorities – a dangerous recipe indeed. On the other hand, the materiality of art should not let humankind descend to its history of pagan and idol worship or the worship of the state and so on as the institutions of power manipulate art to control the masses.

C) Creative expression free of utilitarian ends

The key concept that needs to occur in the education system is to nurture a love and curiosity to learn, to question, to create without the need for outcomes with notions of success and competitiveness. Art should be done because its fun and natural, because one wants to form things and create and live inspired, not simply to one day make money or be famous. But most kids today are taught to look up to those with fame and fortune, measuring education in terms of the ability to acquire as such and without any sense of accruing knowledge for its own sake, or creating through sheer joy.

D) Allowing play

If the above is to be achieved, learning should take place in an arena of play especially in art classes which should be mandatory at all levels of education. Trial and error, experimentation, questioning the boundaries of knowledge should be encouraged and lauded for invention comes from play and play thrives in a society free of dogmatism, tyrannical control, materialism and conformity.

E) Visual literacy and the ability to talk about art

Art classes should be both about making art and exhibiting it as well as developing the skills to talk and write about art. This will develop both convergent and divergent thinking, left and right brained orientations; intelligent and critical understanding of the visual language; the ability not to be swayed by the image but notice its construction, its provenance and its value

and be open to develop, evolve and improve as the artistic enterprise is a process rather than an absolute like a mathematical solution or equation.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, given both the literature which suggests the correlation between art and academic performance and life-enhancing and coping skills, it should be clear of the necessity of art at all levels. Moreover, the five pillars or principles that I suggest art encompasses may be termed as the development of Intuition – where knowledge through doing, dexterity, openness to emotions and the intellect come into play which enhances all round cognitive ability as the child grows in self-confidence and individual sense of self-worth. This in turn will lead him or her to treat others better or to stand strong against the bullies of the world and prevail. Art also enhances the ability to visualise, to imagine and to see things from different perspectives which is key to academic performance and life-enhancing modalities and the means by which a better world may be projected into the future. It starts with education – an educational system that I suggest must include art with the kinds of understandings and notions envisaged herein.

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