

Title: Arts belong in the classroom: Teachers as change agents in arts-based learning

Abstract:

Learning in and through the arts is central to fostering young learners' creativity. This article explores the perceived constraints and barriers to quality arts-based learning for children, and the possibility of overcoming these. It describes an action research collaboration with two Queensland based early years educators, and explores how this collaboration facilitated changes to their pedagogical approaches that were arts-based. We argue that with sufficient support, educators can fulfil their potential as change agents to lead arts-based learning and thereby promote creativity within their classrooms.

# **ARTS BELONG IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS IN ARTS-BASED LEARNING**

It is widely acknowledged that modern students need to develop skills associated with critical and creative thinking if they are to thrive in the contemporary world (Henriksen, Mishra, & Fisser, 2016; Tan, 2015). Indeed, creativity is so important as a catalyst for breakthroughs in technology and science (Tan, 2015) that *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (which sets the directions for Australian schooling) recognised its importance as comparable to communication and collaboration skills (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). However, looking beyond technology and science, creativity has a historic and enduring relationship to the arts, with the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* emphasising that “The Arts have the capacity to engage, inspire and enrich all students, exciting the imagination and encouraging them to reach their creative and expressive potential” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014, para. 1). Despite this curriculum recognition, classroom practice may not reflect this vision of the arts as an outlet and catalyst for creativity (Russell-Bowie, 2011). The practices and processes of symbolic creativity, and the very idea of ‘the arts’ have discursive effects on people’s actions and positions (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). In other words, educators’ perceptions of the arts influence how they enact the arts within their classrooms and the possibilities they see for arts-based learning.

This article explores perceptions of the constraints and barriers to quality arts learnings for children in the Preparatory year (also known as Prep), the first year of formal schooling in Queensland. It also offers an example for how teachers might be empowered to implement

arts-based learning. The article begins by offering a definition of arts-based learning and an outline of the extant issues in the literature about creativity and arts-based education in Australia. We then describe the first author's action research collaboration with two educators in Queensland, followed by a discussion about how the collaboration led to the educators making positive arts-focused changes within their existing pedagogical approaches. This article argues that with sufficient support, educators can act as change agents to lead arts-based learning and promote creativity within their classrooms.

### **Contextualising arts-based learning**

The term 'arts-based learning' encompasses learning that occurs both in the arts and through the arts. We offer this necessarily broad definition because *The Arts* is conceptualised as a rich and dynamic learning area in the *Australian Curriculum*. It brings together five subjects – dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts – which are each “unique, with its own discrete knowledge, symbols, language, processes and skills” (ACARA, 2011, p. 5). At the same time, there is connectivity or “interplay” between various art forms (p. 26) as well as “connections to other learning areas within the curriculum” (p. 19). In particular, *The Arts* has a direct relationship with English, Geography, History, Mathematics and Science, and it can “provide a range of pedagogies for use across learning areas in the curriculum” (ACARA, 2013, p. 26). Thus, arts-based learning is synonymous with arts integration across the curriculum, but it does not exclude the learning of art for art's sake. Both ideas are promoted within the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts*, an integral learning area in the education of young learners.

While the necessity and value of arts education appears in the educational policies of many countries, there is a distinct gap between these and the opportunities that are provided for

implementation in classrooms (Bamford, 2006). There is evidence that this is an international trend (e.g., Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010; Lohmander & Samuelsson, 2015; Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, & Sachdev, 2010; Rasmussen, 2017), to which Australia is not immune. As Russell-Bowie (2011) pointed out, arts education policies in Australian states did not always reflect actual classroom practices despite research, recommendations and the very comprehensive curricular guidelines. These inconsistencies are exacerbated by the organisation of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* which divides this learning area into five separate but related subjects or strands (ACARA, 2014). While inclusion of the arts as a learning area is a significant step forward (Dinham, 2013), there is some concern that the grouping of the five strands into one learning area has unintentionally contributed to the downgrading of the individual disciplines of the arts, leading to inconsistencies in terms of equity for each discipline (Roy, Baker, & Hamilton, 2015).

Proponents of the arts such as Jeanneret (2006, 2011), Eisner (1998, 2002, 2004) and Robinson (2011) argue that arts learning from a very young age develops creative, innovative and imaginative thinkers. Creative arts-based learning experiences are particularly effective in the early years when children are exploring and making sense of the world (Ewing, 2011; Garvis, 2012; Wright, 2002). They can provide the fuel for life-long creativity and support cognitive development (Ganis & Paterson, 2011; Gelineau, 2012). The many benefits of the arts in education include the improvement of intercultural understanding (Magsamen & Battro, 2011), raising awareness of the natural environment and sustainability (Ward, 2013) and improved student attendance, engagement and academic achievement (Vaughan, Harris & Caldwell, 2011). Quality arts programs can also enhance children's literacy and numeracy capabilities and the key competencies of language, symbols and text (Barrett, Everett, & Smigiel, 2012; Hallam, 2010; Hunter, 2005; Roy et al., 2015). When children are introduced to literacy and the variety of ways to express and

communicate meaning, educators can support their understandings with the knowledge, skills and symbols of the different languages of the art forms (Ewing, 2011; Gelineau, 2012; Huber, Dinham, & Chalk, 2015).

However, in order to deliver arts-based learning, educators need to have a well-defined philosophy or vision of the arts as essential to children's well-being and growth. Classroom arts practices often relate to the individual teacher's values and the extent of arts education and exposure they have personally experienced (Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009). An inadequate knowledge base or weakly articulated theoretical foundation in the arts can result in a teacher's lack of confidence and a subsequent limited focus on arts-based learning (Garvis, 2012; Klopper & Power, 2010; Ryan & Goffin, 2008). Teacher education programs in Australia, both pre-service and professional in-service may not sufficiently support the development of pedagogical arts education, knowledge, skills and attitudes due to a lack of allocated quality time for learning and resources (Barton, Baguley, & MacDonald, 2013; Russell-Bowie, 2011). There is also concern that the conceptualisation of arts-based learning for the early years needs more clarity "derived from research and embedded in practice" (Nutbrown, 2013, p. 259).

Practical considerations for the delivery of quality arts-based learning also need to be considered. As a result of the 'crowded curriculum', a term that refers to the much larger volume of teaching devoted to prioritised learning areas such as literacy, numeracy and science, teachers often cite lack of sufficient time as a barrier to effective arts exploration (Ewing, 2012; Garvis & Pendergast, 2012; Klopper & Power, 2010; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008). For example, a survey of early childhood novice teachers in Queensland schools undertaken by Garvis (2013) confirmed the negative profile and lack of time devoted to arts education. Another survey by Garvis (2012) found that while children in kindergartens were exposed to an arts-rich environment on a daily basis, children in preparatory classrooms only

accessed a weekly music lesson and some visual arts activities. This reinforced the perception that formal schooling with its emphasis on performance, mandated curriculum content and required assessment outcomes is eroding quality arts education and other pedagogical approaches such as play-based learning (Chapman, 2015; Fleer, 2011; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Thomas, Warren, & deVries, 2011). Some studies have reported the positive effects of supporting pre-service and in-service teachers with integrating arts into their pedagogical approach, such as Ward (2014) who presented a successful collaboration between a researcher and preschool educators to generate arts-based experiences for researching the natural environment. Further research in this area would prove valuable.

The literature consistently establishes that arts is essential to fostering creativity in learners, and a quality arts program can develop skills and understandings in other learning areas of the curriculum. The arts is entrenched as a learning area in the Australian Curriculum, but as Klopper and Power (2010) noted, there is limited research into how the curriculum transfers to arts education practices in classrooms. Moreover, the literature has acknowledged that teacher dispositions, content knowledge and implementation of the arts strands could be improved with additional professional development and support, but examples for what this might look like in the contemporary Australian classroom are limited. This article seeks to respond to the dearth of research in this area.

### **The process of change**

In late 2015, a 12-week cycle of action research was initiated by the first author. Action research, according to Mac Naughton and Hughes (2008), is a practice-oriented method of research that aims to transform and improve participant practices through four key phases: choosing to change, planning for change, creating change, and sharing the lessons of change.

Action research can improve practice and introduce change through the creation of new knowledge and understandings, and it can change educators' thought processes as they question and investigate what they know and do (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2008; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). A course of action research is to resolve a problem, and thereby develop and improve practices involves collaboration (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2008), so the first author (hereafter, 'the researcher') approached two Prep teachers who wanted to develop and share the arts-based practices in their respective classrooms. Both teachers were experienced early childhood teachers with one (Susan) based in a Brisbane metropolitan state school and the other (Brooke) based in a state school in a regional centre of Queensland. Both of the schools where the teachers worked employed full-time music specialists. At Susan's school, a dance teacher was employed to implement a dance program from Years 1 to 6 with the Prep Year not included. Brooke's school employed no other specialists.

The action research proceeded in several phases. The initial step in the 'choosing to change' phase (2 weeks long) was framed by a questionnaire which prompted the educators to think about their daily practices in the arts strands, how the arts supported other key learning areas, and the possibilities of making changes to their programs that would support the aims of the Australian Curriculum through the development of creativity, arts knowledge, skills and practices. Questionnaire responses were then discussed in follow-up phone conversations where the educators expanded on their responses.

In the 'planning for change' phase (1 week), the researcher provided the teachers with accessible professional literature to help them develop their knowledge about integrating creative arts activities into key learning areas. The literature was easy-to-read, contemporary and locally relevant, and it presented practical applications of the arts strands with

suggestions about the implementation of creative arts activities for drama (Carthew, 2010), music and literacy integration (Niland, 2007) and visual/media arts (Terreni, 2010).

In the 'creating change' phase (2 weeks), the teachers provided the researcher with the set assessment tasks for literacy, numeracy and science, then together, they collaborated on ways in which arts activities could be integrated into children's learning for those assessments. They created a plan with sets of activities linking dance with Science, music and drama with English, and visual and media arts with Mathematics based on the researcher's belief in the importance of maintaining the integrity of each of the individual arts strands. The co-constructed units of work included activities that offered a variety of inter-connected challenges through which the children could apply arts concepts and learnings to other subjects (Dinham, 2013). The activities were designed for repeated implementation during seven weeks of the term and they could be adjusted to suit the needs of the children. In the 'sharing the lessons of change' phase, the teachers reflected on their experiences with this cycle of action research through semi-structured phone interviews with the researcher.

### **Arts-based learning: What is being done? What *can* be done?**

**Gaps in professional knowledge.** From the collected data, it was evident that there were gaps in the teachers' professional knowledge about the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts*. For example, neither of the teachers was aware of the link between the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* and the *Early Years Learning Framework* in the Prep year despite the curriculum stating that:

In Foundation to Year 2, learning in The Arts builds on the Early Years Learning Framework. Students are engaged through purposeful and creative play in structured activities, fostering a strong sense of wellbeing and developing their connection with and contribution to the world. (ACARA, 2015)

In addition, in terms of the media arts, neither teacher knew that it was a strand of the Arts learning area with both expressing uncertainty about what exactly ‘media arts’ was. Susan related it to the use of computers in the classroom and Brooke similarly noted, “My class goes to the school’s computer lab for an hour every week and after completing a basic task the children can sometimes use programs that incorporate painting and drawing”. To encourage a stronger understanding of the role of media arts, the researcher included Terrini (2010) in the collection of professional articles for the next phase of the research. This article offered recommendations for the use of interactive whiteboards (which both teachers had in their classrooms) for art-making processes in visual media and computer-generated imagery.

**Lack of time.** Curricular and other constraints featured heavily in the teachers’ responses. For example, when asked whether the structure, framework, and learning experiences for children in their own Prep classrooms provided the opportunities for ‘engagement, enrichment and inspiration’ as suggested in the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* rationale, teacher responses were consistent:

Susan: As a trained early childhood teacher I am aware that I am not doing nearly enough to support the children with arts activities. I find that just getting through the day with 28 children (six of whom have English as their second language and are fairly new arrivals to Australia, another five who have specific learning and behaviour difficulties and one visually impaired child) is problematic!

Brooke: There's little time available to provide arts experiences and opportunities due to the constant demands of our literacy and numeracy programs and the need to accomplish assessment tasks.

When they estimated the typical amount of time spent on arts-related activities in a week, both teachers indicated that they planned in more time for music and visual arts activities rather than drama and dance. Media arts, interpreted narrowly by the teachers, were taught less than half a day per week for Brooke, while Susan did not teach media arts at all.

Still, the teachers attempted to implement the arts strands in a number of ways. Both teachers reported that they used songs and music to effect transition changes in classroom routines, for example, greeting in the morning and changeovers between literacy and numeracy tasks. Visual art activities such as painting, drawing, and colouring were also often incorporated with literacy activities such as colouring in templates of alphabet letters and drawing pictures to match initial letters. Dance was encouraged in the form of circle songs or action songs, while drama and role-plays were sometimes used for storytelling. However, both teachers indicated that the limited class space was prohibitive to creating spaces for creativity and for storing costumes, props and the like.

**Lack of support and professional development opportunities.** Both teachers expressed strong concerns that other curriculum areas had precedence over arts learning, as well as concerns about negative perceptions towards arts-based learning, as described in this incident:

Susan: I was trying to do a drama activity one day using fairy tale characters and a member of the administration team stopped at the doorway commenting, "So, we're playing today, are we? Hope you've got all your work done!" I felt so frustrated!

Despite the perceived lack of institutional support, both teachers seemed enthusiastic when asked about their attitudes to planning a unit of work based on arts-learning. Susan said, “I would love to do that and I know the children would enjoy it also, *but* we would have to plan it around the assessment tasks required for reporting at the end of Term 4”. This same concern was raised by Brooke: “Planning would have to support the assessment tasks though as there is no time to add anything else that is different to the day”.

Both teachers expressed the need for professional development opportunities and support when asked what could be done differently to ensure that arts learning in the Prep year was authentic. Susan stated that she faced an increasing amount of paper “differentiating programs for every child, collecting data of children’s progress on a regular basis, homework tasks for every child” that took up a lot of time and effort. She said, “If only we had an Arts coach the way schools have literacy and numeracy coaches – it would be so much easier for planning and implementation”. In the follow-up telephone conversation, she raised the issue of a specialist coach again:

Susan: How good would that be! My teacher training at [university] in early childhood covered a lot of arts and play-based activities and I still think that was the most help I have ever received apart from a music teacher once who did try to integrate her program to support what I was doing in the classroom. To have someone to go to for help with planning the units around the arts would be great. I feel I could implement the strands if someone was around to assist. There is no time really for me to sit down with the five arts strands and work out a program of different arts activities for the class. I don’t really know how to implement dance or drama activities either, so help in those areas would be useful. I need more information about media arts. It’s not mentioned in our school at all.

Brooke: It'd be wonderful to have an arts coach as well as a literacy and numeracy coach. Maybe schools could share a person? Just to get support in how to integrate the different arts subjects with what I have to do in literacy and numeracy would be helpful. . . . Planning activities for music and art, dance and drama, would be so time consuming and there just isn't time because of the demands of the department and admin.

Both teachers indicated that they did not collaboratively plan with the specialist teachers at their schools. Instead, Brooke relied on her teacher aide, who played guitar and led singing in the mornings.

An effective source of support appeared to be the professional literature that the researcher collated with the teachers' contexts and concerns in mind. After reading the literature, the teachers' confidence in planning arts-based learning seemed to increase, and this was observed in their collaboration with the researcher to create arts-rich learning activities to integrate with English, Mathematics and Science. One successful product of this collaboration was the integration of dance, where children would explore movement through space, into a Science unit which investigated the way in which different objects and living things move. Another example was the combination of visual and media arts with mathematics to consolidate number names, numerals and quantities.

**Challenges with evaluating success.** After implementing the planned units, the teachers' reflections reported varying degrees of success. For example, Susan reflected:

The music, drama and English integration has probably worked the best for me. The children with English as a second language have really enjoyed these activities. I guess they don't feel as threatened because they can't do something. Dance has been problematic because of the number of children and their behaviours. We went to the

hall one day but the boys were very silly and it was difficult without someone else there to support me. We've tried different body movements in the room though – just sitting at desks and they seemed to like doing that and thinking about the way body parts can move. It definitely supports the science assessment task.

Brooke reported more success and she reflected that implementing the unit was easier than she had anticipated. She said this was because the activities were quite specific in terms of what the children were required to do. She stated, “The ideas for numbers and visual and media arts are working well. I hope it shows up in the results of the assessments but it's certainly made a change and given me some extra ideas”. Brooke had passed the other Prep teachers at her school copies of the co-constructed plans at their request, but she did not seem optimistic that integrating arts-based learning would continue because “it's so hard to fit in the extra planning that it involves.” To the teachers, therefore, it was difficult to evaluate the success of the collaborative adjustments towards arts-based learning

### **Exploring the way forward**

Our research confirms findings from previous studies (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Ryan and Goffin, 2008) particularly with regard to educators' gaps in understanding of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* content, the perceived constraints that impact the delivery of arts-based learning, and the need for professional support for in-service educators. In particular, the data revealed that even in the current educational climate where systemic demands and expectations can feel oppressive, teachers still possess a degree of agency that can be mobilised for the effective delivery of arts-based learning activities.

Despite being very experienced, the two Prep teachers in the current study had a lack of understanding about what the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* comprised and appeared unaware of the meaning and relevance of media arts. The inadequate subject content knowledge of teachers was reported as well by Garvis and Pendergast (2011) and Ryan and Goffin (2008). The gaps in educator knowledge may be why the teachers perceived their activities as diverse fragments of learning experiences rather than making meaningful connections for students through and about the arts (Bain, Newton, Kuster, & Milbrandt, 2010). Both of the teachers in this study were generalist Prep teachers, and not specialist art teachers, so not only did they lack an overview of *The Arts* learning area, but it can be further inferred that they lacked an overview of how *The Arts* could be taught across the curriculum. This is a concern because it connects to how Arts is positioned and prioritised (or not) within the curriculum, particularly for early years learners.

Existing pressures already impinge on the quality and quantity of arts-based learning. For instance, both teachers in the current study raised concerns about the constraints of the curriculum and the lack of time, and these concerns are not new (e.g., see Garvis & Pendergast, 2012). Our results are consistent with Garvis and Pendergast (2011) who also identified teacher perceptions that arts education received less priority in the curriculum than the learning areas of literacy, mathematics and science. The lack of time was also cited by Garvis (2012) and Klopper & Power (2010). However, there is a degree of passivity evident in our teacher responses, as if they had surrendered to having limited agency in their classrooms and felt too disempowered to act otherwise. These limitations, coupled with an uneven understanding about the five arts strands, meant that both teachers allocated more time to teaching the strands they were familiar with (music and visual arts), less time with strands that were more demanding of time or space (drama and dance) and a negligible amount of time teaching the more unfamiliar strand (media arts). The unequal allocation of

time reveals a clear connection between deeper content knowledge and familiarity with specific strands to the provision of arts-based opportunities for learners. The overall sense, initially, was that the teachers had given in to the identified constraints, and this attitude warrants further interrogation.

Discourses around systemic compliance and the crowded and narrowed curriculum also featured heavily in the teachers' responses. For example, Brooke mentioned literacy, numeracy and assessment at the outset of the research and she mentioned assessment again in her final reflection. The contemporary reality is that arts-related learning operates in the shadows of other, more prioritised learning areas. Yet, as McArdle (2012) wrote, "Learning through art is not antithetical to literacy and numeracy" (p. 19). The teachers' openness to adapting their pedagogical approaches signalled that even with rigid or skewed curriculum expectations, arts integration at the classroom level is possible. This points to the potential for teachers to act as change agents to increase opportunities for creativity within their classrooms and in turn, their schools and their communities (Harris & de Bruin, 2017).

One way that teachers can fulfil their potential as change agents is through professional support. While this point has been previously identified by others (e.g., Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Russell-Bowie, 2011), here the researcher was able to temporarily fill a specialist teacher role and work in collaboration with the teachers. The co-constructed units of work demonstrated to the teachers that arts integration with the more 'mainstream' subjects was possible to achieve. Once the units were planned, the teachers had arts-based activities at hand that were consistent with the learning objectives of the original unit while also meeting the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* expectations. Brooke's sharing of resources with her colleagues further suggested the need for resource support such as classroom-ready materials.

In contrast with previous studies, the teachers in the current study did not have negative self-efficacy beliefs towards arts-based learning (cf. Garvis & Pendergast, 2011). For Susan, this was perhaps because of her affirmative pre-service experiences with play- and arts-based learning, which highlights the positive and enduring impact that pre-service professional development can have (Barton et al., 2013). Both teachers appeared keen to try adapting their pedagogical approach to incorporate more arts-based learning and this was fruitful ground for action research where teachers could utilise their knowledge and agency to push back against some of the identified constraints to arts-teaching. Access to carefully selected professional literature that offered practical examples appeared to positively promote teacher self-efficacy with areas they were unsure about, for example, media arts. A holistic approach to professional support, encompassing quality pre-service experiences, access to research literature and regular access to specialists, is likely to have a positive influence on teacher capacity to deliver arts-based learning.

A more minor theme arising from our data is that arts-based learning shows promise for classes of diverse learners. When taught as intended, the five strands of the arts provide ample opportunity for children to pursue their creative needs and interests. In the co-constructed unit, the activities were planned around the recognition that children have multiple intelligences and distinct ways of learning (Gardner, 2011), and this proved useful for Susan who had a class with a variety of learning needs (English language learners, learning and behavioural difficulties and visual impairment). The increased confidence she observed in her students indicates that the arts can potentially provide an alternative and more creative route for learners to access the curriculum, other than through more traditional means. This supports the findings of Vaughan, Harris and Caldwell (2011) who found that participation in performing arts programmes were effective for improving the educational and social outcomes for students in disadvantaged and high-need communities.

In adapting their current practice, the two teachers in this study demonstrated how opportunities to provide learning opportunities for creativity could be increased. Klopper and Power (2010) proposed that “the heart of curriculum transfer and transformation is in the classroom” (p. 9), but while those authors asked “What are teachers in our classrooms actually *doing* in relation to teaching arts education?” this study has added the question “What *can* teachers actually *do* in relation to teaching arts education?” The current study suggests that for teachers who already have positive predispositions towards arts-based learning, and who desire professional development and support, there is the potential for incremental but impactful changes to pedagogy.

Our findings are offered in light of two key limitations. Firstly, this was a small-scale study limited to educators from one region in one Australian state. Action research with more participants might offer different findings. Secondly, due to time limitations only one cycle of action research could be carried out with the teachers. Action research is ideally an iterative process, so further cycles of research with these teachers could have provided deeper insights into the effects of the pedagogical changes.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study makes a renewed call for the prioritisation of *The Arts* as an integral part of the *Australian Curriculum*, connected to and supportive of the other learning areas. Based on our research, which confirms the findings of other projects, it is clear that more in-service professional development opportunities are needed to up-skill teachers in the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* and arts-based learning to enhance pedagogy across the curriculum. This study further reiterates the value of having a specialist or advisory teacher that educators can access (Russell-Bowie, 2011), and the necessity for materials and resources to

assist teachers in making connections between the arts and literacy, numeracy and science.

These could take the form of sample unit plans, online videos of practice or regular practitioner newsletters with summaries of arts activities and recently published professional literature. In terms of research, more studies are needed that share positive examples of successful arts practices in education and ideas for empowering teachers in practical ways.

For students to be afforded learning opportunities for creativity, their teachers must be given time and support for integrating the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* into other learning areas. Teachers need opportunities to discover, imagine and explore arts-based pedagogical approaches to literacy, numeracy and science. If provided with such opportunities, we anticipate that teachers will gain confidence and fresh understandings about how arts-rich experiences can enhance cross-curricula learnings and provide the fuel for life-long creativity.

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