

Toward Fulfilling the Gap Between Arts Policy and Practice

Modern society constantly confronts us with the question of how we can find our way through the wealth of information, what values and knowledge will enable us to survive and enjoy a better quality of life, and how we can achieve all of this. Strategies for the development of science, education and culture (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019; UNESCO, 2006; UNESCO, 2024, etc.) offer strategic and operational proposals to get out of the maze of possibilities and emphasise the importance of critical, creative and in-depth selection and processing of information.

If this points the way out of the labyrinth of values in modern society, which are all too often lost in the byways of expediency and capital, and indicates the importance of humanity and humanistic values, then in this context we can also ask about the importance and role of art and culture in the social context and in the life of the individual. Many disciplines, from psychology to education, sociology, philosophy and neuroscience, offer answers that shed light on the complex dimensions of art. They are all united in the realisation that holistic, creative and reflexive thinking is an axiom of artistic activity. Working in the various fields of art, through an authentic and autonomous process that cannot be replaced by modern technology and artificial intelligence, anchors humanistic values in the life of the individual and the community.

The irreplaceable importance of artistic activity in the various artistic fields is reflected in the human development of critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision-making, constructive management of emotions, etc., all of which are also essential indicators of lifelong learning competences. In this context, the competence of cultural awareness and expression is one of the key competences of lifelong learning, with a focus on creative expression and the appreciation and experience of artistic languages. In its definition, it emphasises “the importance of creative expression of ideas, experiences and feelings in a variety of media, including music, performing arts, literature and visual arts” (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019).

Awareness of the importance of arts education is highlighted by international strategies for cultural and education policy development (McCarthy et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2006; UNESCO, 2010; UNESCO, 2024; Winner et al., 2013), of which the Seoul Agenda (UNESCO, 2010, p. 10) notes the need to “realise the full potential of high quality arts education to positively renew

educational systems, to achieve crucial social and cultural objectives, and ultimately to benefit children, youth and lifelong learners”. Quality arts education, including visual arts, music, drama, dance, reading, cultural heritage, film, intermedia arts and other artistic areas (Bucik et al., 2011), benefits people’s holistic development, encompassing emotional, social, psychomotor and cognitive domains (Ijdens et al., 2018). In addition, arts education has important implications for the teaching and learning environment, as well as for the community (Bamford, 2009). As outlined in the *Ljubljana Dance and the Child (daCi) Declaration* (Dance and the Child International, 2024), we also recognise that culture and the arts are integral to inclusive development, resilience and the overall well-being of individuals and societies. Culture lies at the heart of what makes us human. It provides the foundation for our values, choices and relationships – with one another and with nature – nurturing critical thinking, a sense of identity and the ability to respect and embrace otherness.

At the same time, we note that there is a gap in the implementation of arts policy in practice (Bamford, 2009; Bamford, 2017; Ijdens & Wagner, 2018), and that clearer and more refined models for the qualitative implementation of arts education are needed (Bamford, 2017). Several countries also point to the problem of the lack of training of teachers to teach artistic subjects (EACEA/Eurydice, 2009; Ijdens & Wagner, 2018) and the need for a more balanced inclusion of different artistic fields, as disciplines such as theatre, dance, film and digital media, among others, are often not part of the curriculum or feasible activities. Within this framework, we can approach arts education from many perspectives.

In the context of the above dimension and the problems of implementing arts policy in practice, this focus issue contains ten articles dealing with arts education in the community context, arts education in the teaching and learning context, and the impact of arts education on children’s development.

The issue opens with Susan R. Koff’s article *Dance Education as Social Studies Education*, in which she argues that current measures of educational success overlook the arts, despite their potential to support holistic human development. In the US, social studies fosters citizenship and democratic participation, yet it is often marginalised. The article explores how dance education can integrate social studies by enabling students to engage with diversity, identity and society. Based on an online survey of dance educators, the findings suggest that meaningful implementation requires broader education policy support beyond dance education itself.

The second article, by Janja Batič, Natalija Rojc Črnčec and Nina Šulin, with the title *The Visual Journal as a Way to Strengthen Students’ Ability to*

Self-Reflect, deals with the issue of how art allows us to look within ourselves, to learn who we are and what interests us. It connects us to our thoughts, our feelings, our perceptions, and our external reality and experiences. Artistic expression enables students to think about themselves and their feelings, to take the perspective of another while evaluating their artworks, to set goals and to organise the course of their creative work.

The third article, entitled *The (Im)possibility of Primary Arts Teacher Education* by Jeff Meiners and Kerrin Rowlands, explores the persistent gap between policy aspirations and practical implementation in primary arts teacher education. Drawing on UNESCO frameworks and recent Australian curriculum reforms, it examines how one Australian university has responded to the lack of structured arts education in teacher preparation by offering an “Arts Specialism”. Using education policy sociology and critical discourse analysis, the study investigates the policy contexts, curriculum design and institutional negotiations involved. It highlights key challenges and opportunities related to content, pedagogy and stakeholder engagement, and offers recommendations for strengthening arts education in initial teacher education.

In the fourth article, *Improving the Social-Emotional Well-Being of a Child with Multiple Developmental Disabilities by Incorporating the Performative Drama Model into the Learning Process*, authors Alenka Vidrih and Tina Grošelj present how the Performative Drama Model was trialled to improve students’ assertiveness and performance in real life. A 12-year-old boy with learning disabilities and multiple developmental disabilities, who had difficulties expressing himself and participating in class, managed to improve his academic performance and general well-being through the activities of an “actor” who supported the development of his self-advocacy, classroom integration and communication skills.

The fifth article, *Becoming an Engaged Dance Scholar Through Arts-Based Community Engagement Projects* by Lynnette Young Overby, Diana Crum, Jill Grundstrom, Francine E. Ott and Melissa Van Wijk, explores how postgraduate dance education students can develop as engaged scholars through arts-based community projects. The study analysed seven projects from doctoral students at Teachers College, Columbia University, focusing on levels of community engagement and the presence of arts-based research qualities such as evocation and illumination. The results showed consistent application of co-creation, co-implementation and co-assessment, while co-dissemination occurred only in the earlier cohort. The students reported positive impacts on their dissertations and future engagement plans, highlighting the value of structured support in developing engaged scholarship through dance.

The article entitled *Teachers' and Artists' Collaborative Teaching and Learning*, by Sonja Rutar, Tina Štemberger and Bogdana Borota, highlights the specifics of collaboration between artists and the school environment. By involving artists in the pedagogical process, teachers can gain information about how children are able to participate experientially and expressively in artistic experiences, which relieves the burden of predetermined and over-structured curricular practices, provides teachers with insight into children's experiential and expressive capacities/competences, and provides artists with insight into the possibilities of integrating authentic artistic experiences into education.

The seventh article, with the title *Teachers' Views: Using Body Music in Teaching and Learning Primary School Subjects*, written by Muzafer Özgü Bulut, Ayşe Akarsu and Ersoy Karabay, examines the KeKeÇa Body Music approach in Turkish primary school lessons. The aim of the study was to understand how this form of embodied and arts-integrated method, which integrates movement, rhythm and play into learning and uses the body as a musical instrument, influences teachers' professional development and teaching practices, while impacting on students' motivation and academic performance. The study emphasises the great potential of body music as a pedagogical tool to enrich teaching and learning experiences in primary schools.

The eighth article, entitled *Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Children Through Carrying Out Musical Activities in the Daily Routine*, authored by Olga Denac, Ines Mohorko Germ and Jerneja Žnidaršič, presents how daily routines with enriching musical activities in Slovenian preschool education can promote children's social and emotional learning, including emotional self-awareness, regulation, empathy, relationship building and responsible behaviour, while achieving specific musical learning outcomes. Research confirms that integrating music into the daily routine not only improves emotional intelligence and social interactions, but also the structure of the classroom, transitions and overall atmosphere.

The ninth article, *Educating Children for Creativity and Democracy Through a Music and Drama Community of Practice*, by Blaženka Bačlija Sušić and Vesna Brebrić, explores how music and drama, integrated in a community of practice and guided by process drama, can enhance children's creativity and democratic values. Classical compositions, movement games, singing and creative storytelling formed the basis for a participatory and inclusive learning space. The study provides compelling evidence that music and theatre can serve as powerful tools to foster democratic and creative potential in early childhood education.

The focus issue also contains three articles in the varia section.

The first varia article is written by Monika Klun, Danijela Frangež and Aleš Bučar Ručman and is entitled *Addressing Violence Against Parents and Peers and Violence in Schools Through the Perspective of Ecological Theory*. This paper examines violence against parents and peers and violence in schools using Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. The study managed to establish connections between these forms of violence, perpetrator characteristics and conclusions about the influences at different ecological layers. Outward manifestations of these issues include discipline problems, truancy, association with problematic peers, substance abuse or addiction and violent behaviour.

The second varia article, entitled *The Development of Science Process Skills and Content Knowledge with Inquiry Boxes in Early Childhood Education* by Nika Golob and Vanja Ungar, explores the systematic use of inquiry-based learning in preschool science education through thematic inquiry boxes. The study involved twenty children aged four to five, with the experimental group engaging in guided exploration of materials using photo-based instructional cards. The results show that the children improved both in science content knowledge and in process skills such as classifying, ordering and weighing. The findings support the use of inquiry boxes as an effective didactic tool for fostering autonomy and integrating science skills with content learning in early childhood education.

The third varia article, by Irena Lesar, entitled *The Educational Paradigms in Tagore's School Through the Lens of Continental Pedagogy* explores Tagore's concept of holistic education through the lens of continental pedagogy. Using a qualitative theoretical analysis, the author examines how Tagore's school in Santiniketan reflects his vision of comprehensive education. The study focuses on four key pedagogical factors – teacher, content, child and social environment – and shows that Tagore successfully integrated all of them, unlike the major European traditions analysed. His approach also anticipated many contemporary educational concepts, including experiential learning, student participation and embodied cognition.

The varia section also includes a book review by Konstanca Zalar of the monograph *Art in Education in Kindergartens and Schools: The SKUM Project*, written by Robi Kroflič, Sonja Rutar and Bogdana Borota (Eds.), which offers a new perspective and approach to the theoretical and practical justification of art as an essential element of contemporary education.

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