

Evaluation of school-based arts



education programs in Australian schools



By Dr Jennifer Bryce

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*Participation in school-based arts education programs can have a positive impact on students' engagement with learning, according to recent ACER research. However, there was little statistical evidence of improvement in academic progress as a result of participation in arts education. **Jennifer Bryce** reports on the study.*

Anecdotal evidence from Australian arts programs and overseas studies suggest that exposure to the arts provides positive general learning outcomes, particularly for young people who are Indigenous, in remote or regional communities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Four Australian school-based arts programs were evaluated, with a focus on the following questions:

- What is the impact of each arts program on participating students' academic progress, engagement with learning and attendance at school?
- Are empirical or anecdotal examples of improved learning outcomes substantiated?
- What are the attributes of arts programs that are of particular benefit to students?

Four schools were selected for the study because they were seen as examples of good practice that might substantiate claims that exposure to the arts provides positive general learning outcomes. There was a range of ages and a diverse range of backgrounds among the participating students. Data were taken from a range of sources, including administrative records, interviews, observations, questionnaires and tests and other assessments administered as part of the study. The following arts programs were included in the study.

Arts@Direk, South Australia

Direk School is a combined campus across three levels of schooling: preschool, junior primary and primary. There are 650 students from a range of backgrounds, primarily white Anglo Celtic. The school is classified as 'disadvantaged'. The report focuses on a drama mentoring program at Direk Primary School. In addition to drama, the school has a lively arts program with strong participation in the visual arts, music and dance.

Northern Territory Music Programs – Boys' Business Program

Boys' Business is an experimental program based in the Northern Territory that incorporates music as a focus. It is an initiative to encourage male students in the middle primary years, in the first instance, to engage positively with education and life. Students come from diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous and those who have English as a second language. They range from those whose school performance is exemplary, through to students challenged by education and life.

Northern Territory Music Programs – Indigenous Music Education Program

This is a secondary level Indigenous instrumental music delivery program for remote community schools. The main objective of the program is to provide basic literacy and life-skills development through music education.

SCRAYP – (Western Metropolitan Melbourne)

SCRAYP is a youth arts program that aims to engage all young people, particularly high-risk young people, in schools and the wider community. SCRAYP conducts drama programs in primary and secondary schools. Young artists are employed on a casual basis to offer weekly workshops to students in selected schools over two terms. At the end of the program, students in each school present a performance to the local school and community.

Impact of arts programs on learning and attendance

The arts programs investigated enhanced students' potential to engage in learning in the following ways:

- Students' self-esteem is increased, helping them to feel more positive about themselves as learners. The arts programs also often provided students with exposure to positive role models. The contribution of the arts to students' self-esteem was seen to be of particular significance for students from dysfunctional backgrounds and those who suffered from particular disabilities such as attention-deficit disorder and autism.
- Students are better able to work cooperatively with others. This involves working together as a team to mount a production (musical or dramatic), learning that each person (including oneself) is an integral member of the team, and learning various social (emotional control/behaviour management) and communication skills needed to contribute to the team.
- Students learn to plan and set goals, and recognise the need for persistence. Students learned that working hard over a relatively long time can be more rewarding than obtaining immediate results. This was summed up by a Year 4 student who said of drama: 'It was hard but it was fun.'

For students from Indigenous communities, involvement in arts programs led to improved attendance at school (attendance was not seen as an issue at other schools).

None of the studies was able to produce hard evidence that participation in the arts program enhanced academic progress. Although this may be partly due to the short period of investigation, it also reflects the results of other research. System-level results in literacy, numeracy and writing were compared for students involved in two of the programs with students in the same schools who were not involved in the arts programs. In both cases there was no significant difference between performances of the two groups. For assessment of the generic competencies of problem solving, communication, planning and organising and working with others there was a significant difference for one group only. In this one case, the 'arts rich' group scored significantly better than the 'non arts rich group'.

Attributes of arts programs that are of particular benefit to the students

A number of attributes of the programs studied clearly benefited students and encouraged them to learn. It is pertinent to consider the extent to which these attributes may be exclusive to arts programs, and to what extent they might also be present in other programs. It was clear that some students (who would normally be labelled 'low achieving') appreciated the fact that in music programs (*Boys' Business* and *Indigenous Music Education Programme*) they could express themselves without having to read or write. Another important attribute seems to be the voluntary participation of students who can choose to be onlookers.

Transferability of attributes of arts programs to the general curriculum

To what extent can aspects of the arts programs that help students' learning be transferred to the curriculum in general? The Direk drama mentoring provided a model where transfer of 'enabling' skills, attitudes and processes was occurring. This may have been because there was a 'whole school' approach and thus the drama mentoring program was integrated into the school's process of change. Teachers took up ideas that came from the drama mentoring, such as encouraging students to keep learning logs and setting aside class time for students to reflect on their learning.

To what extent are the attributes identified unique to arts programs?

The features that emerged from this study suggest that the arts can provide learning opportunities for students who do not fit the conventional mould of institutional learning. Weak literacy skills can provide a seemingly insurmountable barrier to learning. The arts provide opportunities for students to start to learn and enjoy learning without experiencing the initial discouragement of having to display weak reading and writing skills.

The arts can provide experience of working in a team, an opportunity for reflection and constructive criticism, and helpful ways of expressing and exploring emotions. Arts programs are inclusive – allowing students who have disabilities or who are socially

ostracised to be included, and they can also have a 'levelling' effect – by providing opportunities for students, parents and teachers to work together on an 'equal' level. One does not need to be fully grown or to 'know' a lot to participate in activities.

Further research

There are various directions in which this research could be developed. It would be useful to consider the arts as a vehicle for learning in Indigenous communities. To what extent can the arts provide a bridge between cultures of learning? It would also be of interest to investigate the necessary conditions for transferring the learning processes in the arts to other areas of the curriculum.

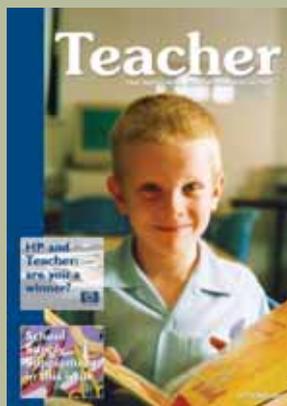
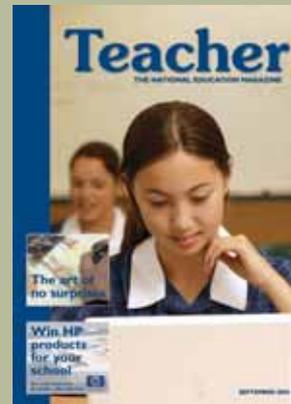
In this study there was an indication that students involved in arts programs scored better in the generic competencies of problem solving, planning, communication and working with others, than students who were not involved in arts programs. It would be useful to look at this phenomenon more intensively, using a larger sample and possibly assessing the 'employability skills', developed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia. The generic competencies assessed for this study happen to be included in the more recently developed 'employability skills'.

It would also be useful to consolidate the present research with a longitudinal study, taking cohorts of students involved in arts programs that can demonstrate positive role models, positive reinforcement of achievements, 'authentic' activities, negotiated procedures and safe environments for risk taking, and track the progress of these students over several years. In particular, school completion, post school study and employment pathways could be noted.

The research was commissioned by the Australian government through the Department of Education, Science and Training, the Australia Council and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. ■

The full report can be downloaded from www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2004/index.htm

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