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Why the arts matter in schools

January 30, 2015 in [Classroom culture](#), [Research](#), [Thought Leadership](#)

In March and April 2015, the IB welcomes Michael Anderson as a keynote speaker at the [IB Asia Pacific Annual Conference](#), Macau, China and as a presenter at the [2015 Peterson Academic Symposium](#), The Hague, Netherlands respectively.

By Michael Anderson

If we want our children to do better academically and socially studying the arts could be the key to success. By ignoring arts education, we could be jeopardizing young people's opportunities to achieve and to be creative participants in the 21st century.

What we know about arts in schools

Research undertaken by my colleagues and me at the University of Sydney and published in the Journal of Educational Psychology involved primary and high school students from 15 Australian schools.

It examined their academic and personal well-being outcomes over two years. The research found that students who actively engaged with the arts in schools—as makers and doers of the arts—were more likely to do better in academic and social spheres than those who passively consumed the arts or those who had little or no connection with the arts.

The arts, creativity and learning in the IB

This research has implications not only for schools and schooling in Australia but what the future of schooling could and perhaps should be internationally. In some ways, International Baccalaureate schools are leading the way by integrating creativity in learning programs.

The International Baccalaureate movement has a proud tradition of valuing creativity and innovation. These values, skills, and understandings have been enabled through the focus on the concept of inquirers; nurturing curiosity, developing skills for inquiry and research across learning stages and programs.

In the Arts, learning programs that engage students not only as consumers of the arts but also requires them to actively create within the arts encourages young people to imagine and create visions of the world that rely on empathy and the development of global citizenship. Additionally, the arts provide a way for each school to understand their own cultural context and create art within that context to explain their country, their culture and their society to the worldwide community.

Why teach the arts?

The arts have been and continues to be one of the ways that communities and cultures can understand each other and engage in difficult discussions. Jon Suffolk who is a Drama and Performing Arts teacher at IGB International School in Malaysia argues “graduates will leave school with the skills to collaborate successfully with their peers and to be responsible citizens. The aim of the IB, as I see it at present, is to allow students to be informed, curious, creative risk-takers.” While the IB has begun this process of making creativity matter in learning, there are compelling reasons to value creativity as a core skill to deal with the challenges of the 21st century and beyond. Although it is unarguable that

creativity can reside in any field, the arts teach creativity explicitly. The process of composing a piece of music, choreographing a dance or making a sculpture are the processes of creativity.

Young people can and do learn to be creative in arts learning spaces. This is the core business of the arts. More than processes though, the arts provide new ways of thinking and communicating. These approaches to thinking can provoke creativity, imagination, and possibility. Learning in the arts make this possible by allowing young people access to the tools of creation. These tools are central to the arts – but are also vital in a rapidly changing world that will require citizens not just to be consumers of “their” world but to be able to actively change the world. We all need these tools to find creative, collaborative and imaginative solutions to some of our most pressing problems, such as global warming, food security and overpopulation.

When young people sculpt, make films or choreograph dance in schools and other places they use the “languages” of the arts, such as musical notations, gestures, and images, to make something new. In this process, they have the opportunity to rehearse and rewrite the world – or at least their part of the world – in their own way. These creative processes lie at the heart of innovation and re-invention, skills that are likely to be essential for 21st century citizens.

When the demands of a crowded curriculum bear down on the time and resources of schools, we often see a tendency to cut back on arts education. But our research demonstrates that cutting arts could be compromising students’ academic potential and deny them a chance to achieve in other areas of their lives.

Understanding a bigger world

There is another, more compelling reason to make the arts a central aspect of schooling. The songs, plays, dances, films and paintings young people make as part of their arts education show them that they are so much more than a test score. They show students that they and those around them have the capacity for beauty, for pathos, for pain, and allow them to see human experience through the eyes of other people in a play or through a film. Arts learning builds and supports interpersonal and intrapersonal understanding that will also be essential to the navigation of a complex and difficult world. This is the hope of arts education: not that we will create a new generation of stars like Leonardo Di Caprio or Cate Blanchett although great arts education also does that. The hope of those teaching the arts is that we will be able give young people access to an understanding of what humankind is capable of and expand their horizons beyond their town, their social group or their nation.

The question is: do we as an international community have the imagination to move the arts to the centre of learning alongside other major subject areas? We can fulfil this potential if we prioritize arts and creativity learning rather than considering it an option. If we do grasp this opportunity our schools could be more creative, more imaginative places to learn and grow and they might prepare our young people for the challenges the future presents.

As our research demonstrates, embracing the arts will also have the effect of providing enhanced academic outcomes and make our young people better able to cope socially. We have an exciting opportunity ahead of us to change schooling into a more creative, innovative space by prioritizing arts and creativity in our curriculum offerings.

But the question remains: do we have the imagination to make it happen?

The Arts, Motivation, Engagement and Academic Achievement Research team included Professor Andrew Martin, Associate Professor Michael Anderson, Dr Robyn Gibson, Dr David Sudmalis, Dr Josephine Fleming, Dr Caitlin Munday and Dr Marianne Mansour and was funded by The Australia Council for the Arts and The Australian Research Council.