

The Arts in the Contemporary Socio-Economic Context: An Emphasis on Arts Education

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Abstract

This literature review was conducted to explore arts education practices in the contemporary context, including historical perspectives, current arts education practices, the importance of arts education, and modern trends such as STEAM, arts integration, and the integration of the arts. Highlighting the benefits of arts education is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the importance of arts education and the vital need for improving arts practices and education are included. Findings suggest that the arts have the potential to function as a vehicle to address global challenges, and arts education should be offered both as a discipline valued for its own sake, intrinsic values, and through integrated arts approaches, such as STEAM, thereby providing stakeholders with a range of options from which they can select the model that best aligns with their needs and preferences.

Keywords

Arts Integration and Integration of the Arts, Current Status of Arts Education, STEM and STEAM

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Importance of Protecting the Arts



Figure 1: Art poster: *The Earth without Art is just Eh*²

The above quote in Figure 1, "The Earth without Art is just Eh," (Weatherly Studios, n.d.) was coined by the American comedian, writer, and artist Demetri Martin. Unpacking the idea further, Valaray (2022) explains that

It is beautiful how the language symbolizes the meaning of the word itself. In a way the "E" and the "h" holding the "art" kind of shielding and protecting it. "Art" needs to be protected indeed. Without "Art" we are just [Eh] an empty vessel³.

The Arts encompass a broad range of disciplines, which can be broadly categorized into visual arts, performing arts, media and digital arts, literary arts, applied arts, and decorative arts. Unfortunately, the focus on arts education has been gradually deteriorating globally at all levels of education, beginning with early childhood education and extending through primary, secondary, senior secondary, and tertiary education, including informal educational settings. However, Goodwin and Vincent (2024) pointed out that the production of "graduates has exceeded the number of available jobs" (p.350) currently, and therefore exploring this concern regarding arts practices is of high importance.

² <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Art-Poster-The-Earth-without-Art-is-just-eh-5984458>

³ <https://cherievalaray.medium.com/the-earth-without-art-is-just-eh-ccf1f448a324>

Historical Perspectives on the Arts and Arts Education

There is ample evidence to justify the claim that the arts have existed within human social structures as a way and means of communicating and expressing ideas since before recorded history (Dinham, 2020). As discussed by Tate (2016), the arts were so prevalent in Ancient Greece and the European Middle Ages that philosophers such as Plato actively argued against the teaching of the arts as being a distraction to the learning of more important academic pursuits; still, the arts in the form of visual arts, dance, drama, and music continued to flourish in society. By the late eighteenth century and progressing into the Industrial Revolution, arts education was being proposed as a method to enhance the technical skills needed for a changing society and as a way of building the creative thinking skills required to solve the ever more complex problems encountered in an industrializing world (Whitford, 1923; Keel, 1963). As Raber (2017) notes, the history of education in the arts has primarily revolved around whether education in the arts produces tangible public goods that can be beneficial in developing a future workforce and society. However, there may be an even more fundamental reason for teaching the arts in education: enabling individuals to enjoy the arts and their benefits, a fundamental human right recognized by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948).

The Current Status of Arts Education

Schools are challenged to quantify their learning areas, resulting in a dominance of traditionally academic learning areas at the expense of less quantifiable areas such as the arts (Ewing, 2010). In addition to testing and league tables, the impact of globalization on school curricula across the globe has resulted in a focus away from knowledge and an increasing emphasis on developing students' twenty-first-century learning and skills (Gleeson et al., 2020); this focus extends to the arts as a learning area. The combination of competitive league tables on numeracy and literacy, and the emphasis on the development of twenty-first century skills as a desirable learning outcome has meant that learning in the arts within schools has become an exercise in how the arts can benefit students in other areas, as though that should be the primary justification for an arts education (Gregory, 2017). What this neglects is that while it is commendable that studying the arts may have additional benefits, the study of the arts is beneficial in and of itself for the development of not only the "artistic habits of mind" (Winner et al., 2013, p.19), but also for the possibility of mastery of the skills and knowledge that the varying and diverse strands of the arts give one access to (Winner et al., 2013). As Winner at

al. (2013) put it, students may discover in the arts their "life's passion", the freedom to "explore and experiment", and a place where they can "introspect and find personal meaning" (p.20).

Alter et al. (2009) note that teachers are not well prepared to teach the arts. This is particularly true when it comes to teacher confidence in teaching highly technical arts strands such as music. This connects with what is happening in teacher education globally, where pre-service teachers are being offered increasingly less time to focus on professional learning in the arts (Ewing, 2020). Teachers who are not confident in their abilities to teach arts strands are more likely to give low priority to arts education, especially in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Primary School Education (PSE), which is being revealed in the increasing deficits of art education within schools (Alter et al., 2009). Nethsinghe (2011) notes that artists/practitioners claim that most teachers are not confident in arts practices due to a lack of skills and pedagogical/content knowledge (what to teach/how to teach), which supports the above statement regarding their lack of confidence in abilities to teach arts strands. Added pressures in schools also arise from arts funding, which is often unstable and allocated in ways that prioritize some strands of the arts over others (Ewing, 2020). Funding for specialist arts teachers is also unlikely to supplement generalist teachers due to funding constraints and expenses (Holt, 1997). Similar circumstances are occurring in the Sri Lankan context. As the researcher is based in Sri Lanka currently and works at a university that is dedicated to visual and performing arts education, it is important to explain the situation with regard to the concerned subject areas.

Arts is often seen as an add-on within classrooms in the Sri Lankan context. In comparison, neighboring countries within Asia are increasing studies in art-rich learning as they see the increasing value of arts education (Ewing, 2020). In the Ceylon Today Newspaper, Vanniarachchy (2023) states that "In Sri Lanka's education system, art is considered a boring and unwanted subject; a subject that is not beneficial to anyone at all. Also, art is considered a subject chosen by those who are not smart enough to enter maths or science streams" (para.3), and the arts education offered at primary, secondary and tertiary institutions is at an unsatisfactory level. Similar to diminishing global practices, the arts are undervalued, underfunded and under-resourced in Sri Lanka, and it is seen that the arts industry, educational institutions and arts educators/researchers, including artists, struggle to survive in this unsupportive environment. Vanniarachchy (2023) explains that this dismissive and prejudicial attitude towards art education is a major reason "why Sri Lankan education system has failed to produce talented and productive artists and sensitive and sensible citizens" (para.4), which is a serious claim. Irugalbandara (2025) advocates for comprehensive policy reform to improve

aesthetic education in Sri Lankan educational institutions. The failure to recognize the value of the arts on a global scale can lead to significant consequences, as seen in Sri Lanka at present. Therefore, all stakeholders must act urgently and do their best to include, sustain, and enhance the arts, arts industry, and arts education at all levels across the globe.

Importance of Arts Education

There is clear evidence that studying the arts is correlated to several student success and achievement criteria (Ruppert, 2006). Growing evidence that positively impacts students in academic and non-academic areas can be measured (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Bryce et al., 2004). However, Winner et al. (2013) assert that there is no causal link between the study of specific art types and long-term academic achievement. This correlation may be due to a lack of skilled teachers to teach the subjects and/or factors external to arts education itself, such as the unwarranted, backward attitude towards the arts in certain societies. If the arts are being studied purely for their correlation to academic success in other learning areas, this lack of causality would be a significant concern. However, the arts have their own intrinsic value as learning areas, not only in the knowledge of that area that the students may gain through study but also through the acquisition of what Winner et al. (2013) call the "artistic habits of mind" (p. 19).

An arts curriculum allows for teaching strategies that can address a range of intelligences and provide inclusive teaching systems (Chapman, 2015). The study of the arts for the mastery of the arts produces tangible arts-based learning skills including observation, exploration, collaboration, persistence, reflection, and the ability to learn crafts and techniques specific to certain fields of the arts (Winner et al., 2013), which can only be achieved through arts education. While the arts can be used as a pedagogical method for the learning of additional content (which is gaining momentum as a popular method in the world at present), it is in the study of the arts that students can develop the arts-based skills that allow for varying needs, deeper connection, and engagement in learning.

Contemporary Trends: Arts Integration and the Notions of STEM and STEAM

Martín-Páez et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of educational experiences published in journals indexed within the Web of Science Core Collection between 2013 and 2018. Their review examined how STEM education was conceptualized within theoretical frameworks, the disciplines involved, the reported benefits of STEM education, and the factors contributing to successful educational interventions (Martín-Páez et al., 2019). Their analysis

revealed that there is no universally accepted definition of STEM education. Instead, theoretical frameworks tend to emphasize specific educational variables rather than providing a common conceptual foundation. The authors further observed that STEM education has been interpreted in multiple ways, although most definitions emphasize the integrated application of the four disciplines represented in the acronym. They also identified considerable inconsistencies in how STEM integration is conceptualized and implemented across educational contexts, highlighting the need for more clearly defined theoretical frameworks and consistent implementation strategies. As the concept of STEM education continued to develop, educators expanded the framework by incorporating the arts, giving rise to STEAM education.

Arts integration occurs when relationships are formed "between learning in the arts and learning in the other skills and subjects of the curriculum" (Deasy, 2003, p.3). The notion of STEM with inclusion of the arts (STEAM) can also be considered as a form of arts integration that is popular in the current global context. University of Central Florida (2023) states that, according to 2018 and 2019 LinkedIn reports,

integrating the arts into STEM, STEAM-focused curricula incorporate the study of the humanities, language arts, dance, drama, music, visual arts, design, new media, and more. Students who explore and master any of these subjects can make themselves more marketable in today's workforce, as 57 percent of senior leaders value soft skills more than hard skills ... creativity, persuasion, and collaboration are the top three skills companies seek in prospective employees (para. 10).

Research implies that, rather than teaching science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as separate disciplines, integrating these fields through interdisciplinary learning has become a significant educational reform in the global context, aimed at enhancing students' real-world problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, collaboration, and innovation (Martín-Páez et al., 2019). This integrated approach is commonly referred to as STEM, an acronym formed from the initial letters of the four disciplines. However, the inclusion of engineering within this acronym raises conceptual questions. Standard English dictionaries, including Oxford, Cambridge, and Merriam-Webster, define engineering primarily as the systematic practice of designing, building, manufacturing, or as a professional field. Engineering is also described as the work performed by engineers, reinforcing its identity as a profession rather than a standalone academic discipline. From this perspective, engineering can be understood as the

process of applying scientific knowledge, technological tools, and mathematical principles to design and create practical solutions. Accordingly, STEM may be interpreted as the integration of Science, Technology, and Mathematics within the engineering process.

Engineering involves designing and developing products, improving systems and processes, and addressing practical challenges. Throughout the design process, engineers frequently employ the fundamental elements of visual arts, such as line, shape, colour, and composition, particularly through sketching, drawing, and creative visualization. This close relationship between engineering design and artistic creativity contributed to the emergence of STEAM, which extends STEM by incorporating the arts. In this context, it is important to distinguish between arts integration and integration of the arts, as these represent different concepts. Arts integration refers to the combination of multiple artistic disciplines, including dance, drama, music, visual arts, and media arts, within creative and performing arts practices. For example, theatrical productions integrate music, lighting, costumes, visual imagery, stage design, makeup, and other artistic elements to create a unified performance. In contrast, integration of the arts involves embedding artistic principles into non-arts disciplines. STEAM represents a prominent example of this approach, where artistic creativity and design thinking are incorporated into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics learning.

The inclusion of the arts strengthens the interdisciplinary model by promoting creativity, design thinking, communication, and innovation alongside scientific and technical competencies. STEAM acknowledges that addressing complex real-world challenges requires not only analytical and technical expertise but also imagination, aesthetic understanding, and human-centred design. Consequently, STEAM aims to cultivate learners equipped with both creative and analytical capabilities, enabling them to develop innovative and holistic solutions to contemporary problems. Although the purposes and educational benefits of these different forms of integration are important areas of inquiry, they are beyond the scope of the present study and warrant further investigation in future research.

The Need for Improving Arts Practices

The use of professional networks and partnerships (especially with the industry) enables arts educators/practitioners to promote connections not only for the study of the arts but also through community links to other educational institutions and programs, and by allowing for multiple cultural, social, economic and aesthetic backgrounds to be represented in ways that

individual teachers are unable to achieve by themselves. When accessing professional networks, it is essential to consider that arts education needs to achieve different ways of knowing and skills for providing students with opportunities for multiple ways of engaging with content (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala & Mouriki, 2019). It is important to mention that by looking at different ways of knowing and skills, students can present their understanding in ways that promote inclusiveness, as there are no right or wrong answers in interpretations (Kenyon, 2019).

This can be further developed in the classroom for socially and culturally responsive teaching. The process of making and responding in art allows for greater understanding through the history and diversity of arts education and arts practice (Perignat & Katz-Buonincontro, 2019). This inclusiveness comes about because, as Kenyon (2019) notes, true arts education is student-directed, it values means more than ends, it does not require literality, and it creates an active but not stressed mind frame, the benefits of which would allow for the flourishing of diverse practice and outcomes in diverse contexts, particularly for those who are generally disadvantaged by traditional educational structures (Ashman, 2018; Moon, 2019). Exploring the impact of arts education on socio-economic resilience and security, Nvana et al. (2025) point out that the arts develop a critical set of skills that include innovative problem-solving, cultural appreciation and emotional intelligence essential for sustainable development. They claim that “these skills are crucial for individuals and communities to navigate and overcome the socio-economic challenges” (p.59) in the contemporary world, and Arts education has the potential to function as a vehicle to address global challenges.

In light of these findings from this literature review, it can be suggested that arts education should be offered both as a discipline valued for its own sake, intrinsic values, and through integrated arts approaches such as STEAM, thereby enabling stakeholders with a range of options from which they can select the model that best aligns with their needs and preferences.

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