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Policy in Arts Education – Arts Education in Policy

Introduction

In 1974, Elliot Eisner wrote about an earlier article he had published: “I titled this article, ‘Is the Artist in The School Program Effective?’ Now we are, I believe, able to arrive at an answer. We don’t know” (Eisner, 1974, p. 23). Almost half a century has passed, and Eisner’s words still ring true today for most subsequent artist-in-school and comparable programs: we simply don’t know whether they are effective. Arts education in many countries is largely dependent on policy programs, the effects and effectivity of which are often unclear. That does not mean that they are ineffective, but as policy programs it is often difficult to ascertain their impact.

Another reference to start this article: “From the outset, [the educator]’s efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men and their creative power” (Freire, 1968, p. 62). In his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire stressed the need for creativity as a means towards the ultimately and fundamentally political goals of education. This drive is typical for arts educators: arts education can be a source for liberation (see also Schwartz, 2000; Roberts & Freeman-Moir, 2013; Tunstall & Booth, 2016). Arts and cultural education, in other words, is profoundly political.

The above quotations serve to remind us of the two-directional tie of arts education and policy. While it often depends on policy programs for its sustenance, it also has the ambition to change the political landscape that made it possible in the first place. This article explores this tension, in order to explain a defining characteristic of arts and cultural education and arts and cultural education policy and hopefully to prompt further research and theory development in the field, for which the *International Journal for Research in Cultural, Aesthetic, and Arts Education* could provide a welcome new platform.

Arts education in policy

The aim of arts education in several countries, for instance Germany (Steigerwald, 2019), the Netherlands (Meerkerk & IJdens, 2018) and Norway (Rasmussen, 2017), generally is the democratization of culture, in other words: to give all children access to established cultural experiences, regardless of their social backgrounds, through arts education. It does so, however, without acknowledging the *cultural* backgrounds of the children. The underlying choice for this approach is a political one, in which canonical culture and established art forms are being privileged. This exclusionary policy is furthermore executed under the umbrella of ‘quality’, a term that is narrowed down to measurable, and thus financial and bureaucratic criteria (Rasmussen, 2017; Meerkerk & Es, 2016). The intended effect, in other words, can be measured in numbers: the more children participate, the greater the success.

Arts education policy, under the umbrella of democracy, thus comes to stand in the way of *cultural* democracy: the endorsement of different cultural expressions and perspectives in arts and cultural education as well as in arts and cultural (education) policy. Over the past few years, increasing evidence from research has surfaced indicating the tremendous potential impact of arts and cultural education on societal concerns, concluding in a call to give the arts priority in policy (Wilson, Gross, & Bull, 2017). Thus, the potential role of arts education for building democratic citizenship may turn out to be a crucial argument for legitimizing arts education. An open question in that regard is the empirical foundation for such arguments. The effects of an arts education policy program aimed at cultural democracy is not as easily measured, it requires intensive fieldwork and a strong antenna for cultural differences and biases. More research in this direction, aimed at ample data and objective criteria for measurement is needed to strengthen the position of cultural, aesthetic, and arts education in politics and policy.

Policy in arts education

In both research on arts education and in arts education advocacy, the political, societal, and moral effects of arts education form a continuous backdrop. Starting with the work of John Dewey (Dewey, 1916), the impact of arts education on democratic citizenship has become a central tenet of arts education as well as an object of research. A recent example of this is the debate about the EBacc, the accountability measure for school performance in England. Like in many other countries, Language and Mathematics have in England become the primary criteria for excellence, at the expense of the status of the arts as a school subject. According to many, this has a significant impact on the democratic task of the school: building responsible citizens. Especially the arts have a role to play in this (Thomson et al., 2019).

The discussion on arts integration internationally focuses on both the enhancement of creativity and disciplinary competencies as well as on citizenship skills (Allina, 2018). The latter are at the core of the importance of the arts in education: by putting the arts center stage: “arts educators [...] are uniquely positioned to effect change” (Morgan, 2018), by offering multiple perspectives on reality, training students in negotiating differences, and making them more aware of diversity in cultural expressions. This effect of the arts in education is seen by practitioners as an important outcome of arts and cultural education (Meerkerk, Neele & Korven, 2021). The artistic and theoretical explorations by Johnston (2018) on the role of the visual arts in conflict transformation are a convincing example, as well as a call to action of the moral and political potency of the arts in the education of children and youth. Johnston calls his approach ‘critical visual arts education’, stressing the public role of the arts in education. Research in this direction remains rather scarce, however. This may be caused by fear of a political bias in such research. One challenge for any researcher in the field of cultural, aesthetic, and arts education is finding a balance between engagement with the subject and a nuanced scholarly stance.

Conclusions

This article stressed the two-way entanglement of arts education and policy. This imbraglio is likely to continue to influence research, practice, and policy for many years to come. I have tried to show how arts education policy has considerable impact on the political consequences of arts education and the available choices for arts educators to opt for a democratic and engaged perspective in their teaching. The central question that, given the above considerations, I hope will become visible in future issues of this journal and in other arts and cultural education research is how to strengthen the ties between the needs of arts educators for recognition, the political need for the building of democratic citizenship in politics, and the empirical and theoretical research on arts and cultural education by dovetailing the call for more arts education in policy and more politics in arts education.

Given this call for a political goal of arts education, the difference between theory and practice on one hand, and policy on the other is striking. While among researchers and practitioners alike, the democratic and transformational potential of the arts is seen as an important and even obvious argument for the arts as a core subject in education, the political debate on the role of arts and cultural education, inasmuch as it goes beyond classic goals of disciplinary skills and knowledge, has geared towards the potential *economic* impact of creativity through arts education. One reason for this might very well be that highlighting the political outcomes of arts education will always be (seen as) a shift towards a *specific* political outcome. In other words: a logical consequence of the interweaving of arts and cultural education with politics is that both practice and research must eventually embrace, rather than shy away from a po-

litical position. In the spirit of Eisner and Freire, I hope that the *International Journal for Research in Cultural, Aesthetic, and Arts Education* can become a platform for that debate.

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