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ART IN THE MAINSTREAM

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In Singapore, as in the United States, art is not considered a priority in the school curriculum. It is deemed to be valuable but not precisely essential. Art is often considered a frill, a peripheral or an educational extra in the school curriculum. Art periods are sometimes used for revision of other more important subjects especially nearing examinations. Parents are not unduly concerned if their children do not make the grade in art. In most schools the budget for art lessons is low. Most primary schools do not have art rooms for the effective implementation of art programmes. This is most unfortunate because art has a great deal to contribute to the overall development of a person. It helps to develop creative and logical thinking and provides a means of self expression.

'Art training is not one of the minor fillers of the curriculum but relates to the very foundation of education' (Rudolf Arnheim, 1983)

'Art provides the content; education the form' (Clark and Zimmerman, 1981)

Yet art education in school has not been given its due recognition. The following are some of the reasons advanced for the present state of art education.

The main reason is because art education has been taught under a 'contextualist' justification. Art has been useful in the school curriculum for various reasons except for its unique qualities.

- * Art serves as an emotional outlet for the children we teach.
- * Art provides a vocation for those not academically inclined.
- * Art provides a form of enrichment for the children.
- * Art is useful as a relief from the vigor and tensions of the necessities in the school curriculum.

Art has been treated as ornaments rather than as a necessity of life. As long as art education is being thought of as being a handmaiden to other disciplines, it will never be considered to be important enough to be at the core of education. This will effect the status of the subject and the morale of the art teachers.

ART EDUCATION IN THE USA NOW

In the United States, art educators are making a concerted effort to bring art education back into focus. In 1965, they met at the Penn State Conference and made the recommendation that art education should consist of the teaching of art production, history, appreciation and aesthetics, in order to reestablish art to be at the core of education where it rightly belongs. Art is far from being a frill. It is a body of knowledge to be learnt. It is a discipline in itself. Unless art teaching takes into consideration the role of the artist, the art critic, the historian, and the aesthete, it will not earn the status it justly deserves. The present trend in art teaching concentrates on the production aspect of art education. Art education has much more to offer. Art education provides unique opportunities for training in the production of visual images, the development of manual skills, creativity and self-expression. All these, besides providing the development of creative skills, teach our children an appreciation of the visual phenomena in nature and the built environment. It teaches our children to exercise value judgment.

In 1982 the Getty Center for Education in the Arts was formed to focus on the issues and challenges confronting today's art educators and policymakers. It is based on the conviction that the ideas and values communicated through art are an essential part of every child's education. The Center wanted to understand better why art education is accorded such low status in most of the schools in the United States. It embarked on a research project to find out the cause for the low status in art education and to provide recommendations to make it an important feature of the school curriculum. It came out with 'Beyond Creating: The Place of Art in America's School' its first public report in 1985. Its findings, augmented by extensive interviews with leading art educators, led the Getty to conclude that if art

education is to move from the sidelines of instruction to a more central place in a balanced school curriculum, its content needs to be expanded to include attention to the disciplines that contribute to understanding art: art production, art history, art criticism and aesthetics. The inclusion of these four content areas in art instruction is important because each develops knowledge and techniques that contribute significantly not only to children's artistic creations, but also to their ability to draw facts and inferences about the cultural and historical contexts for art and to analyse and interpret the powerful ideas that art communicates.

The National Art Education Association of America also came out with a package called AIM (Art in the Mainstream), a visual-verbal package to reiterate the fact that art should be at the core of education rather than a peripheral. It emphasizes that Art inculcates good work attitudes, teaches value, and develops visual language. Art has historically been work, physical, mental and imaginative work for the child and the adult. Art constitutes a language in itself, the language of visual image which is today fast replacing the language of the written and spoken word. It is therefore vital that our students be taught to observe, to interpret and even to evaluate visual images in the works of art that surround them. Art is the study, the creation, and the examination of visual images. A civilized society cannot function without artists and designers nor without a discriminating, discerning, perceptive and knowledgeable public. The AIM package therefore tries to promote the concept of art education as providing three things that we all need and want. It emphasizes that art means work, art means language and art means values.

WHAT MUST BE DONE IN SINGAPORE

In the Singapore context, art teaching tends to be production biased and examination orientated. Our teachers have done well in this respect. Our students produce wonderful art pieces and score well in examinations and win awards in art competitions. However, as art educators, art teachers need to bear in mind that an effective art education programme, besides producing art works and preparing students for examinations,

also develops the whole human being into a valuable and useful citizen. Despite our constraints of timetabling, budget, personnel and physical facilities it is necessary for us to reflect on the values and benefits that a proper art education can contribute towards the all round education of the children we teach. Extra-curricula activities could be exploited to teach art more effectively. In fact children's critical and creative faculties and leadership qualities are best developed during such informal lessons unhampered by timetable and syllabus constraints. Extra curricula activities can be used to reinforce the learning of the historical, cultural and aesthetics aspects of art education through visits to historical sites, museums, art galleries, art studios and the doing of project work.

As in the United States, in order for art to be taught effectively, it must include not only the production domain but also the historical, cultural, critical and aesthetic domains of art education. If this is not done, art teaching will remain a frill and languish at the sidelines of education.

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