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IDEAS

Explorations of Artistic Practices in Singapore Schools

The arts encompass essential components of education for the 21st century because they offer multiple ways for students to perceive and understand the world. Various forms of representations are embedded in our daily lives through the artistic domains (e.g., music, dance and the visual arts), which engage meaningful relationships between different cognitive and emotional processes.

The project *Creativity: Representational Praxis in Artistic Domains* was conceptualized to examine various artistic practices in selected Singaporean classrooms at three levels - Preschool, Primary and Secondary. Our case study project, which began in August 2004, has focused on students' multimodal meaning-making, particularly in the visual arts, music and movement (that is, the use of visual, spatial, aural, musical and bodily-kinesthetic modes of expression). The emphasis on students' representations has led to an understanding of both the teachers' and students' outlook on the arts and the creative practices that have been undertaken in Singaporean classrooms.

What we did

Through an ethnographical approach, over 30 observations were made in these schools to probe the meaning of creativity from the perspectives of students, educators, parents and community members. In addition, an arts coding system was conceived to decipher the modalities of representational praxis within and across different arts media, and this has been implemented in the observations that were carried out in schools.

These observations focused on three key aspects of arts pedagogy:

1. Preschool, primary (P1) and secondary (S1) students' understanding and use of multiple modes of representational thought and expression to generate, communicate and interpret meaning;
2. The processes of representational meaning-making that are involved; and
3. The type and level of support and encouragement that occurs in the learning of semiotic systems within students' school, home, and community environmental contexts.

We also collected student artifacts, teacher documentation and school brochures and documents to develop an overview of arts practice in the schools, and interviewed teachers about what they saw as the challenges, constraints, goals and opportunities for arts pedagogy and practice. In addition, interviews with students and parents helped us get a picture of their likes/dislikes about education in the arts, and their interest, expectations and participation in the arts in and outside of school.

What we have found so far

The project is now complete, and we are aiming to move into a new phase next year. Although the analysis of the data and the writing up of the results are still in progress, some preliminary findings are reported here.

Dance lessons that were observed seemed to have a high emphasis on expressive forms of communication. In particular, the dance teachers used expressive language, including metaphors and similes, as part of their oral instructions. For example, "Stepping on the ants" was used to create imagery in young children's minds and to

teach them how to gently dance on the tip of their toes.

Art lessons also included a large emphasis on visual metaphor and other semiotic forms of meaning-making, such as in the example below (left), where secondary students used animals and other images for the letters of their names, to reflect their personalities.



Primary school teachers encouraged children to use their bodies to express stylized forms of movement and encouraged personal forms of expression to represent aspects of themselves or their worlds. In the example above (right), the boy spontaneously gave an enactive gesture to show that he was "Spiderman" who was about to spin a web.

Dance teachers also gave oral instructions while physically demonstrating the dance steps for students. However, as class groups moved closer to forthcoming concerts, where students already knew many of the steps, rehearsals centred more on verbal instructions than on physical demonstrations. The teachers were verbally assisting the students to remember and practise what they had learned.

Students who were interviewed expressed their passion for the arts. The secondary dance students, for example, said they valued the role of creativity in dance education, but also acknowledged that consistent practice was necessary in honing the basics. A group of dance students (at secondary level) shared their views when they were asked about their rehearsals for the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) Dance Competition:

- Student: *We really put in a lot of effort, a lot of time.*
- Student: *We even come back specially on Mondays to practise.*
- Student: *Extra.*
- Student: *Yah, extra. Saturdays.*
- Student: *Three days...four days a week. We come back four days a week.*
- Student: *And the Secondary 3s, two and a half hours every day. Not every day.*
- Student: *Every session.*
- Student: *Yah, every session. Quite intensive.*
- Interviewer: *Was there any feedback given back to you on the competition?*
- Student: *The vice principal wrote on my report card that we've done well.*
[?]
- Interviewer: *Do you think you learned anything from the whole long period of practising for the SYF competition?*
- Students: *Of course.*
- Student: *Confidence.*
- Interviewer: *Confidence? Anything else?*
- Student: *Work together. 'Cos we always have conflicts and fights, and quarrel.*
- Student: *Encouragement. SYF. The teacher. Choreographer.*

The students also wished for more time for the arts each week at school, and for more time for personal exploration within the various art forms. Similarly, parents who were interviewed commented that they believed the arts were very important. They said they thought the arts should be given a higher priority in schools, and that the teaching and learning of arts should not have to take place outside of school

hours.

Where we go from here

The current findings are both interesting and promising. The extension of this current project in the development of the arts in Singaporean schools is both exciting and valuable.

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The Research Team

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