

## Editorial

### THE ARTS AND ACTION RESEARCH

Kurt W. Clausen, Editor

The last two decades have seen an almost unrelenting decline in the influence that the arts have played in the experience of most North American public school students. Drawing, painting, sculpture, music and drama have all been minimized at both the elementary and secondary levels, in large part, due to an increased focus on academic performance testing. In fact, this shift has been accelerated since the *No Child Left Behind Act* was put into effect in 2001 across the United States. Of course, throughout the history of education, there has always existed a tension as to what subject areas should be cut and what should remain. Driving this tension have been budget constraints, time limitations and, most importantly, societal values. At the present moment in our history, these values have included a loss of faith in anything beyond the material: if it cannot be counted or seen to have concrete value for students' future careers, it is perceived as a waste of time. To reinforce this belief, a series of "high stakes", standardized testing has been implemented. It comes as no surprise, then, that the subjects who prosper under these conditions are the ones who lend themselves to this quantitative yoke: literacy, mathematics and science.

But what of the Arts? Where do they fit into this present curricular vision? In his recent review, Michael Parsons argues that:

...art is often considered (by administrators, parents, politicians, even by teachers of other subjects) a soft subject where little thinking is required. Many continue to believe that art is dominantly a matter of feeling, intuition, talent, or creativity, all understood as not including what we normally call thinking; hence, art still has a weak place in the curriculum... (Parsons, 2005, p. 370)

This is amply supported by the research done by the two authors whom he reviewed: A.D. Efland (2002) and Elliot Eisner (2002). Using the historical approach in his book *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum*, Efland traces the evolution of the Western psyche as it comes to the conclusion that the arts are academically unchallenging, and should be used solely for entertainment. Arguing in much the same vein, Eisner's book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* found that this mentality has landed the arts at the edge, rather than at the centre, of education. Both authors conclude that this has done a lot to rob children of meeting their full potential beyond the rote memorization and mechanical calculations needed for accountability.

The main detriment to the Arts, in this materialistic era, is its inability or stubborn unwillingness to submit to the general homogenization that other disciplines are ready to subject themselves. If every child in one class paints a different picture (and all look nothing like what the teacher suggested) does it affect the class average? Must all students react the same way to a musical composition? Should all dramatic arts students mimic Olivier? Most competent teachers would answer - absolutely not! Instead, they would argue that the study and practice of any art-form is an intensely personal experience that cannot be generalized. However, this should not diminish the experience of any student and the role of the Arts in the curriculum.

But, lack of hard-core evidence *does* diminish the Arts (at least in the eyes of those in power). Next to home economics (another subject on the chopping block), the Arts are the most

expensive programmes to run: Musical instruments, painting equipment, kilns, and studio theatres are costly propositions. "Where's the return on this investment?" school officials may well ask themselves. To a society that has little trust in anything, therefore, it is no wonder art shows, high-school productions and bands have to constantly fund-raise and prove themselves. Perhaps it is time for the Arts to stop asking a faithless society to believe in the goodness of what they're doing and show, in concrete terms, the goodness being done.

Here is where a stand-off exists between the two sides: The general population has largely ceased to rely on Arts teachers to act without accountability, while Arts teachers will not subject themselves to standardized, large-scale research or evaluation to simply pander to the general population. Perhaps, it is at this stage that action research may be the best way to bridge this gap. If done carefully, with quality and rigour, it will give Arts researchers the ability to show the beneficial results of an Arts education – and do it on their own, individualized terms. At the same time, it is hoped that with a critical mass of studies done by Arts researchers in many situations, a growing case can be made for the importance of the Arts within the curriculum, and its presence can once again be restored within the school timetable.

In fact, numerous art-related projects have indeed come to the fore in recent years (see appendix below) to claim their importance through the use of action research methods. It is with pleasure that the OAR adds its contribution through the works of this issue: **Anne Hewson** of St. Thomas University examines the use of Forum Theatre in relation to classroom management strategies, while **Maureen Ferley** experiments with ways of achieving effective and efficient band rehearsals at the junior high level.

Finally, as a connector to our next issue, **Howard Slepko's** article deals with "authentic" professional development for teachers (arts and otherwise) as they relate to an on-line SchoolNet project entitled *GrassRoots*. In these various website projects, curriculum integration of the various aspects of literature, social studies, art-work and computer technology find root.

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### Appendix – Arts-Related Projects and Articles (The Last 10 Years)

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