

# CS RESEARCH REPORT

## *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning*

A recent national report released in the United States contains research that demonstrates, in rigorous terms, how and why the arts contribute to effective learning and attitudinal change in young people of school and post-school age.

*Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning* is a report that provides new evidence of enhanced learning and achievement when students are involved in a variety of arts experiences. *Champions of change* reveals the effect of learning in and through the arts on the development of a range of competencies for young people.

The report is important for NSW teachers in the four fields of the arts, as it contains internationally acknowledged current research. The status of the report gives credible support to claims that the arts are important to the school curriculum. This claim is reinforced by the research from Columbia University that demonstrates an interdependence of learning across subject disciplines, which is accessible to different students in different ways.

The U.S. Arts Education Partnership invited seven teams of researchers to examine a variety of arts education programs using diverse methodologies. The programs included elementary (primary) and secondary school settings, as well as out-of-school and post-school environments.

The research projects were conducted independently, but the consensus is that engagement in the arts nurtures the development of cognitive, social and personal competencies by developing multiple skills and abilities.

### The findings

NSW dance, drama, music or visual arts teachers will not be surprised by many of the findings of the research teams – they are known to most of us either through previous research, or they belong to the “common lore” of arts education.

For example, the results indicate correlations between mathematics and musical intelligences, and that students gain enhanced self-esteem through success in arts education programs. The research also shows that classroom practice emulates professional practice and has direct correlation in general with the world of work.

One important finding is that learning in and through the arts can help less advantaged students to achieve academically in formal schooling. The *Involvement in the Arts and Human Development* (IAHD) project reveals that “high arts participation” makes a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds than for those from high-income background. The IAHD research demonstrates the importance for students of sustained involvement in a single discipline. The disciplines selected were music (instrumental), because of related research suggesting links between music and cognitive development, and drama, because of links with the development of various skills and attitudes.

The Learning in and Through the Arts (LITA) research suggests that learning in one domain supports and stimulates learning in others, which in turn supports learning in a complex web of influence described as a “constellation”.

### Effects of learning in the arts

The report identifies a number of reasons why the arts change the learning experience of students.

The ArtsConnection study and the LITA research build on recent research on the effect of different styles of learning on student achievement. The studies provide examples of students’ success in the arts which, in turn, leads to success in other areas of learning.

The LITA and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) projects reveal that when the arts become central to the learning environment, a school’s culture is changed and conditions for learning are improved.

The IAHD study, in particular, demonstrates that intensive involvement in specific arts disciplines can offer poorly motivated students renewed interest in learning while accepting the unlimited challenges offered by the arts form. In the ArtsConnection project, students work with mentors and professional artists to extend their expertise in specific disciplines.

The research reveals a close relationship between learning experiences in the arts and workplace competencies. Students immersed in arts practices are motivated to learn for the intrinsic value of the learning experience itself – they become their own toughest critics. Learning in the arts mirrors current and future workplace behaviours.

The NSW dance, drama, music and visual arts syllabuses developed over the last four years parallel key aspects of the US report. The emphasis upon sustained engagement, rigour in learning experiences, the acquisition of multiple skills (including generating ideas, planning, realising ideas and reflecting on results) and developing conceptual strength and resolution, are key elements of our syllabuses.

## Implications for schools and the system

If arts experiences help to level the playing field for less advantaged students, then more proven resources for learning in the arts need to be available to these students.

Highly trained teachers, able to foster passion for the subject in students and to model practice, are critical for achieving the learning outcomes identified in the research.

If, as demonstrated in the research, well-constructed partnerships between schools and arts organisations can improve outcomes for students, then such partnerships must be nurtured and replicated.

The achievement of artistic and learning excellence requires opportunities for the sustained engagement by students in their work during individual sessions and over time. The provision of the learning experiences need not be confined to the classroom or school, but may extend to many settings at different times.

Superior results are associated with the concept of “practice” and the development of a sense of “craft”. When teachers model professional practice and students emulate the processes and work habits of artists, they acquire skills and techniques and develop an understanding of conventions, codings and signifiers.

Sustained engagement with the arts allows students to develop self-regulation and resilience, or “flow” – qualities regularly associated with personal success. The arts need to be embedded in the regular timetable of the school, with opportunities for extension time to enable students already immersed in work programs to further pursue their involvement.

If sustained, integrated and complex projects, like an art exhibition, a musical performance or a theatre production, significantly deepen the learning process, then school schedules should be modified to make such experiences possible.

## Conclusion

The compelling evidence of this research indicates that student outcomes are improved in an environment where high quality arts education is offered and where the school climate supports active and productive learning.

In the next edition of **CURRICULUM SUPPORT**, I will provide a precis of selected reports to enlarge upon some of the comments contained in this article. If you want to look it up on the Internet, this report is published on [www.pcah.gov/new.html](http://www.pcah.gov/new.html).

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