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Analysing the Arts in the National Curriculum in compulsory education in Iceland.

In this article we will present and analyse how arts are represented in Icelandic compulsory education with a special focus on dramatic art¹ to find out if all the arts are given equal space in compulsory education. Our research question is: Are all art forms equally represented in Icelandic education? The backdrop for this article is that in 2013 the Icelandic Ministry of Education declared drama as a key learning area to the national curriculum and opened the way for drama to be taught as a scheduled subject for all students in compulsory education. The findings indicated that the arts subjects are not equally represented in education and that the timeframe for the arts is divided into three categories instead of four, leaving drama with less time than other art forms in Icelandic compulsory education.

Changes in society, changes in education

Transformation of education in Europe for the future is needed because of rapid changes in society. Young people in Europe are facing new challenges on many levels due to the effects of climate change and societal changes, such as the huge number of refugees seeking shelter in Europe in recent years. The educational task is demanding. In Iceland, like in many other parts of Europe and the world, young people spend much of their time using the Internet and social media. Traditional children's games have been replaced by computer games.

We believe that there is far too little emphasis on arts and humanities in schools. Of course numeracy and literacy are important basic skills, but there is also a need to develop social skills in young people. It is important to encourage young people to develop their imagination by playing together, solving problems together, and making independent decisions. Moreover, young people can also be informed through digital

technologies and the arts about the threats and opportunities for their futures.

In the UNESCO's "Road Map to Arts Education" (UNESCO, 2006, p.14), which is intended to serve as a beacon for arts education in the 21st century, the following is stated:

"Building creative capacity and cultural awareness for the 21st Century is both a difficult and a critical task, but one that cannot be eluded. All forces of society must be engaged in the attempt to ensure that the new generations of this century gain the knowledge and skills and, perhaps even more importantly, the values and attitudes, the ethical principles and the moral directions to become responsible citizens of the world and guarantors of a sustainable future".

The Road Map aims to promote the role of arts education in meeting the need for creativity and cultural awareness, and places emphasis on the different strategies required to introduce arts education in the learning environment. In that context the question we want to explore is: Are all art forms equally represented in Icelandic compulsory education?

The importance of the arts

Through the arts people are able to express and enrich their feelings and acquire understanding and experience that cannot be expressed in words. Arts are concerned with concepts, ideas and objects that are related to human beings and their social environment.

"Through art students are able to examine social values and personal values concerning individuals, family, society, work and play, nature and environment, beauty, ugliness, violence and love". (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013, p. 146)

Elliot W. Eisner (2002) in his book *The arts and the creation of the mind* points out that art leads students toward discovery when learning. Students develop their senses through the arts and discover that there can be many possible solutions to a problem and questions may have more than one correct answer. Learning in the arts requires the ability to deal with unexpected projects throughout the working cycle, where minor changes can have a big impact. The arts provide experiences that we otherwise find difficult to obtain, and through the arts the students learn to trust their own judgment (pp. 4-24). He believed that students' minds are not unploughed acres. On

the contrary, he claims that students are susceptible to the seeds sown by their teachers. Using art methods in teaching affects the student's attitudes and skills and develops talent, creativity, and imagination and improves their work habits (p.71).

In his classical book *Art as Experience*, John Dewey (2005/1934) argued that children's cognitive and emotional development was best supported by constructive childhood play and problem solving. This attitude to learning prompted a revolution in educational thinking in which the arts were given a central role. The arts allow for a "complete merging of playfulness with seriousness" (Dewey, 2005/1934, p. 279). It is important that students develop skills in analytical thinking, clarity of written and spoken expression, collaboration, and creativity. These skills can all be developed through the arts.

The arts curriculum in Iceland

Compulsory education in Iceland is for children ages 6 to 16 years. The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools with subject areas (2013) specifies the subjects of arts and crafts as two categories. Arts are divided into *performing arts* (dance, drama), *visual arts* and *music*, and crafts into *home economics*, *design and crafts*, and *textiles*. Arts and crafts are numerous and diverse subjects. Although these subjects are related in various ways, they also differ. What unites them is the emphasis on craftsmanship, technology, creativity, aesthetics and values, material technology, ergonomics, interpretation and expression. According to the National Curriculum for compulsory school, arts and crafts should be taught a total of 900 minutes per week in grades 1- 4, 840 minutes per week in grades 5-7 and 340 minutes per week in grades 8-10. In total 2080 minutes spread out over a period of 10 years. That is a total of 15.5% of weekly classes in grades 1-10. Arts gets half of that percentage and crafts gets the other half. Leaving the arts with an average of 7.8 % (1040 minutes) that is divided into three categories, performing arts (dance and drama), visual arts and music with 2.6% each of weekly classes for all the grades. But because performing arts include both dance and drama it could be argued that the total time each student will have in drama is only 1.3% of the total time of the weekly classes in grade 1-10. In this case it's about 18 minutes per week for drama (and 18 for dance). While music and visual art have about 34 minutes a week. This is in total contradiction with the stated policy put forward in the curriculum that emphasis

should be on the use of drama at all levels. Every school decides if the subjects are taught separately or integrated in separate short-term courses that are allocated more hours in the timetable during certain periods or continuously throughout the school year. The reference timetable (from the Ministry) stipulates that performing arts, visual arts and music should be taught at every age level (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013).

Educational values of the arts

Art in education is considered to support the capacity to integrate the physical, intellectual and creative properties that promote a productive relation to culture. This ability is very important because of the social changes that we face in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2006, pp. 4-5). Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner (2004, pp. 135-159) stress that it is time to state the right arguments for the arts in schools and to begin to gather the right kind of evidence for these arguments. The best hope for the arts in schools is to justify them by highlighting what the arts can do that other subjects cannot do as well, or cannot do at all. Trineta Respress, and Ghazwan Lutfi (2006) found that when students get education in the arts they gain the skills and the maturity to deal with their own feelings. According to John O'Toole (2009), at school the "vast majority of children and young people look forward to the arts, are strongly and consistently motivated by them, and love to encounter them" (l.c. 2009, p. 11).

Drama provide powerful pedagogy that has a potential for transforming young people. Through cognitive learning they gain knowledge and skills in drama; through expressive development they grow through drama; through social pedagogy and function they learn through drama and in drama (O'Toole & O'Mara, 2007). In musical activities students listen, create and perform. It is a process where individuals create meaning by reacting to and working with tones, sounds and silence, alone or in cooperation with other subjects like in drama. Musical activity requires physical coordination; analytical thinking and emotional relationships and these are also required in dance and drama (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013 p. 153). Dance develops creativity and physical skills and it gives the students' opportunities to expresses their knowledge and understanding of reality through movement just as in drama. Visual arts are by nature a creative process; an important process where students find their inner voice, form connections and develop skills to

apply different approaches, such as drawing, painting, moulding, printing, paper cutting, and screen media. One of the main advantages of visual arts is that students have an opportunity to learn and express themselves without words like they do through dance, music and drama.

Educational values of drama

Michael Anderson (2012, p.10) points out that drama sits in a unique place at the intersection between intellectual, creative and embodied education. He adds that drama teachers have at their disposal an enormously powerful pedagogy that has the potential for transforming young people and modernising schooling. Education in drama includes training students in the methods of dramatic literacy in the widest sense. As drama is the art of the moment, drama teaching is able to take on issues that are relevant in society at any time.

"When the students come together and do their best in a production, the pillars of equality and democracy in school activities are strengthened and moreover such events have a positive influence on the students' fellow feeling and the school atmosphere, and this also creates a possibility of cooperation between the home and the school". (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013, p. 149)

According to the article *Drama makes meaning* (Drama Australia, 2015, p. 2), drama includes a wide variety of experiences, such as dramatic play, improvisation, theatrical performance, film and television drama, and includes both the processing and presentation of drama. Drama draws on many different contexts from past and present societies and cultures. Drama motivate students to learn and there is evidence that student participation in the arts can enhance their overall performance in school (Gallas, 1991). Paraphrasing Joan Lazarus (2012), students are engaged in the exploration of social, historical and educational issues by the study and use of drama. It is education facilitated by teachers who understand how drama can give voice to young people's concerns and ideas while connecting them to real and fictional figures throughout time (Lazarus, 2012 pp. 31-32). For many students the opportunity to learn in ways other than traditional formats is liberating. As one student said: "They taught me a lot of things that I didn't know... and you don't have to be stuck in the classroom on a chair being real quiet and that, you can actually get up" (O'Toole et al,

2005, pp. 50-51). The students bring their own cultural agendas into the work, which then flows out into the resulting general understandings.

Are all art forms equally represented in Icelandic education?

The implementation of drama in compulsory education in Iceland is unique in the Nordic context in that drama is placed as a mandatory subject in compulsory education (Österlind et al, 2016). The National Curriculum entitles all students access to the same core knowledge and skills in an equal way: that is to say, it is an equity and entitlement rationale. But having a National curriculum does not guarantee all students the same education. It is in the power of the headmasters whether policies are followed and drama is taught. Qualification of teachers also differ. Ivor Goodson has studied curriculum changes over the past 40 years. His research shows that the power and control of the curriculum has been transferred from professional groups (teachers and scholars) to political and commercial interest groups (Goodson, 2014, pp. 768-776). Michael Young wrote that the purpose of the curriculum is not only to transmit knowledge; it is to enable the next generation to build on that knowledge and create new knowledge, for that is how human societies progress and how individuals develop (Young, 2013, pp. 101-102).

Art subjects in the Icelandic curriculum are divided into three subject areas, as mentioned before: performing arts (dance, drama), visual arts and music. It could be argued that as a newcomer in the curriculum, drama is given less time than other art subjects because it is combined with dance as performing arts. This results in the three subjects (*performing arts*, *visual arts* and *music*) not being equally represented in Icelandic compulsory education. On the other hand, the curriculum states that drama should also be integrated as a teaching method with other subjects and it could also be taught in short-term courses that are allocated more hours in the timetable for certain periods of time or continuously throughout the school year. Because drama instruction is a newcomer in the curriculum, in some schools drama teachers are faced with the additional problem of having no classroom to teach in. That problem is a political matter. The qualities and uniqueness of drama offer an exclusive learning opportunity. It can be said that every person is capable of creating and interpreting, although certain circumstances and environments will affect how this ability develops (Ragnarsdóttir & Thorkelsdóttir, 2012, p. 3). Albert Victor Kelly (2004) emphasises

that if a particular subject is to be fully implemented in schools, it is important and even necessary that the subject be included within the school operation plan, not just in the school curriculum guide or the formal curriculum. Most troubling, particularly to linear thinkers, is that the timetable in compulsory education in Iceland is focused on theoretical knowledge and testing which side-lines the arts.

Conclusions - discussion

The question we raised at the beginning: "Are all arts equally represented in Icelandic education?" has now been addressed and discussed. We have pointed out that because drama and dance are combined in the performing arts in the Icelandic curriculum, the arts are not equally represented, both with reference to the timetable and also the site for drama teaching (classroom). Drama is the newcomer in the curriculum and perhaps therefore does not have the same status as the other art subjects. It has yet to claim its place in schools. For implementation to be successful and for drama to have equal status to other art forms, we also need to have qualified teachers who can teach drama and have opportunities for professional development in drama. The National Curriculum states that drama could be used as a mode for learning, thus giving drama the opportunity to be at the very heart of the curriculum. In this fragile landscape of drama being the newcomer in the curriculum, the stakes are high in Iceland. Whether drama will maintain its place within education will be up to the government and school authorities. It also relies on good education of drama teachers, their involvement and interest. We ask for a transformation of education for the future where arts play a bigger role and all art forms are equally represented.

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ⁱ According to the Icelandic curriculum, drama is called dramatic art, but in this article we will call it drama.