ARTISTS IN SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY OF THE ARTS-IN-EDUCATION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The aims of the recent arts education reform is to build on the strengths of existing practice, to allow greater autonomy for schools to fully develop their school-based arts curriculum and to provide space for more new art forms for students to pursue their preferences in the arts. This paper investigates the effects of the ‘Arts-in-Education’ project (2001-2002), piloted in two secondary schools in Hong Kong, on the school curriculum, student learning and partnership with the artist. Results of the case study where the artist worked collaboratively with the schoolteachers during formal and informal hours on a musical production revealed that school support such as special timetabling arrangements could greatly facilitate a successful model. Other factors contributing to effective student learning included the commitment and dedication of the artist, a strong artist/school partnership, common goals, sufficient funding and resource support from the school management and parents. Qualitative data, collected from lesson observation, interviews, focus group discussion and project documents had revealed successful ingredients for the across-the-arts and the interdisciplinary approaches, while pressing issues also emerged, to which educators need to pay special attention when responding to the recent education policies.

INTRODUCTION

The recent education policies encourage students to learn how to learn; the teaching strategy is shifted to be more student-centred, while the arts teachers view themselves as facilitators who hold a life-long attitude towards learning and become role models for their students. The proposed arts curriculum (CDC, 2002) included four learning targets: to develop creativity and imagination; to develop skills and processes; to cultivate critical responses and to understand arts in context. The overall aims of the arts education reform are to build on the strengths of existing practice; to allow greater autonomy for the school-based arts curriculum and to provide space for more new art forms such as media arts, dance and drama. Other curriculum planning approaches are suggested, such as across-the-arts approach; artists-in-schools programmes; interdisciplinary learning and a community-focused approach. It was highly recommended that a school’s arts education policy should be formulated by the Principal, arts panel and other subject teachers to promote a school-based arts curriculum.
THE ‘ARTS-IN-EDUCATION’ PROJECT

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) was set up in 1995 to promote the appreciation and development of the arts. In view of the recent reform, a three-year (2000-2003) ‘Arts-in-Education’ (AiE) project was proposed to explore new ways of promoting arts and to implement the arts reform in schools. Co-organized by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and the Creative Arts Department of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), it received a donation of HK$4 million dollars from the Hong Kong Bank Foundation to develop feasible, innovative models exploring across-the-arts and interdisciplinary approaches. It encouraged artists to interact with teachers and students during formal time to integrate any art form(s) with other arts and/or discipline areas so that students could link their knowledge laterally and more cohesively through new learning experiences. Each pilot school received about HK$78,000, including artist’s fees, to implement the project. International arts educators Eppel, Forrest and Swanwick shared their experiences from the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, followed by a series of workshops for teachers and artists in 2000. From 2001-2003, eight projects, each comprised a pilot school and a partner school, were implemented in each year. The 01-02 projects utilized various art forms: visual art, music, dance, drama, Chinese Xiqu and digital art, to facilitate student learning as part of the formal curriculum. The EMB was responsible for monitoring the projects, while the HKIEd was to evaluate their outcomes. Two AiE schools, which tried to work on the production of a musical by integrating a number of arts and non-arts subjects, were selected for investigation.

The Dreamcoat of Mount On Shan

Being a Catholic brother, School A’s project leader strongly believes that the arts can express the truth, kindness and beauty of humanity. The musical incorporated the Bible story of Joseph, a brief school history and the communal life of the early settlement in Ma On Shan. All Form Two students of about two hundred were involved in the project. The artist, who was a well-qualified and experienced dramatist, gave expert advice in the workshops and directed the musical production. The project integrated seven subjects, namely Religious Studies, Art, Music, Physical Education, Home Economics, Design and Technology, and Computer Studies, and involved nine teachers. The aims of producing a musical were that students could i) apply digital techniques in prop and costume design; ii) gain skills in making digital images and select an interesting area to contribute actively to the musical; iii) realize the close link between technology, arts and culture and their daily life and iv) appreciate the contributions made by individual and teamwork. To facilitate efficient implementation, the Principal arranged a common block of time in the second stage for students to select a workshop in which to participate. The project was divided into four stages: a) computer classes for all to acquire skills to design props, costumes and to arrange scores; b) simultaneous workshops for student dancers, choir members, players, costume and prop designers; c) combined rehearsals for the musical and d) dress rehearsal and final performance. The progress was made known to everyone in school through the intranet. The artist worked extremely hard with the teachers to coach the students for various roles. The musical was
successfully performed in the school hall in July 2002, in front of the whole school, Catholic brothers and nuns, school Principals and the AiE organizers.

*The New Wizard of Oz*

School B was a Christian secondary school where the Principal had valued arts education not only by formally establishing art and music in the curriculum, but also by encouraging a variety of extra-curricular arts activities. By adding the dance ingredient, the school management and the project leader, who was the music teacher, hoped to provide students with an integrated arts experience through producing a musical based on the popular Wizard of Oz story. Two Form Two classes of about eighty students took part in the project. The arts organization was a well-established dance company, which had worked well with the school for two years. Five subjects were involved, including Religious Studies, Chinese, Music, Home Economics and Physical Education, with the respective subject teachers participating. The aims of the project were that students could i) learn to care for and love one another through exploring the theme; ii) develop creativity and imagination through writing the script, song lyrics and dance steps; iii) enjoy the learning process with self-confidence and better communication skills and iv) reflect if dance and drama would be welcome as part of the formal curriculum. The school had arranged double lessons for Music and Physical Education in the timetable to facilitate the dance lessons. Other help was also given regarding extra funding, secretarial and IT support. The project took about six months to prepare and finished with a successful public performance, which involved both the performers and a huge stage crew adding up to over two hundred students and staff.

**RESEARCH INVESTIGATION AND FINDINGS**

**Aims and Objectives**

While the recent arts education reform encourages schools to fully develop their school-based arts curriculum and to offer students all-round education, by observing an artist work collaboratively with teachers during school hours and through other qualitative data analysis, this research aims to investigate alternative strategies using an across-the-arts or interdisciplinary approach; effective student learning and a successful artist/school partnership. It is hoped that the findings can enlighten school administrators, teachers and artists when planning for the new school-based arts curriculum.

**Methods**

In order to address the research questions of examining curriculum models and alternative approaches, student learning with the intervention of an artist, and effective partnership between the artist and teachers, qualitative data were collected through non-participant lesson observation, semi-structured interviews with the Principal, the artist, the teachers concerned and a random sample of students. A focus group discussion was arranged for the school Principals, the teachers and the artists to probe issues and problems. The investigation also included a review of documents such as the project proposals, school reports, multi-media, lesson plans and audio/video tapes.
Findings and Discussion

Curriculum model and school support

In recent years, musicians, visual artists, dancers and writers have worked in integrated creative processes to loosen art form boundaries. The Arts Education Reform also emphasizes a broader perspective of the arts and the interdisciplinary and across-the-arts approaches as alternative modes of teaching and learning (CDC, 2000). These approaches are described as a 'weak classification' under Bernstein’s model of learning (Bernstein, 2000). The boundaries of a subject are a classification system. Strong classification implies that different subject contents are kept well away from each other by strong borders so that curriculum contents are clearly laid with little room for students to explore topics of their interest among subjects. Weak classification implies that the boundaries between subjects are blurred with reduced insulation so that contents can be more integrated. It can give students more room for decision-making about what to learn (Swanwick, 1988; Cheung, 2001). Both schools employed the interdisciplinary approach, which allowed the students to experience not only multiple arts: music, art and dance, but also other subjects like religious studies or design technology in a thematic way to produce a musical.

In School A, apart from learning how to use different software packages in the computer lessons, e.g. Noteworthy for music arrangement and Prodesktop 2000 for Design Technology model designs, a common block had been specially timetabled for all the arts and humanities, to facilitate loosening of the subject boundaries for effective integration. The artist was able to monitor student progress efficiently in the simultaneous workshops. In School B, art forms like art, music and dance were explored in the formal class time, with specially arranged double lessons to facilitate more in-depth, active and imaginative arts learning. Moreover, both schools used their informal time flexibly, for extra rehearsals and refinement at the final stage, to integrate the whole musical. Like many artists-in-residence schemes and integrated arts programmes, the AiE Project intended to encourage schools to look beyond examination-oriented learning and the rigid curriculum structure, and to take a broader humanistic view of education and student needs (Braden, 1978; Xin shiji yishu jiaocai bianxiezu, 2002). The student questionnaire findings in School B showed that the majority agreed to include dance in the formal curriculum.

While School A valued the arts as a reflection of human beauty, creation and expression, School B viewed arts as a part of living, where the process of making arts was valued more than the product itself. The two Principals gave their AiE projects top priority by giving them full administrative, financial, manpower and moral support. Both schools made the school hall available for rehearsals after school, and had provided financial support internally and through the support of parents and alumni (in the case of School B), on top of the subsidy from the Hong Kong Bank Foundation. Appropriate support and encouragement from the school Principal was crucial for a successful project. Financial commitment helped the schools to cultivate ownership of and commitment to the partnership, which in turn made the artists feel welcome and encouraged them to contribute fully to achieve success (Seidel et al, 2001).
Student learning

Several characteristics on student learning were identified:

i) Artistic skills: The projects not only enhanced the students’ knowledge and skills in the existing arts like managing difficult part-singing in School A, making props, backdrop and colourful costumes, they also expanded other artistic experiences like dance and drama. The final report of School B reflected that the students’ dance skills were improved and their perception of dance performance broadened. The girls accepted dance more readily while the boys were formerly quite shy about it. The artist managed to convey appropriate concept and skills and the boys began to gain confidence. They showed enjoyment when they were invited to choreograph.

ii) Creativity: The project gave the children an insight into the creative processes involved in working with the arts and a wider appreciation of the arts and artists. The artists encouraged the students’ creative, critical and reflective thoughts by allowing divergent thinking about various art designs. A teacher in School A reflected that the students could express themselves creatively in dance and drama and co-operated well with their peers. In School B, the students designed their own dance steps with critical judgment for improvement. They also created their own script and lyrics, the choreography and costumes. Students learned to appreciate the amount of commitment and hard work required during the creative process to strive for the best performance.

iii) Generic Skills: The musical presented an effective stimulus for critical reflection and discussion on cultural issues. The majority of School B’s students could relate the moral of the musical (love thy neighbour) to caring for their families, friends and classmates and accepting each other’s weaknesses. From their questionnaire findings, some had gained self-esteem, developed leadership, communication, co-operation skills and respect for others through the learning process. School A’s students reflected that life-long learning was necessary, and the majority claimed that they had learned how to co-operate with others better, developed decision-making, teamwork and made new friends. The projects developed personal and social skills and general capacities similar to those found in other parts of the world (Oddie et al., 1998, Abeles et al, 2002).

iv) Motivation and joyful learning: Working with multiple art forms encouraged greater motivation and joy of learning (Xin shiji yishu jiaocai bianxiezhu, 2002). Students showed interest in the new curriculum and motivated to learn with the artist. On a 6-point scale where 6 meant ‘strongly agree’, School A’s student questionnaire indicated that both the IT experience and the arts workshops were inspiring (4.6) and interesting (4.8). They understood how a musical was produced (4.7) and had acquired the digital techniques for designing props and backdrop (4.4). They felt proud of making the moon and the stars and realised that technology was related to arts, culture and their daily life. They preferred this mode of learning, which gave them choices to choose the parts they most wanted to play in the musical. Similarly, a student in School B stated that he felt bored at first, but when he could design dance steps to stretch himself, he started to enjoy the learning process.

v) Affective experience: The arts also give people the space and channel to explore their feelings and to realize their aspiration (Ofsted, 1998). Not only had the students undergone a peak experience during the musical production, when they were asked what
impressed them most in the musical, some students in School A expressed that it was seeing a Catholic brother moved to tears during their performance.

**Artist / school partnership**

Downing suggested four types of artist/teacher partnership (Oddie, 1998): a) the ‘Supply-led’, where the artist/arts organization offered a service or product to schools, b) the ‘Demand-led’ where the school called for a specific service or product with a proposed budget, c) the ‘Overlapping agendas of interests’ where school and arts organization negotiated from their respective standpoints and d) the ‘Dynamic dialogue’ where the relationship between both parties was open-ended and there was a process involving discovery and risk-taking. School A resembled Downing’s ‘Dynamic dialogue’ partnership where both parties discovered new ways of solving problems, while School B resembled the ‘Demand-led’ type of partnership where the Dance Company tried to fulfill the school’s request to integrate dance with the existing arts to produce a musical.

Both schools had prior acquaintance with the artist/dance company before the projects started, and in each case the relationship between them was harmonious and well maintained. Joint planning with goals related to the school vision was conducted in School A while clearly defined partner’s roles, good communication, sustained engagement with students and acknowledgment of each other’s contributions were evident in both schools that encouraged ownership and helped to draw support from other staff and parents. There was clear distribution of work among staff involved with active participation and interaction. These were signs of strong partnership manifested in similar arts projects (Xin shiji yishu jiaocai bianxiezu, 2002; Deasy, 2002).

In School A, the regular teachers conducted most of the workshops, while the artist acted as the director, whose main task was to connect the separate parts into an integrated whole. Strong commitment and enthusiasm from the artist was reflected from the interview and the focus group meeting.

‘I felt the challenge, as producing a musical is a large task. But the school has shown its determination, and was most supportive in arranging formal time and extra-curricular hours, and there was a strong team spirit from the teachers, who also helped in class discipline. So I took up the challenge’, said the artist.

The teachers appreciated the outstanding professionalism of the artist, who had shared new knowledge and experience with them. The dedication and commitment of her set excellent role models for staff. The project leader also had strong leadership ability and managed to communicate very well with other staff and students. As a music teacher, he managed to collaborate with other arts teachers to build a safe place for the arts in school, which was an important factor for success (Eisner, 2001).

In School B, both the teachers and students gained professional dance skills and knowledge from the dancer of the dance company, who appreciated the contributions from the teachers. Through regular meetings, there was good understanding and teamwork between the two parties. The dancer conducted the dance workshops and gave the stage crew useful advice while the teachers trained the choir and supervised the
costume and prop design. They maintained trust and respect for each other throughout the project. An experienced artist was a very useful resource for both student learning and staff development and a good artist/school relationship was central to the development of good practice.

PROBLEMS REVEALED

This investigation also revealed issues that needed specific attention. A) Psychological preparation was necessary for the teachers and for the artists, as both projects involved a number of subjects, new modes of curriculum integration, instructional strategies and new art forms. This required joint planning, close monitoring, good collaboration between school and artist, and more time and effort than had been expected by either party. B) Even though the projects were sponsored by external funds and financially supported by the schools, the cost of a musical production demanded careful estimation and fund-raising activities to make ends meet, as revealed by School B. C) The allocation of funds for the artist was too rigid, and inadequate for such a large-scale production. The procedural complications of fund virement application discouraged schools from proceeding with it, which resulted in frustration on the part of schools and artists, who had to devote extra time in order to monitor students’ performance. D) Duration of the projects only ranged from six months to a year, and thus might not generate reliable results. Examination of data on student learning and staff development over a wider sample and a longer period should produce more reliable and significant results.

CONCLUSION

The AiE Project made good use of community resources to develop students’ creativity and appreciation of the arts. Building on existing strengths: e.g. media technology, music and dance in School A, art and music in School B, the AiE projects gave schools the autonomy to fully develop their school-based arts curriculum to include other arts, such as drama and dance, as well as integrating other disciplines. Specially designed timetables had facilitated more in-depth acquisition of artistic skills and knowledge and broadened the exposure to new art forms. The production of a musical could work either in schools with a strong arts programme, where the students could sing, dance and act all at once, or in schools with less strong arts programme, where some students could sing while others dance or act, to produce a musical through concerted effort. The commitment and dedication of the artists provided good role models for staff and students, to encourage them to strive for the best. Strong teacher-artist partnerships, with common goals and distribution of work among staff, enhanced project implementation. Sufficient funding, support from the school management and parents were all crucial to the success of the projects. Teachers saw the advantages to their students’ artistic, social and whole-person development of producing a musical, but they also felt the need for professional development in order to be more confident in employing an across-the-arts or interdisciplinary approach.
REFERENCES


