



## Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health

### The Arts and Health: meaning and fulfillment in an uncertain age – a discussion paper.

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The Arts in schools are on the defensive. Well before 'austerity', curriculum arts were being squeezed out by the race to be top of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) league in maths, science and language (Rogers, 2003). In the UK and elsewhere arts in teacher education are allotted ever-diminishing time and resources. This decline in attention has been accelerated during the current global economic crisis as public funding for art, music, dance or drama projects is cut, unless it can clearly show money-making effects. Many local authorities like Westminster have, (or plan to) cut arts funding to zero. Arts educationalists have responded in one of two ways:

1. *the 'arts for arts sake' argument* - resisting measurement and commodification and claiming that the arts are an essential part of being human and becoming better humans.
2. *a series of 'instrumental' arguments* (for example teaching music because it helps mathematical and logical development, or drawing because it helps language development and the scientific mind).

Looking back over a lifetime that almost exactly covers the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, I have seen an interesting shift in dominant philosophies. Argument 1 prevailed during the flowering of the arts and arts education in the cash-strapped start to the 'New Elizabethan Age' in the 1950s. Those who believe in this 'golden age' see it as one in which idealism was strong, values were expressed and largely accepted by a relatively cohesive community. In today's less idealistic (perhaps less egalitarian) times, defenders of arts education seem to be pushed closer towards argument 2, despite the dangers associated with losing shared, social values and replacing them with materialism and de-humanisation.

Education faces a similar schism of philosophies. Educational research throughout the last 60 years has shown that learning, socialization and mental health respond positively to a broad and balanced curriculum and humane values - what Nell Noddings calls an, 'authentic ethic of care' (1992).

Achievements in such settings, however, come in difficult-to-measure and highly personalized forms – recognizable to teachers, parents and pupils, but not to government statisticians. Schools across the world are therefore, increasingly driven towards countable and data-led decisions involving the care-less language of the production line: objectives, levels, setting, streaming, testing, profiling and statistics – and the arts and the disadvantaged suffer.

The arts in schools can bridge these seemingly opposing viewpoints. I want to illustrate this bridging potential by focusing on two recent UK reports and their implications for the arts as transformative in the lives of the most vulnerable. Pat Thomson and her team in Nottingham University looked at arts in schools projects over the nine-year history of the UK ‘Creative Partnerships’ programme (2002 – 2011) aimed at poor communities throughout England. In their report, *The Signature Pedagogies Project* Thomson’s researchers described a range of major contributions made by the artists working in schools. Untrammelled by the need to meet literacy targets and show improvements in discipline, relationships, motivation, confidence and attendance these artists generated positive change in each of them (DCSF, 2008). The artists also seemed to display a distinctive pedagogy that consisted of:

- A genuinely inclusive approach
- A focus on choice and agency
- A tendency to big ambitions and boldness
- An interest in the absurd, humourous and challenging
- A strong bias toward lived experience in the present.

As Thomson started her research, Sir Michael Marmot was completing his - a major health report for the then Labour government called *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*. His report shows unequivocal links between poverty and poor educational and health prospects. The Marmot report established amongst other health-related findings: strong relationships between the lack of control associated with poverty and health problems throughout life. The detailed findings showed a gradient of such relationships, suggesting in general that, ‘*the lower a person’s social position the worse their health,*’ and concluded that:

*‘Child poverty is a driver of the key factors that make a difference to early child development.’* (Marmot, 2010)

Using a values-centred argument that health, well-being and sustainability should be central social goals, Marmot recommended that governments should work across education, welfare and health departments, to ensure that:

- *Every child has the best start in life*
- *All children and young people should be enabled to maximize their capabilities and have control over their lives.*

For a rich country (still 7<sup>th</sup> richest in the world) the UK has a bad record on child poverty. Marmot revealed, 'a staggering 41 per cent of children are NOT achieving a good level of development.' His research centre draws attention to the facts that 25% of our children live below the poverty line and that the UK comes 16<sup>th</sup> out of 29 rich countries in terms of child well-being, 28<sup>th</sup> in the risky behaviours of young people (Marmot, 2013, OECD, 2012; UNICEF 2013)

Marmot fails to consider the arts in his report or his subsequent work, Thomson does not mention health in her's, but both claim that when young people sense **control** and **achievement** in their lives, their physical, mental and intellectual health improves. Here is the bridge. My recent research has convinced me that because of their intrinsic value-laden and social qualities, the best arts in schools link the personal perspectives of Thomson with the national and economic interests of Marmot.

#### *Control and achievement*

'Environmental control' is one of Carol Ryff's 6 components of personal well-being (Ryff, 1989). When we claim some control over our world, we are describing our ability to change parts of it, to participate, share, have our abilities and our being valued in our communities. Clearly education is not wholly responsible for generating such feelings, fair wages, employment, good environments, health and social care, each affect the sense of control. We portray achievement as those times when we meet and succeed with a challenge, are happy with our relationships and/or positively involved in the moment.

Our schools represent a universal context in which all, regardless of wealth or background, may experience choice and achievement. The 'difficult-to-measure' arts uniquely offer the rest of Ryff's well-being indicators: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, personal growth and purpose in life. This is the 'well-being' Marmot and many other health researchers claim forms the basis of good mental, physical and social health.

Three current projects in deprived areas of inner city London, demonstrate these impacts of the arts in educational practice. Preserving the integrity of their artistic practice, the observed artists working in schools are significantly and measurably improving children's and teachers' personal, social and intellectual health and well-being. The artists involved in these projects embody Thomson's 'signature pedagogies' whilst creating the very sense of empowerment, meaning and fulfilment that lies at the heart of Marmot's hopes for a healthy national future.

**1 Kids Company, Royal Academy of Art project, 'Childhood - the real event.** Kids Company currently work directly with 17,000 desperately needy children most of whom have referred themselves. The damage in their lives has driven them to the streets or away from home or school. Some are trafficked or the children of trafficked adults, others have disengaged from schools, family, friends, they are often in trouble with the law. Kids Company provides recreational activities and professional therapies designed to help

them back into a healthy mainstream life. Last year - Olympic year, artists and designers worked with some of London's most deprived and damaged youngsters. They started with deeply personal questions: How do you feel now? What do you want to feel? Who helped you survive? Who deserves a medal for supporting you? How did you survive? What will you write on your survival trophy? Where do you feel really safe? With this team of artists the children designed and made trophies, medals, citations about winning the race to survive, sculptures of safe places, or dresses that expressed their transition from despair to hope. They took control of their lives through art. These art works were exhibited throughout the Olympics at the Royal Academy of Art.

These artworks were big, colourful, arresting and unapologetic. They exposed the London gallery-going public to the realities of lives of abuse, fear, deprivation and danger and generated a major boost in public support, recognition from the Royal Society for Public Health and a host of other awards. The experience also changed the lives of the artists, teachers, therapists and designers working with them. Their arts were used with damaged children to express and communicate emotional truths beyond the level of words, giving excluded individuals a new sense of control and guiding them back into the mainstream of life.

2. **The Speech Bubbles project** in the London Borough of Southwark also hands agency to the children, but through the medium of their stories and play, (London Bubble, 2011; Barnes, 2012, 2013). Theatre practitioners address the speech, language and communication difficulties of selected infants, through developing their theatre-making skills. These artists, whilst they care for children, have no specific interest in their 'special needs' only in their ability to make vibrant, convincing theatre. That is all they work on. In this weekly project each child in turn constructs a story which is acted-out by the whole group (adults and children equally) the following week. This simple formula when used by a teacher may not be uncommon but when a theatre practitioner facilitates the idea the results are spectacular. The warm-ups, rehearsals, improvisations and idea-sharings give children almost total control and the effect is total engagement in the present. In telling their own stories, in planning and acting them out with their friends, these children discover that they can change things; they can control the story.

The inclusive ethos of Speech Bubbles permeates the whole programme so that being mute, having a stutter, no English or being terribly shy are no barriers to full participation. The more absurd, surprising and amusing, the product the more the children are involved. The effect? Major and very measurable improvements in speech language and communication, major positive changes in relationships with self and others, confidence and motivation back in class.

3. **The Lullaby Project** (Nursery World, 2013, Lullaby Project videos) is a music-based intervention in three children's centres serving the most deprived wards of Haringey, London. The area has a wide mix of ethnicities and

cultures. In this place there are significantly higher figures for teenage pregnancy, child hospitalisation, illnesses such as asthma, unemployment and special needs than most of the UK. If you are a male living in these wards your life expectancy is ten years lower than if you lived in the richer west side of the borough. Many children come to these centres with very little English, very low self-esteem and poor health. The Lullaby project aims at alleviating some of these issues by providing at least an aspect of the 'best start in life.'

Using only voice and a guitar a professional singer meets with each parent and their two or three year old child. Using Heritage Bags' containing unique, physical reminders of each child's family and cultural home, she finds out what is important in the child's life: her nick names, the important adults, her favourite toys and pastimes, her first words and funny ways. The musician then weaves these personal details into a specially composed song or lullaby, which takes account of the musical culture of the family, (reggae, samba, polka or African drum patterns, home language words for example). She sings the song to the child and her carer asking for corrections, and finally it is recorded onto a disc for each child. In many families these songs become the most often played track in home or car...'*My get out of jail free card!*' in one mum's experience. Music making and sharing has become the vehicle through which diversity is respected and its richness developed, celebrated and strengthened. As the child's identity is made central their confidence visibly grows and with it their potential for learning.

Confidence-building is a term frequently ascribed to arts projects. Confidence in the children observed in these project, stemmed from a sense that they had authentic choices, real control, a valued identity and that their social relationships were secure and predictable (See Barnes 2013; Thomson et al.2012). Healthy relationships, positive self-image, real consequences and challenging physical activities are fundamental to the psychological well-being that neuroscientists believe affect general health (Damasio, 2003, 2010; Greenfield, 2012). In each example the art work produced became a 'transitional object' (Winnicott, 1990); the personal developments discovered through the arts were able to be transferred to the rest of life. Put simply, the arts and artists helped the children become happier.

Look at the photographs and videos of children involved in these projects. Their faces show very clearly what is happening in their minds, brains and bodies. They smile, they relate warmly and calmly with each other, ideas flow through them, their muscles relaxed, skin tone good and faces stress-free. These are the universal indicators of happiness (Ekman, 2004); the outer signs of well-being. They reflect what is going on in the children's conscious and personal mind and powerfully influence what is going on in the chemistry of their brains, (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; LeDoux, 2002; Damasio, 2003, 2010; Greenfield, 2012). The Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health is now working to examine the final and vital link for us. We know that involvement in the arts makes us happy, improving our feelings of well-being, but do these sensations positively affect children's mental and physical

health? We arts educators need to be involved from now onwards in collecting the evidence and making the argument. Art is for art's sake; we don't do art because it's good for our health, but I suspect that the more committed we are about art, the more mental, physical and social benefits accrue in the children we work with. That's why it continues to be vital that we share our time in schools with working artists, that we are working artists and that every child is given the chance to find the artist in themselves.

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