

## The arts

There seems to be universal agreement that the arts are a crucial part of formal school education and should not be viewed as an ancillary or ‘add-on’ component of schooling. In the words of the Australian Major Performing Arts Group:

*The evidence is thoroughly researched and well documented in Australia and internationally – the benefits of a comprehensive arts education are felt across all learning areas. Students whose learning is embedded in the arts achieve better grades and overall test scores, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom, and have a more positive self-concept than students who are deprived of arts experiences. They are also more likely to become involved in community service.<sup>1</sup>*

The view of the Australian Academy of the Humanities is that ‘art subjects are not a “pleasant diversion” or “optional extra” but an essential and productive component of a comprehensive, systemic curriculum’.<sup>2</sup>

However, there appear to be no other countries that have combined these five art forms into one curriculum. Music, visual arts, and drama exist in some form in most curriculums, but as standalone subjects, and are not always all part of the core. Dance is less common, and media arts is virtually non-existent as a standalone subject. This is not to say that these five art forms are not taught in schools in some manner; indeed most of them are also part of, or linked to, other learning areas, and are often part of extracurricular programs.

The matter of combining five art forms into one curriculum was a predominant element in submissions to this Review. We received strong views from 10 major arts organisations supporting the curriculum in its current form. Other submissions were concerned that one or other of the five art forms had been privileged. A number of submissions wanted a particular art form created as a standalone subject – music was the main focus of this approach and some submissions argued that music could only be delivered by music specialists. As might be expected, the followers and practitioner of each of the five strongly favoured their art form being given equal or greater prominence.

One overwhelming concern expressed in both submissions and consultations was whether generalist teachers would be able to handle all or any of these art forms, since they were written as specialist learning areas by specialists. It was signalled in unambiguous terms that considerable professional development would be required – particularly for primary teachers – in the middle years when the curriculum became very complex and highly specialised. The language and confusing terminology used in the curriculum did not help, it was claimed. The term ‘media arts’ caused some confusion and does not appear to have been satisfactorily defined in educational terms. There seemed to be a general feeling that schools would need to have specialists on staff or on contract to handle the arts curriculum in upper primary and secondary years. There was also the factor that the arts can be very resource intensive for schools, and so it might be beyond the realm of less-endowed schools to teach all of the five arts forms in the one curriculum. The question, particularly for a primary school,

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Major Performing Arts Group 2014, Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Academy of the Humanities 2014, Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum, p. 1.

is which arts specialist does a school bring in? What strand does it focus on? Where does it spend its money? Similar dilemmas face small secondary schools.

According to The Song Room:

*More than 3 out of 4 schools do not have a specialist music teacher. Generalist primary school teachers receive less than 20 hours of training across all art forms in their undergraduate degrees. Australian schools and teachers need to be supported to effectively implement a world class curriculum though the continued provision of quality, engaging, curriculum – aligned teaching resources.*<sup>3</sup>

The Music Trust says that ‘the countries topping the PISA scores ... all offer much more music education than do government schools in Australia; music is taught by specialist music teachers or by generalist classroom teachers with up to 20, even 40 times more music education than is provided to Australian classroom teacher’.<sup>4</sup>

Research indicates that in other countries the arts are vital in understanding history and culture, and are important in developing artistic appreciation and skills, and play a vital role in cognitive development and achievement. However, in most of the PISA top performing countries music and the arts have separate learning areas. There is a considerable variation in the age to which these curricula are specified, varying from 14 to 18.

The curriculum in England states the objective of studying arts is to:

*know how art and design both reflect and shape our history and contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation. The aims of studying the arts in existing curricula include developing artistic skills, evaluating artistic works and understanding the history of art ... to know about the great artists, craft makers, and designers, and understand the historical and cultural development of their art form.*<sup>5</sup>

The Framework for the National Curriculum in England notes that an appreciation of the arts should be fostered:

*[It] should develop pupil’s knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes to satisfy economic, cultural, social, personal and environmental goals. More specifically, provision should be developed to ... provide opportunities for participation in a broad range of educational experiences and the acquisition of knowledge and appreciation in the arts ...*<sup>6</sup>

These perspectives open another debate in this curriculum area; i.e. the balance which should be struck between knowledge about and appreciation of the arts, and skill in the actual performance of them. This is one of the aspects of the focus brought to the Australian Curriculum by the two subject matter specialists commissioned by this review.

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<sup>3</sup> The Song Room 2014, Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> The Music Trust 2014, Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education 2013, *The National Curriculum in England: art and design programmes of study*, can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study>

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education UK 2011, *The Framework for the National Curriculum. A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review*, Department for Education p. 16.

**Subject specialists**

The first subject matter specialist, Dr John Vallance, makes a strong case for the arts:

*The arts are an indispensable part of a child's education for many reasons. First they build social confidence and self-respect. They provide the equipment for the lifelong enjoyment and exploration of different forms of human communication. For some the arts will open routes to satisfying and socially useful employment. Even at the level of national security and social cohesion, it has been well documented that a broad grounding in the arts is an effective prophylactic against some forms of anti-social political extremism. Societies which support the education of young people in the arts provide their citizens with gifts and pleasures that can never be taken away from them. They leaven other parts of the curriculum which demand more solitary forms of work, and ... young people who have received training in the creative arts alongside other, more academic parts of their education, take a broader and more generous view of their obligations as citizens than their peers with a more narrowly focused education.<sup>7</sup>*

He comments that these factors mean that the arts must be an organic and consistent part of any school curriculum but is not convinced that these points are made forcefully enough in the Australian Curriculum. He finds that the broad distinction between 'making' and 'responding' seems reasonable at first glance but as the arts curriculum develops into taxonomical detail such as viewpoints, questions, bands, content descriptions, content elaborations, and achievement standards it becomes increasingly vague. Indeed, one of the main thrusts of his general criticism of the curriculum relates to the standardised and homogenised approach of the curriculum design. His concern is that such standardised formal language quickly starts to dominate content with inconsistent results and consequential difficulties for assessment. Also, it means that all of the art forms are described in the same terms, which is inappropriate.

Dr Vallance notes that there is no clear unambiguous indication in the curriculum of the amount of regular class time it is envisaged be spent teaching component parts of the arts curriculum. In the context of all Australian schools he questions the relative importance of each of the art forms in the curriculum, despite the fact that they are treated in the same manner. In his view, media arts does not require a separate curriculum at all; all the content set out for the media arts could readily be covered in other places – in visual arts, English, history, music and so on. He worries about the pressure brought to bear on less resourced schools by lobby groups and advocates of new technologies. This is the view taken in many other jurisdictions. Dance and drama, though obviously important, should not arguably have a claim on formal time in a core curriculum either – they are better pursued as co-curricular activities especially in the early years of school.

The rather crude bilateral taxonomy dividing the curriculum into areas of 'making' and 'responding' assumes that one must be either a producer or member of an audience, but this distinction is more of a hindrance than a help: 'is there any room to be a student?' he asks. Moreover, he finds that 'making' is privileged over 'learning how to make' and there is inadequate space in the curriculum for reading, listening, and reflecting. There is, he believes, an assumption that intuitive forms of

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<sup>7</sup> Vallance, J 2014, 'Subject matter specialist report on the Australian Curriculum: The Arts', prepared for the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

expression are enough on their own, without an additional need for disciplined training in the context-founded skills required for effective communication.

The standardised language does damage as well in relation to the cross-curriculum priorities. He believes they have been clumsily integrated without any serious attempt to establish the practical relevance of these priorities to specific learning areas:

*By privileging say, Indigenous or Asian contributions to musical art over others, especially those related to the Western cultures of the majority of Australian students, the curriculum runs the serious risk of placing pupils at a great and isolating disadvantage, cutting them off from some of the most long-lived and highly valued human achievements in the arts. At the same time the integration of indigenous and 'Asian' material also risks limiting and patronising Australian children's encounters with the amazing richness and complex cultures, both indigenous and Asian.*

Dr Vallance makes similar observations regarding the visual arts curriculum, observing that the attempts at integration suggest 'a disturbing ignorance of the status and spiritual importance of visual and aural expression in Indigenous cultures'.

He analyses each of the arts strands in more depth, and notes that in relation to music it is very clear that the music community was, on balance, unhappy with the draft curriculum. Descriptions of content and their elaboration are on the whole vague and differentiation and specification at various age points is very poor and so the curriculum provides a weak level of guidance for those teachers and schools most in need of it. Content descriptions notably lack any meaningful focus on the teaching of Western music notation – a foundational tool for anyone planning to pursue an interest in practical music whatever its origin – and there is no meaningful reference to the teaching of music theory, harmony, or counterpoint. He observes, 'Throughout, the encouragement of expression through intuition is placed before learning – sleepwalking into music, one might say'.

He is also critical of the vagueness and inappropriate sequencing of content in the other arts strands.

After a fairly forensic examination of the arts curriculum in England and the Republic of Korea, Dr Vallance comes to the conclusion that the Australian model is well behind both in terms of quality and clarity. The English curriculum is brief and concise, but nevertheless conveys a clear sense of the content areas to be covered at the appropriate stages. In the Republic of Korea there is much more detail – but here too, the detail is focused on specific areas of content, technique and practice, which in general are lacking from the Australian documents. He observes 'compared to the other two countries our curriculum appears organised around a series of unfocused, apparently unexamined, assumptions which have their origins far outside the classroom'.

In concluding his analysis Dr Vallance places the Australian Curriculum in the spectrum between the knowledge/truth-based approach to education and the 'romantic' approach. He is concerned that Australia over the years has drifted towards the latter and now has a strong tendency to privilege pedagogy over content:

*Members of the Board and senior staff of ACARA, for instance, are mainly experts in teaching methods and assessment rather than specific specialists in any of the major subjects taught in school. For too long curriculum development in Australia has been left in the hands of*

*educators, rather than subject specialists ... These curriculum documents appear to have been drafted by experts in 'education' rather than by experienced leaders in the disciplines involved. The result is a series of vague, discursive and rambling targets, in which the need to find uniform and consistent terminology is privileged over the specific and distinctive requirements of each discipline.*

He also finds the glossary of technical terms at the end of the arts curriculum to be highly controversial.

In short, he finds the documents are:

*so vague as to provide an inadequate sense of their intended content ... The curriculums are far from being either balanced or substantial ... They appear overlong, overworked and unfocused ... They are the obvious product of multiple compromises, deals with interested parties and the red pen of educational bureaucrats. At nearly every point they lack rigour ... Australian children are being told that they can run before they can walk; it is a cruel hoax. The documents are too long diffuse and tendentious in terms of their quasi-technical vocabulary to be comprehensible to students or to parents who want to know what their children are learning.*

His recommendation is that:

*Media Arts, Dance and Drama be subsumed into other parts of the curriculum. The remaining courses should be shortened into concise yet flexible programmes of study along the lines of the English models which are clearly the result of careful work by area experts. Investment is required in arts programmes aimed at providing high quality mentoring and training for teachers across the country. If the cross-curriculum priorities are to survive this review, they must be more carefully integrated into the whole, and serious efforts must be made to ensure that they do not result in the banalisation of some of the world's great cultures – Indigenous, Eastern and Western.*

His general summation is that 'In the case of all the arts ... school courses should provide a solid and carefully sequenced foundation in the practical and intellectual skills needed for effective artistic expression. I am not convinced that this curriculum achieves this aim'.

The second subject matter specialist, Ms Michele Chigwidden, is no less enthusiastic in her support for the arts to be in the Australian Curriculum, 'The arts offers richness to learning, confidence to explore, pride in achievement, and opportunities to become an "artist" not simply a passive spectator'.<sup>8</sup>

Overall she is less critical of the arts curriculum than the first specialist has been, and cites the international recognition the arts curriculum received in the International Arts Education Standards: Survey of the Arts Education Standards and Practices of Fifteen Countries and Regions, a report

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<sup>8</sup> Chigwidden, M 2014, 'Subject matter specialist report on the Australian Curriculum: The Arts', prepared for the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

prepared in August 2011 by the New York-based College Board for the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards<sup>9</sup>.

However, she does express some concerns. Foremost is the capacity of generalist teachers to deliver the various strands, especially as the years progress and the content becomes more complex. Delivering the arts in classrooms to cover the five subjects within each band is quite demanding. As an example: 'To cover the five arts subjects over 2 years (i.e. within each band) is quite a challenge, especially the suggested range in the time quota from Reception to Year 6'. She advocates that all of the time allocations be reviewed as they seem to be inadequate, and also presses strongly for more professional development for teachers.

Another of her concerns regarding most of the five art forms relates to the ratio between 'making' and 'responding'. In some areas she believes that an appropriate balance has been struck but not so in other parts.

Ms Chigwidden has concerns about the cross-curriculum priorities and would like to see some guidance as to the proportion of content or scope and sequence from all learning areas that is required to embed the three curriculum priorities. She notes that, in relation to Indigenous history and culture, if all the content descriptions are satisfied there would be themes or topics that would be at risk of being done to death. She calls for more use of contemporary Indigenous culture, life and issues. Many icons indicate that all three cross-curriculum priorities are embedded in the content descriptions, however they are misleading. She feels that the focus on Indigenous aspects is at the expense of the other two cross-curriculum priorities – Asia and sustainability.

The specialist provides a detailed journey through each of the five strands. In dance, she comments that in general the curriculum for F–10 looks to be robust with a good balance of activities linked to content. The scope for choice and flexibility is sound. However, she says that the F–2 subject matter seems quite technical in its approach, with some content elaborations focusing more on the responding rather than the making strand. She feels there is too much emphasis on dance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, but rather than excluding it she says that other cultural references to Asian and European exemplars should be included. If 'sustainability' is to be introduced, it needs to be quite explicit and relevant to students.

In drama she finds balance but seems to be disturbed that the ratio of making to responding in years F–6 is 3:1 and in Year 7 to Year 10 is 5:2. She thinks students do not respond well to too much talk about why, how, and reflection and it can get 'bogged down with theory'. She adds that to achieve greater balance in the content and band descriptions there needs to be additional references to the history of Australian and European drama.

Her assessment is that the music curriculum is quite prescriptive, with a clear and detailed structure and sequence. There is not enough emphasis on Asian cross-curriculum priorities here she believes. The core content in the music subject allows for flexibility in classroom delivery up to Years 3 to 4 but for Years 5 to 6 and Years 9 to 10 specialist resources, instruments and classrooms are required with delivery by a specialist teacher. She further comments that while the document is user-friendly

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<sup>9</sup> The College Board, *International Arts Education Standards: A survey of the arts education standards and practices of fifteen countries and regions*, New York, NY, August 2011 can be accessed at [http://nccas.wikispaces.com/file/view/int'l%20standards%208%201%20\(final\).pdf](http://nccas.wikispaces.com/file/view/int'l%20standards%208%201%20(final).pdf) (viewed 10 July 2014).

for teachers to the end of Years 3 to 4, generalist teachers for remaining bands would need further training and development.

Ms Chigwidden commends all aspects of the visual arts curriculum but says if sustainability is to be introduced, it needs to be more successfully embedded as a theme or topic.

In media arts she has similar concerns about ratios of content descriptions. She believes media arts should be a subject in its own right and calls again for the cross-curriculum priorities to be relevant.

Her report also covers the arts curriculums of England and the Republic of Korea. She commends many aspects of them – the clarity of the English curriculum, its aims and rationale etc. – but is disturbed by the hierarchy of subjects in the English curriculum and the fact that the weighting between core and non-core subjects is not reflected in the allocated time in the school day. And of course she is disappointed that the arts is not core in the curriculum in England. She finds the curriculum easy to read and follow except the attainment targets, which are far too generic and seem flimsy and lacking in depth in regard to arts subjects. By contrast, the Republic of Korea's curriculum seems to be very prescriptive and less accessible.

Ms Chigwidden is in favour of the continuation of the arts curriculum in Australia with attention to her concerns, the exclusion of media arts to become a separate subject, and the continued evolution of the other four art forms with the benefit of classroom experience in implementation.

### **Conclusion**

There is considerable evidence that this curriculum has been cobbled together to reach a compromise among the advocates of all the five art forms, rather than a serious consideration on educational grounds as to the place of each in the whole curriculum, the current practices in schools, and the realities of a school's resources and time. It would also seem that not a lot of realistic thought has been given to the structure and sequencing of the components of each area and some major rewriting is required along the lines that both subject matter specialists suggest. It is also clear that, as the age level increases, the capacity of a generalist teacher to master the content and devise appropriate pedagogy becomes very strained. There would have to be specialist teachers used, on staff, or on contract, to handle such demanding material. Each strand also seems to be overcrowded and requires slimming down. Professional development would still be required for generalist teachers and the language needs to be made clearer.

It is also not evident whether curriculum writers took account of the considerable amount of 'doing' or 'responding' that schools are already achieving in these creative domains as part of their school-based activity. They will no doubt continue to do so, whether there is a national curriculum or not. Most schools would be very active already, in at least four out of five of these arts areas. They would also be effectively integrated into other curriculum streams; for example, drama in English, music and drama in history, media arts in technology and the ICT capability, dance in health and physical education, visual arts in history, and so on. Consequently, the key question arises as to whether all five strands should be integrated into one curriculum and whether they should all be mandatory.

Each of these art forms has much to offer and there can be no doubt that a curriculum should be available in each for those schools who want to access it. However, based on the international research, and evidence and opinions expressed to this Review we consider that media arts should

become a standalone subject and reduced in content. The other four arts areas – music, visual arts, drama, and dance – which have a more common foundation and conceptual base, would remain in one curriculum but be reduced down to a slimmer concise content. Then, only two of the five arts subject areas would be mandatory and the most likely ones would be music and visual arts.

However, schools could elect to offer any of the remaining three subjects in a form and structure of their choosing, and indeed might decide to choose which ones to offer based on their available resources, their comparative advantage, and the context of their community. Some schools will, of course continue to offer all five arts subjects.

### ***Recommendations***

- The arts curriculum should be available to all students throughout all the years of schooling. The learning area should be formally introduced at Year 3 but provide a rich source of resource material for Foundation to Year 2, the Foundation years.
- The core content of all five strands should be reduced and a considerable portion of the current core be included in school-based curriculum and activities, thus augmenting the rich arts programs which most schools are already conducting.
- Two of the arts strands should be mandatory and we recommend music and visual arts. The other three strands would be elective subjects and schools would choose which to offer according to their resources and wishes of the parents and nature of the school context. Media arts should become a separate standalone subject and substantially reduced in content.
- Elements of the current arts curriculum should also be integrated into other learning areas such as English, health and physical education, history and technologies.
- The content of each of the arts forms needs to be restructured and re-sequenced along the lines suggested by the subject matter specialists. The documents need to be expressed in clearer language. The balance between ‘making’ and ‘responding’ in each of the strands needs to be revisited involving consultation with arts teachers.
- The considerable resourcing costs associated with delivering the arts curriculum need greater consideration, and professional development for teachers is needed as the years progress. It needs to be acknowledged that arts specialists will be needed at the advanced levels.
- An analysis needs to be undertaken to identify the extent to which the cross-curriculum priorities have produced repetition of content in these strands, and the extent to which they have skewed the content of all the strands, particularly away from Western and other cultures. The cross-curriculum priorities should be integrated, but only where appropriate, and their presence more clearly indicated.