

## The Role of Arts in a Changing Educational Landscape

By Professor Anne Bamford



Prof Anne Bamford speaking at The Arts in Education National Day 2017

Society is in a period of unprecedented change. These changes have a direct bearing on education and the responses schools make to the challenges and the opportunities of change. I have sometimes described these changes as like a tsunami, but critics have said that perhaps the tsunami analogy is not the best as it implies only destruction rather than opportunity. However, the point of the tsunami metaphor is that there are a number of warning signs that occur before the tsunami actually arrives. For example, the ground starts shaking, there are unusual sea-level fluctuations, the water recedes unexpectedly from a beach and there may be abnormally huge waves. Apart from these scientific facts, local people in areas prone to tsunami say that they notice unusual movements amongst birds and fish and even trees and other plants change. The point is, there are a number of signs of the impending change but generally these are ignored by people as they continue their daily business largely oblivious of what is coming. Perhaps schools are like this. They largely continue with their regular business and ignore the tsunami of change factors heading to their shores.

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Most schools still have a largely subject-based curriculum even if we know in reality people do not think or work in discrete subject areas. In life, science and art are interdependent and writing or mathematics are of little importance if not combined with creative thinking and aesthetic crafting. As knowledge continues to expand, human understanding requires the interplay of different subjects.

We are also witnessing rapid changes in populations. Our schools evidence the effects of both increased globalisation and, at the same time, a push for more individualisation. In many countries school dropout rates have soared. School quality assurance systems, rather than 'closing the gap', have actually revealed in stark figures an increasingly differentiated society and consequently an increasing gap of achievement between the most and the least privileged.

***While society has changed in all aspects in 100 years, schools have hardly changed at all.***

I was recently cleaning out the archive at work and amongst the papers I found a report card from 100 years ago. I do not know why it had been kept. Perhaps it was just some of the flotsam and jetsam that washes up on the shores of central administration when a school closes. But the report card was very revealing. It listed the school subjects – reading, languages, spelling, handwriting, arithmetic, history, civics, geography, science, PE, drawing and music. It struck me that these are almost identical to the school subjects in today's school. Little had changed in 100 years. The

same report card included marks for homework. Here though, we saw completely different expectations – milking the cows, caring or poultry, care of your room, dish washing, and the brilliantly named ‘habits of economy’. The report card, handwritten in black ink on mushroom coloured cardboard, revealed the fact that while society has changed in all aspects in 100 years, schools have hardly changed at all.

Now, it could be argued that schools do not need to change because they have got it so right that they have been able to just carry on doing a great job for 100 years. Certainly Ireland has very good education if we are to believe the PISA international education testing process. Irish schools tend to either be just in or just out of the top ten in the world for results in mathematics, reading and science. Ireland sits just a little worse than Australia and just a little better than Slovenia. Ireland is six places ahead of the United Kingdom. The PISA test assesses 14 year olds to determine their level of a set of quite traditional schools skills, but are these are the most important set of three areas of learning we can give children to secure their future? Also, is the test itself a fair selection? If we test tree climbing, is it fair to dolphins who are without doubt incredibly intelligent and intuitive animals or is it fair to tortoises or crocodiles who have stood the test of evolutionary times? What we focus on when we assess something, means we fail to see other qualities excluded from the lens of assessment.

### ***Perhaps one of the roles of the arts in schools is to allow ‘the other’ to shine.***

So perhaps one of the roles of the arts in schools is to allow ‘the other’ to shine. The United Nations measures countries based on what they refer to as the ‘Better Life Index’. In the Better Life Index, the educational measures reveal that Ireland is doing quite well. In terms of education, Ireland is happier than the United Kingdom, but not as happy as the Germans.

The other argument often made for the arts and in particular creativity is that it generates the kind of creative and innovative future workers that a country needs. Certainly, areas of Dublin have flourished as magnets for innovative companies and creative people. The economists tell us that the creative sectors are continuing to expand across Europe. The European Index of Innovation shows that Ireland is above the European average for innovation but behind all of the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom. In terms of cultural employment, Ireland is ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the European figures, behind Cyprus and the same as Croatia and less than the European average at just 3% of overall employment. Perhaps, then, more of the arts in Irish schools could boost creativity and build future innovations.

With the changing demographics in our schools, the arts in schools can serve to celebrate culture, enabling people to flourish. Arts and cultural activities can help children make sense of their cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual, linguistic, and moral development by enhancing the whole curriculum. The effect of childhood cultural experience is very strong. Being encouraged to get involved in the arts as a child increases the chances of being an active arts consumer as an adult. Studies such as the *Find Your Talent* programme in England showed that culture must be in school if it is to reach all the population, rather than just the privileged few. The level of parental encouragement differs by family background and personal demographics. Children with parents of high social status are more likely to engage in the arts. Similarly, girls and white children are more likely to receive encouragement than boys and children who are not white. According to the Eurobarometer of Active Artistic participation, sadly Ireland is not in the top ten and is below the European average.

A major study, conducted by the ESRI on behalf of the Arts Council in Ireland, draws on the *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)* data to assess arts and cultural participation specifically among 3, 5, 9 and 13-year-olds. The study measured the impact of arts and cultural participation on the cognitive development and emotional wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland. The study found that Irish children who participate in artistic and cultural activities cope better with schoolwork; have more positive attitudes towards school; have an improved ‘academic self-image’; are happier and have reduced anxiety; have better academic skills; have fewer socio-emotional difficulties; have improved cognitive development; have a broader interest in the arts outside of school hours; and, are more likely to read frequently outside school. Despite these impacts, the study also found that there were considerable gender differences in the participation of boys and girls. There were also major socio-economic differences with the children of low household income largely missing out on the arts. For immigrant families with young children, language emerges as a barrier to

participation in the arts. While the families of young children with disabilities are generally highly engaged in cultural activities, there are barriers to participation at ages 9 and 13, with fewer children with special needs participating in structured cultural activities.

So what does all this mean in schools? How can teachers improve learning in the classroom?

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There are four main ways that you can boost the arts and creativity in the classroom.

- 1) **Education in the arts:** This means dedicated curriculum time to music, visual arts, drama, dance, and the media. If the teachers do not feel confident in the arts try linking with professional artists (arts partnerships) or local arts clubs and volunteers. For example, many localities have excellent local bands, theatre groups and dance organisations who might be happy to be involved with the school. Look for opportunities to take the pupils to concerts, theatre events, book readings in the local library and visits to art exhibitions or music studios.
- 2) **Education through the arts:** This is the time when you can sneak lots of the arts into other subject areas. For example, get the pupils to write a script. This activity can work with almost any subject. In language arts, have the pupils adapt a short story into a script. In history, have the pupils re-create a historical event. In science, the pupils can script a dialogue between different chemicals or atoms. In mathematics, a script can be written to describe how to do a mathematical process or to review content the pupils have learned. The pupils can perform their scripts and the other pupils watching have their learning consolidated in a kinaesthetic way. Visual literacy is an increasingly important skill and it can be developed through all subjects. Encourage the pupils to draw or make diagrams of their learning. You can incorporate a range of new technologies to create picture graphs and visual representations of information. Summarising learning through drawing improves retention and connectivity. Learning foreign languages can be enhanced through drama and singing while dance can effectively be used to teach mathematical and scientific concepts. Music is inherently mathematical and combining maths and music can assist in the learning of fractions, intervals, comparators and other concepts. These ideas need very little extra preparation for the teachers, but require a lot more complex learning and imagination for the pupils.
- 3) **Art as education:** Throughout the ages, humans have used the arts as a medium for learning. For example, we can learn a lot about empathy and compassion through watching a film or creating a dance. When we look at Picasso's *Guernica* we learn a lot about history and the futility of war. Ask pupils to create a "soundtrack" for a story, a sequence of historical events, or a biological life cycle. Take the pupils to see a play that connects to the curriculum or find an artwork that relates to the theme being studied. Introduce the arts into the assessment cycle. Instead of always sitting a test or writing an answer perhaps the pupils can create a poster, brochure, or advertisement or you can use art, music, or dance as a writing prompt or an assessment stimulus.
- 4) **Education as art:** When you bring a creative, cultural and aesthetic understanding of learning to the classroom you can create the sort of 'WOW Factor' where education itself becomes transformed into an artistic experience. If you have ever read a great story to children, you can sense that moment when the children leave behind the world of the classroom. At that point the teacher is now the performer, and the pupils have entered into the world of the imagination. When these magical moments occur learning is no longer a matter of recall or of curriculum but rather has entered the realm of being art.

I suggest that you start small and build on the successes you will have. I am a great fan of calling something a 'pilot test' – if it works you can spread out your wonderfully innovative ideas and if it does not work, you can 'save face' by using it as an example of your experimental and reflective practice and try something else! So make some brave steps to change learning for the future. Perhaps then, change will feel less like a tsunami and more like riding the crest of a wave. Happy surfing!

*Professor Anne Bamford is Director of the Education Commission and the International Research Agency. Anne has been recognised nationally and internationally for her research in arts education. She is an expert in the international dimension of education and through her research, she has pursued issues of innovation, social impact and equity and diversity. A world scholar for UNESCO, Anne has conducted major national impact and evaluation studies for the governments of Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium, Iceland, Hong Kong, Ireland and Norway. Amongst her numerous articles and book chapters, Anne is author of the “Wow Factor: Global research compendium on the impact of the arts in education” which has been published in five languages and distributed in more than 40 countries.*



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